

Indexicals in Dialogic Interaction

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*Proceedings of the Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society: General Session and Parasession on Phonetic Sources of Phonological Patterns: Synchronic and Diachronic Explanations* (2003) pp. 451-462

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# Indexicals in Dialogic Interaction<sup>1</sup>

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## 0. Introduction

We often find in interaction an array of linguistic elements in one speaker's utterance that make use of elements in another's. This phenomenon -people making use of other people's utterances- is called "dialogicality". Du Bois (2003) explains "dialogicality", based on Jakobson's (1966) notion of "parallelism" and Bakhtin's 1981[1935] notion of "voice", as "my words come from and engage with your words, and with the words of those who have spoken before us". In interaction, dialogicality is pervasive between comparable linguistic elements at any level: words, morphemes, phonemes, features, meanings, referents, illocutionary forces, etc.

Instances of linguistic forms such as honorifics and sentence-final particles can be dialogically interconnected to one another in interaction. But analysis focused on dialogicality of these linguistic forms has been scarce. Taking a combined interactional and semiotic approach to the analysis of honorifics and sentence-final particles in Japanese, I examine the ways in which these linguistic forms construct dialogic interaction. Seeing linguistic forms as indexical signs, which will be explained in the next section, I point out dynamic changes in the indexicals in dialogic interaction. I also demonstrate that the use of the linguistic forms interacts with the situated interactive context and larger social norms. Lastly, I discuss socially significant meanings of dialogic interaction within the framework of social interaction, referring to Goffman's (1956) notions of "deference" and "demeanor". Using these notions to interpret the meanings of dialogic interaction, I elaborate on what the speaker owes to others and to oneself

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper in part appeared in Takekuro (2002) and was also presented at the Workshop on East Asian Languages (WEAL) at University of California, Santa Barbara in March 2003. I wish to thank the participants in the 2003 meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society and WEAL for their questions and insightful comments. This paper significantly benefited from discussions with Bill Hanks. I am deeply grateful to Robin T. Lakoff who heard, read, and criticized various versions of this research. Responsibility for the data and analysis rests solely with me.

in social interaction. Through dialogic interaction, the speaker displays ordered activated affinities and the sense of self in meaning and structure.

### 0.1. Indexicality

An “index” is one of the constituents along with “icon” and “symbol” in Peirce’s (1955) tripartite system of signs. In Peirce’s terminology, an index is representative of the object by virtue of “being really affected” through a dynamic or causal relation to the object. For instance, a knock on the door is an index of the presence of a visitor; a weathercock is an index of the direction of the wind. When a sign is an index, it stands for the object neither by similarity nor convention, but by contiguity with it. In this sense, an indexical sign is existentially bound to the object.

The adjective “indexical” and noun “indexicality” are used to describe linguistic signs that signal or point to certain features of the communicative context (Jakobson 1960, Lyons 1977, Morris 1938, Peirce 1955, Silverstein 1976). Linguistic indexicals include regional accent, pronouns, demonstratives, deixis, tense, and honorifics, whose tokens stand in dynamic and existential relations to their objects. As indexicals bear a direct connection with the object, the interpretation of indexical signs depends on the context in which it occurs.

Similar notions of indexicality are worth noting. Gumperz (1982) has identified a subclass of indexical signs, which he calls “contextualization cues”. Contextualization cues indicate how an utterance is to be understood and what its rhetorical role in a sequential discourse is, therefore invoke the framework of interpretation of sociocultural context. Goffman (1974) defines “footing” as the position or alignment an individual takes in uttering a given linguistic expression. Bakhtin (1981[1935]) presents the notion of “voice”. In interaction, participants use various “voices”, such as reporting someone else’s speech, mimicking someone, and speaking as someone else, all of which are indexed by linguistic features. A variety of these notions describing the more or less the same phenomena of indexicality suggest that the indexical function of language is central to communicative practice and serves to establish social relationships in context.

Silverstein’s (1976) view of indexicality is most relevant to this study. Following semiotic traditions of Peirce, Jakobson, and Jespersen, Silverstein presents a two-way classification of indexical types: presupposing and creative. A presupposing indexical sign points to some contextual aspect independently known. In this sense, the sign presupposes the aspect. A creative indexical sign can make a particular contextual feature operative in the communicative context, by picking out the referent. For example, an honorific expression such as *vous*, on the one hand, functions as a presupposing index when it points to the addressee’s higher status in a social context where status difference exists between interlocutors. On the other hand, the use of *vous* to a friend who is commonly referred to by *tu* can function as a creative index when it foregrounds relevant

aspect of the context, such as deference, coldness, irony, humor, or sarcasm. Because of these two aspects, indexicals become primary tools to maintain and create social and psychological worlds among interlocutors.

In this paper, I take this semiotic notion of indexicality as the point of departure for analyzing honorifics and sentence-final particles in informal conversations among Japanese speakers in their 20s and 30s. I use the terms, “unmarked” and “marked” as analytical tools.<sup>2</sup> My aim was to determine how linguistic forms communicate indexically in the processes of interaction and interpretation.

## **0.2. Honorifics and sentence-final particles in Japanese**

In the present study, the focus of honorifics is on two major categories: referent and addressee honorifics. Referent honorifics mostly appear as pronouns and predicate forms and have two further subclasses: *sonkei-go* (‘respectful form’ or subject honorifics) and *kenjo-go* (‘humble form’ or object (non-subject) honorifics). They commonly refer to the subject or non-subject that is socially distant from the speaker. Addressee honorifics, the so-called *teinei-go* (‘polite form’), appear as verbal suffixes or as suppletive forms of the copula, generally used as markers of formality or in reference to an addressee who is socially distant from the speaker.

Sentence-final particles (hereafter, SFPs) in Japanese have traditionally three gendered categorizations: “feminine”, “masculine”; and “neutral” (Okamoto & Sato 1992, Okamoto 1997). Feminine and masculine forms have two subclasses: “strongly feminine/masculine” and “moderately feminine/masculine”. Feminine forms are conventionally used by women, masculine forms by men, and neutral forms by both women and men.

Both honorifics and SFPs are highly indexical in the sense that they have pervasive context-dependency. Honorifics are forms of speech that signal deference, through conventionalized understandings of some aspects of the form-meaning relationship. They imply and grammatically encode participant role structures, relating the giver of deference to its recipient. SFPs are forms of speech that signal not only the speaker’s gender but also the speaker’s epistemic and affective stances and other relevant aspects of the interactive context.

## **1. Method**

The database for this study consists of three spontaneous conversations among friends: a 120-minute conversation among ten females, ages 21 to 23; a

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of markedness and its definitions have been much discussed in the literature. In the context of the present work, I will be using both “marked” and “unmarked” in a simple, restricted sense. “Marked” in this paper will refer to a linguistic form that is statistically more likely to occur, while “unmarked” will apply to a form with a rare statistical likelihood of occurrence. I am using this terminology in order to avoid the use of confusing terms such as “semantic presupposition”, although Silverstein’s concept of “presupposing” does not mean semantic presupposition.

120-minute conversation among seven females, ages 26 to 28; and a 120-minute conversation among two males and five females, ages 28 to 36. All the subjects speak more or less standard Japanese and resided in the eastern part of Japan (Kanto) at the time of the recordings, although three subjects in Data Set III grew up in other regions in Japan, such as Hokkaido, Tokushima, and Nagoya.

Before turning to the analysis of the data, I present a brief summary of how indexicality operates in Japanese informal peer group conversations. Statistically speaking, in an informal peer group conversation, young female speakers of Japanese in their 20s use honorific forms in no more than 0.70-1.92% of all intonation units (Takekuro 2002). Studies based on different databases (Okamoto 1997, Takekuro 2002) show that the most frequently used SFPs by female speakers of Japanese in their 20s are gender-neutral forms (68-70%), and the next frequently used ones are moderately masculine forms (18-19%) and moderately feminine forms (8-10%). They rarely use strongly feminine forms (0-5%) or strongly masculine forms (0-1%). Sturtz (2001) demonstrates that the most frequently used SFPs by male speakers in any generation are gender-neutral forms and the next most commonly used ones are moderately masculine forms. Due to the low frequency in usage, if honorifics or strongly gendered forms of SFPs are used in informal peer group conversations, such linguistic forms could be viewed as marked. However, in this study, I will demonstrate that many of the seemingly “marked” use of these linguistic forms can be reinterpreted as “unmarked” in situated interactive contexts. Indexicality of linguistic forms is dynamic and constantly negotiated in situated contexts.

## 2. Data analysis

In this section, I will present examples of dialogic interaction in the use of honorifics and SFPs in Japanese informal conversations. Dialogic interaction is influenced by conversational topic and becomes most prominent in the context of a conversational topic shift.

### 2.1. Honorifics

When one speaker uses an honorific form, although it is not a norm in informal peer group conversations, the next speakers continue to use honorifics, as in (1).

(1) Data Set III: As J is talking about a car accident, a waiter brings a dish to the table.

1 J(m): *asoko no atari de ushiro kara mou dakara mou*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Transcription conventions are as follows: ADD.HON=addressee honorific; CLF=classifier; COP=copula; GEN=genitive; HUM=humble form of referent honorific; LOC=locative; NOM=nominalizer; O=object; PST=past; QT=quotative; RES=respectful form of referent honorifics; SFP(M.M.)=moderately masculine form of SFP; SFP(M.F.)=moderately feminine form of SFP; SFP(N)=neutral form of SFP; SFP(S.F.)=strongly feminine form of SFP; SFP(S.M.)=strongly masculine form of SFP; SUB=subject; TOP=topic; VUL=vulgar form; ?=rising intonation; (( ))=nonverbal movement and scenic detail.

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- 2 there GEN around LOC behind from well so well  
3 *sakeyoi unten dayone*  
4 drunken driving COP:SFP(M.M.)  
5 'Around there, well, a drunken driver came from behind, you know?'
- 5 W(m):((bringing a dish)) *shitsurei shimasu*  
6 excuse me do:ADD.HON  
7 'Excuse me.'
- 8 *shin jaga ni nari masu.*  
9 new potato LOC become ADD.HON  
10 '(These) are roasted potatoes.'
- 11 C(f): *shin jaga desu* ((moving the dish to the center of the table))  
12 new potato COP:ADD.HON  
13 '(These) are roasted potatoes.'
- 14 J(m): *sorede tsuitotsu*  
15 then collide  
16 'Then, (there was) a collision.'
- 17 *kore tanonda no watashi nande ikko itadaki masu*  
18 this ask.PST GENI thus one:CLF eat:HUM ADD.HON  
19 'I was the one who ordered this dish, so please allow me to take one.'
- 20 N(f): *haai douzo itadaite kudasai*  
21 okay please eat:HUM please:ADD.HON  
22 'Sure, please eat!'
- 23 J: *sonde sono kazoku ga sanzan to o uttaeteru nimokakawarazu*  
24 then the family SUB a lot MetropolitanO appeal even though  
25 'Then although the family repeatedly appealed to the city assembly,'
- 26 *kekko karui kei ni nacchatta n dayone*  
27 rather light sentence LOC end up:PST NOM COP:SFP(M.M.)  
28 '(the driver) ended up receiving a rather light sentence, you know?'

Before analyzing this text in detail, I should emphasize that addressee honorifics are not expected in informal peer group conversation like this. Addressee honorifics are normally used in formal situations, such as lectures and public interviews, and in interpersonal relationships involving distance or hierarchy, such as first-time encounters and conversations with older and superior

people. Because it is uncommon to use addressee honorifics in informal speech among friends who are of equal status, the use of addressee honorifics creates contextual cues and brings indexical meanings into focus.

In lines 1 and 3, J talks about a car accident in Tokyo, using a plain form of the copula with the sentence-final particle *dayone*. In lines 5 and 8, a waiter brings a dish of potatoes to the table, using the addressee honorific, *masu*. The use of addressee honorifics is always necessary in service encounters like those between waiters and their customers. In line 11, C moves the dish to the center of the table and introduces the dish with the addressee honorific *desu*. As if playing a waitress's role, she echoes the waiter's addressee honorifics. In line 14, J continues his narrative about the car accident without any honorifics.

But when J asks for permission to eat one of the potatoes in line 17, he speaks very quickly, using a humble form of referent honorific *itadaki* and the addressee honorific *masu*. Not only does he use these honorific predicates but he also uses *watashi* as the first person pronoun. This use of *watashi* is notable, because elsewhere in the data, he and another male speaker invariably use a vulgar form of the first person pronoun *ore*, common in informal male speech. But *watashi* is a polite form of the first person pronoun: a form that male speakers use in formal situations (Ide 1990). J's marked use of the first person pronoun (his choice of *watashi*) signifies a change in register from informal to formal and polite in line 17, although J is not playing a waiter's role (as C does in line 14). Then, J's use of the polite form of the pronoun *watashi* could be perceived as a strategy to minimize the risk of his face-threatening act (unlike his earlier narrative): he is asking others if he can eat one of the potatoes. Because of this inherently face-threatening act, J in line 17 has more need for politeness than he did during his earlier narratives. This could be the reason why J switches to a formal register, using the formal form of the first person pronoun and honorifics. Yet in other similar contexts in which he asks a permission to take food and eat, he does *not* use honorifics. Since honorifics do not appear in other similarly face-threatening contexts, the face-threatening nature of the utterance in line 17 is probably not the cause for his use of the formal form of the pronoun and honorifics. Given these circumstances, it is most likely that the previous two speakers' use of honorifics trigger J's use of honorifics in line 17. J echoed them with respect to the same conversational topic. The dialogicality of honorific use motivated by conversational topic becomes critical later in this segment, when the conversational topic shifts.

In line 20, N encourages J to eat, using honorifics *itadaite* and *kudasai*. Here, N makes a mistake of using referent honorifics. In talking about the addressee's action of eating, N would be expected to use the respectful form of the verb 'to eat' *meshiagatte*, not the humble form *itadaite*, although in the follow-up interview N claimed that she was unaware of her incorrect honorific usage. Instead of using honorifics (incorrectly), she could have said something more informal such as *haai tabete tabete* 'sure, eat, eat' without using honorifics. Even

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though the honorific form that N uses in line 20 is grammatically and pragmatically incorrect, N, at least, succeeds in repeating the same word used by J in line 17 and in attuning to the previous speakers' uses of honorifics.

In lines 23 and 26, when J switches the conversational topic back to his narrative about the car accident, his utterances no longer include honorifics. He ends his turn with *dayone*, just as in line 1. This suggests that honorifics are introduced according to conversational topic and triggered by previous instances of addressee honorifics. When the topic changes, honorifics disappear. Even if the conversational topic remains constant, the dialogic use of honorifics usually lasts for no more than four to five turns.<sup>4</sup> If honorifics are used beyond that limit, informal peer group conversations would sound unnatural, uncoordinated, and therefore awkward to participants.<sup>5</sup>

The use of referent honorifics also illustrates dialogic interaction.

(2) Data Set II: G is talking about her baby and M asks G about how happy G's parents are.

1 M: go-ryoushin ga mou taihen janai?

2 RES-parents SUB already big deal SFP(M.F.)

3 'Your parents are very happy, aren't they?'

4 G: ... haha wa ne tomokaku mou nanka ne

5 mother:HUM TOP SFP(N) anyway well like SFP(N)

6 'My mother has not changed, but'

7 genkakudatta chichi-oya ga konna mejiri sagete

8 strict:COP:PST father-parent:HUMSUB this corner of eyes lower

9 'my father who used to be very strict has become so sweet.'

In this exchange, dialogic interaction occurs according to the conversational topic about G's parents. Once a referent honorific is used in line 1, subsequent instances of referent honorifics seem to become unmarked. After M asks G about G's parents with the subject honorific ('respectful') form of the word 'parents' *go-ryoushin*, G seems to be compelled to respond to M with the humble form of 'mother' *haha* and a relatively humble form of 'father' *chichi-oya*.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, their use of referent honorifics seems to be marked in this informal conversation. But once M expresses her deferential attitude to G's parents in referent honorifics, the markedness of honorific expressions changes. It would be

<sup>4</sup> For another example, see Takekuro (2002: 203-204).

<sup>5</sup> These are, however, only my own informal observations. To make a truly definitive claim, one would observe and record many more dialogic instances of honorific usage.

<sup>6</sup> In Standard Japanese, *chichi* is the most humble form available to refer to one's own father. Adding *-oya* 'parent' to *chichi* is less humbler than *chichi*. But *chichi-oya* is still humbler than other forms such as *oto-san/to-san* 'dad' or *papa* 'papa'.



marked for G to use a non-humble form to respond to M for making differences in their registers. In this sense, G's use of the humble forms *haha* and *chichi-oya* is somewhat unmarked. The use of honorifics is generally considered marked in informal conversations, but once an honorific is introduced into a context to activate a particular contextual aspect, the use of honorifics in the following turns can become unmarked even in informal conversations.

## 2.2. SFPs

Once a speaker uses a strongly gendered form of SFP, other speakers also dialogically resonate with analogous strongly gendered SFPs.

(3) Data Set I: The speakers are complaining about their professors.

1 T: *omae fuzaken nayo tte omotta yo*  
 2 you:VUL kidding **SFP(S.M.)** QT think.PST SFP(M.M.)  
 3 'I thought you shouldn't be so ridiculous.'

4 K: *omou yona*  
 5 think **SFP(S.M.)**  
 6 'I think so.'

7 I: *kocchi mo ganbatta n dazo ttsu no*  
 8 this too do the best:PST NOM COP:**SFP(S.M.)** QT:say NOM  
 9 'I was like "we were doing our best!"'

In (3), when T uses the strongly masculine form of SFPs *nayo* to express her annoyance at her professors, K and I then also use strongly masculine forms. Although these forms are not statistically common for young female speakers to use even in informal conversations, T's use triggers more forms in the same gendered category from K and I. The same happens with strongly feminine forms of SFPs, as in (4) where speakers use them one after another.

(4) Data Set II: Remarking on the changes in the content of their conversation.

1 K: *nanka atashitachi mo wadai ga otona ni natta yone*  
 2 well we also topic SUB adult to became SFP(N)  
 3 'Well, the topics of our conversation have become grown up.'

4 *sou ima shimijimi omocchatta yo*  
 5 yes now really think.PST SFP(M.M.)  
 6 'Yes, I just really felt so.'

7 G: *soryaa gonon mae to wa chigau wayo*  
 8 of course five years ago QT TOP different **SFP(S.F.)**  
 9 'Of course, we don't talk like we did 5 years ago.'

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- 10 M: *minna otona ni natta* *noyo*  
11 everyone mature to become.PST SFP(S.F.)  
12 'Everyone became mature.'
- 13 T: *soshite haha ni natte iku* *none*  
14 then mother to become go SFP(S.F.)  
15 'Then we become mothers.'

While each instance takes a different linguistic form in both (3) and (4), they are still in the same gendered categories. Using the form in the same category, which is initially considered marked due to the statistically infrequent usage, thereafter becomes unmarked in the interactive context, because the previous instance sets a new norm of interaction for following instances.

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1. Dynamic changes of indexicals**

My examples of dialogic interaction demonstrate the use of linguistic forms as indexical signs. The use of linguistic forms such as honorifics and strongly gendered forms of SFPs can be highly marked in informal peer group conversations. When speakers engaged in informal conversations use marked linguistic forms, they convey additional information about the speaker's perception of the interactive context. For instance, honorifics give a sense of formality, politeness, or irony to the interaction, while strongly masculine or feminine forms of SFPs convey coarseness or gentleness, respectively. However, from the perspective of dialogic interaction, the first instance of marked linguistic forms sets a new norm of interaction and brings the next instance of marked linguistic forms into conformity with the new norm in the situated interactive context. Subsequent instances no longer seem anomalous, rather unmarked. On the other hand, if subsequent speakers do not use marked linguistic forms that are introduced in prior turns, the use of unmarked linguistic forms could be perceived as a violation of the new norms in the situated interactive contexts, conveying more information than the use of marked linguistic forms.

Initially, the choice of honorifics and SFPs is governed by socially motivated norms of interaction that are relatively "fixed": the formality of the situation, participants' status hierarchy, and the speaker's gender. But whether each instance of usage is interpreted as unmarked or marked depends on its immediate interactive context, such as the conversational topic and participants' role structure. In other words, what speakers experience as "marked" or "unmarked" utterances may shift based on prior context. After one speaker's usage foregrounds other speakers' options, the others discern a change in indexicals and make linguistic alignment by their own usage of analogous linguistic forms for the next four or five turns. The choice of linguistic forms is on the one hand defined by the immediate interactive context, but on the other hand the interactive

context is also defined by the choice of linguistic forms (cf. Duranti 1992).

During the processes of interaction and interpretation, the distinction between unmarked and marked aspects of indexicals is not static, but dynamic and constantly negotiated in situated contexts. Even though interaction is largely based on socially motivated norms of language usage, the norms are nonetheless fluid. In fact, if norms of interaction are strictly fixed, it is difficult to explain speakers' creativity in using language to alter interpersonal relationships and achieve special effects such as irony, sarcasm, or humor (Agha 1994: 288). The fluidity of norms of interaction allows meanings of linguistic forms and social relationships to be creatively negotiated in the interactive contexts like individual conversations. In saying this, however, I do not mean to underestimate the existence of socially motivated norms. The fact that the dialogic use of honorifics lasts for only four or five turns indicates that speakers are aware of "markedness" of using honorifics in informal conversations with respect to socially motivated norms. Thus, indexical meanings of linguistic forms arise out of the dynamic interplay between broader social norms of interaction and the situated interactive context.

### **3.2. Dialogic interaction in light of Goffman's face-work**

In providing these socio-cultural accounts of dialogic interaction, I draw on Goffman's (1956) notion of "deference" and "demeanor" as conceptual frameworks. Deference and demeanor both involve respect, for the other and for oneself. Deference is defined as what is owed to the other and demeanor as what one owes to oneself. Using these notions, in this section, I discuss the socially significant meanings of dialogic interaction.

In informal conversations, speakers have a choice between dialogic and non-dialogic interaction. Although speakers always have the choice of using less marked forms, they "may" choose to make use of previous speakers' marked linguistic forms. Particularly when the degree of markedness is high, dialogicality through the use of analogous linguistic forms or register maintains coherence in interaction. Dialogic interaction demonstrates a speaker's acknowledgement that participants are interacting on common ground. In this way, speakers show deference to one another, because dialogic interaction increases feelings of connectedness among participants. Additionally, dialogic interaction conveys metamessages about the speakers themselves, who display their demeanor as socially engaged members of the group. Dialogic interaction helps parties to establish common ground; deference enhances parties' regard for one another's self-respect; and demeanor creates parties' regard for their own. Failure in any of these respects might be experienced by participants as 'having nothing in common' (Hymes 1986: 82). Therefore I interpret dialogic interaction as a way of ensuring that one is engaged properly in discourse and allowing all speakers to signal their identity and membership in the group.

#### 4. Conclusion

As an analysis of the use of honorifics and SFPs in dialogic interaction, this study suggests that these linguistic forms are multifunctional and multiply indexical. Even in highly marked uses, linguistic forms may have the status of givens, and therefore become unmarked. As their functional and pragmatic dimensions of usage are subject to negotiations between socially motivated norms of interaction and the immediate interactive context, we cannot take indexical meanings as pre-given or predictable a priori. This study, however, is just a beginning. More studies on the indexical properties of natural language are necessary if we are to come to understand the dynamic interplay between linguistic forms and interactive context.

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