

# How Are Speech Styles Elaborated for Presenting Individual Personality While Bearing in Mind Social Norms?

## Certain Cases in Beppu City, Oita Prefecture, Japan

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### A B S T R A C T

*The purpose of this paper is to examine how speech styles are elaborated for presenting individual personality. Through the narratives of ten selected interviewees, some social norms internalised by them emerged. Age, status and career are associated to the joo/ge (upper/lower) and the senpai/koohai (senior/junior) relationships. Whether it is the first meeting and the length of relationship are associated to shin/so (intimacy/distance) and uchi/soto (in-group/out-group). In particular the notion of shin/so takes a role for adjusting speech styles. According to the narratives of individual episodes, there are several factors of determination of speech style, which are not necessarily following social norms. The way of constructing relationships, keeping power relations, protection and so on are influenced by regional characteristics, which include factors of determination of speech style such as generation, gender, solidarity, and jibunrashisa (like myself, personality) and so forth.*

**Key words:** speech styles, social norms, Japan, attitudes

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### The Methodology and the Purpose of This Research

When I first began this research, I was grasping the subject matter by using a dichotomy of the social norms that are referred to when persons differentiate their style of speech, on one hand, and their free speaking style that reflects their personality, on the other. Generally, social

norms refer to the rules and standards for behavior that are shared by the society, community, profession and/or various groups that individuals belong to. However, the social norms are not static, nor are they spread pervasively through society, community and groups in an even

manner. Moreover, there are no clear boundaries. Therefore, if we collect samples on the premise that there is the cultural essence in the norms as such and attempt to verify that point, then we will fail to grasp much information.

In this article, based upon the standpoint that the reality is something that is built<sup>1</sup> and that shows various expressions, I take an interpretative approach of focusing on the meanings that are embodied in an action or a situation, in order to understand the social interaction and the meaning that is communicated in the process. By taking the position that when the individual selects differentiated use of speech based upon the norms which have been formed socially and which change with time, she or he makes a certain choice, which provides us with a cue on how that socially constructed individual positions him/herself. I would like to focus not so much on the function of differentiated use, but mainly on the process of how differentiated use is selected.

The purpose of this research is to clarify how the differentiated use of words (speech) by 10 residents of Beppu City in Oita Prefecture, is related to their positioning of themselves within the surrounding social situation. I carried out a semi-structured interview with ten individuals and daily conversations with one woman.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Agency and positioning*

With the adoption of the concept of »agency«, Butler made it possible for the individual who is a socially constructed passive being to take positioning autonomously as an active subject<sup>2</sup>. The act of taking a position is subjective, distinctively individual and even political. Agency, through engaging in talking, cites and draws upon linguistic resources and customary practices, but gaps or discrepan-

cies that occur in that process of citation create a new context which creates turbulence in language, even though dragged by language<sup>2</sup>. This means that no matter how autonomous positioning may be, just as the individual selects from the existing language resources when she engages in talking, positioning, too, is actually rooted in a high level macro-system, and the ideologies and institutional structures that are integrated with it<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, Ino maintains: »Agency, even while bound by restrictions, struggles with the reality, resists it, and supports individuals to live tenaciously«<sup>4</sup>. When we recall the recent view of identity that it is not given, but is an active process that is formed reflectively, we can see agency at work there.

### *Microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems*

Bronfenbrenner provides a foundation for incorporating a contextual meaning into research from the perspective of the ecological environment of human development<sup>5</sup>. The ecological environment is conceptualized as a »nest-like« structure with multiple phases sharing the same center. The structures are, respectively, Microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems. The individual subject is a passive being who is socially constructed within these systems. At the same time, because the social practice in daily life which is restricted on micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels is social practice that is mediated by language, agency examines the results of one's actions reflectively in an ongoing way. By incorporating unintended results into the conditions for new actions, and by repeating this process, the individual subject (agency) opens up opportunities for new positioning<sup>5</sup>. The totality of such practices constructs the ecological environment.

Using the theoretical framework outlined above, I would like to examine how

individuals select differentiated use of speech styles, their positioning in the social situation that surrounds them, and the relationship between the two.

## Method

The sample consisted of 10 individuals residing in Oita Prefecture (five men and five women, between 15 and 79 years of age).

Semi-structured interviews took place from July 10 to July 25, 2002 (30 minutes –1 hour each) in Beppu City, Oita Prefecture at homes of common friends of the interviewer and interviewees, homes of the interviewees and in a university cafeteria.

The questions focused on the following aspects:

- What kinds of things do you take into consideration when you differentiate your speaking style in daily life?
- Who can you speak most casually with?
- How did you learn to differentiate your speech style?

I asked the individuals to respond freely.

## Recording of the conversations

One of the five women referred to above was 42 years old. Originally, from Hiroshima, she came to Beppu when she was 18 years old. In Beppu, she won a certificate as a dental hygienist; after she got married, she worked at her husband's drug store. (She is at the store from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.).

The interview was held on June 26, 2002, for 5 hours at her home in Yamanote area of Beppu and on June 27, 2002 for 4 hours at the drug store along the street in front of Beppu City Station.

## Results and Observations

### *What became clear through the 10 interviews in Beppu*

1) Their awareness of a number of internalized social norms became clear. Factors such as age, social position and career are connected with the upper and lower relationship and the senior (*senpai*) and junior (*koohai*) relationship. Whether it is the first encounter and the duration of the relationship is connected with the feeling of closeness vs. distance, and inside and outside ties. To a higher-ranking person and to a senior person, they generally speak in a respectful style, using the *desu/masu*\* form. They also use the *desu/masu* form to a person they speak to for the first time. As for the amount of attention and consideration, they pay more attention to higher-ranking persons, seniors and outside persons than to lower-ranking persons, junior persons and inside persons. The awareness of closeness vs. distance plays even a larger role for adjustment in differentiated use of language. At the work place, etc. when they talk about work, they use the *desu/masu* form.

2) Even though they have a definite awareness of social norms, there is a certain level of tolerance. In some specific types of relationships and situations, casual talks are permissible even between students and teachers. This becomes possible only under specific situations. In individual situations, the sense of what is appropriate varies, so that what is appropriate to one person may be quite inappropriate for another. As criteria for judgment, in a close relationship, the awareness of higher and lower becomes looser but in extracurricular school club activities with a formal seniority-based rela-

\* Appears in the sentence ending as a polite expression, which is called *teineigo* in Japanese. *Teineigo* is one of *keigo* (language of respect; *sonkeigo* – honorific form, *kenjougo* – humble form and *teineigo* – polite language, formal sentence ending.)

tionship, the feeling of closeness or distance tended not to be considered. The power to decide on the character of the situation at hand lies in the hands of the higher-ranking person. The mood of the higher-ranking person affects the lower-ranking person's differentiating of speech style. There were situations when the higher-ranking person told a lower-ranking person that she could speak casually, and when she did so, the higher-ranking person did not appear so pleased. When a lower-ranking person clearly feels close to a higher-ranking person, and when this close feeling is reciprocal, the lower-ranking person can speak casually and be accepted.

3) When a person speaks with a certain specific intent, differentiated use of speech style becomes complicated and minutely defined. The functions of differentiated use appear simultaneously in several clusters. For example, in relation to the speech community, its function may be aimed at building unity and relationship; it may be a ceremonial performance; or it may be a special, distinctive characteristic of the community. The individual may feel the pressure of unity or colleagues pushing for belonging, and he may consider what others are expecting of him, and decide to go along with the atmosphere. Then, there are speech styles that are adopted in order to increase work efficiency. Other types of intentions include: resolving tensions in harmony and unity, formalistic expressions based upon power and distance, hiding oneself for self defense and choosing to opt for harmony to avoid clashes. At times, individuals' open themselves up, revealing feelings and their true sentiments, or their speech style may change their image. Some may choose to become closer to society's expectations of them, while others select speech style to become truer to themselves. Occasionally, people may select a speech style solely to make a profit

or to benefit in their position or work. Persons may manipulate the impressions they convey to push matters forward more smoothly. At times, women are talked down with prejudice simply because they are women. There was an episode where the other person's attitude changed suddenly when he saw the individual's business card with the title of assistant section manager.

4) It became clear how people undergo various changes in the course of a long relationship, or through different kinds of experience, or in varied contexts. As the relationship becomes longer, individuals tend to place more importance on the relationship as whole persons rather than differentiated use of speech style based upon social norms. There was a case, however, where the individual was able to speak naturally and true to herself for the first time only after ten years had passed.

5) The ability for differentiated use of speech style becomes part of individuals in the course of daily life unconsciously, through their human relationship with family, club activity, company and the community. The environment is a very important factor. This ability for differentiated use is learned and mastered, step-by-step, by hearing their parents talk with their neighbors, listening to telephone responses and hearing community people talking with one another. Appropriateness of differentiated use of speech style is deeply linked to the values upheld by the family and community. There was one episode where a woman made a conscious effort to learn the Beppu dialect in order to harmonize with the way customers speak to the pharmacist.

*What became clear from recorded conversations and interview with one of the five women*

Some parts of the daily conversations with the women reinforced matters that came out in the interview, others diver-

ged from the interview, and yet others revealed information that did not come out in the interview. Her differential use of speech that was observed strongly supported the above five points of the results from ten interviews. One example of a divergence was that in the interview, she stated that she speaks in *desu/masu* form to a pharmaceutical supplier because it's part of work (business), but responds in a casual speech to a parcel delivery person. Here, we can interpret that she took her position based more on the local norms associated with Beppu, a pharmacy located in front of the station, rather than the norms of formality that construct »work.« The differentiated use of speech that was not clear in the interview was the gap in speech and her customer service to men and women, and her active position taking as an expert at the pharmacy, that is, position taking mediated by products (pharmaceuticals). In other aspects, her main position taking was that of a middle-aged local housewife, as an »*obasan*« (an auntie or a middle aged woman). Even in her use of casual speech with her husband, her daughter, and friends, one could perceive specific position taking within her relationship with each person, respectively.

#### *Changes in the woman's attitude regarding acceptance of the Beppu dialect*

Through her interview, it became clear that her attitude toward Beppu dialect was influenced by her environment.

Resistance to Beppu dialect is evident from the following responses:

»...22 years ago. I came to Beppu when I was 18. At first, I disliked Beppu. I do not want to use Beppu dialect, I thought. I spoke with a strong Hiroshima accent. It was only after my children were born that I felt that I had to accept Beppu dialect.«

»My husband is from Beppu. My husband does not speak in Beppu dialect, not

totally. (He lived) eight years in Tokyo. If you ask me what attracted me to him when we first met, I was drawn by his Tokyo speaking style.«

»I paid attention so that the older daughter used as little Beppu dialect as possible. My daughter's speech was attractive (clean). But when she started to go to school, she was saying that people said she spoke in an attractive manner.«

»At first, I did not understand the business at all. I spoke the standard Japanese mixed with some Hiroshima dialect. I was rather formal, and, so there was a distance with customers.«

»When I was out in the shop in the beginning, I felt tense. I did not feel settled at the shop. I did not feel confident about responding to customers, and had no confidence about my knowledge of the products.«

The following statements indicate the process of the acceptance of Beppu dialect:

»With age, you become more adapted.«

»After I began to tend the shop every day, I began to think about how to interact with customers. At times, my husband cautioned me about the way to speak. So, my daily conversation became increasingly in Beppu dialect. I think that I mastered Beppu dialect in the shop, now.«

»I have confidence with daytime customers. I know to what extent I should handle them. I think I got used to it. During daytime, there are more old ladies, and so, if I speak in Beppu dialect, they find it easier to speak as well.«

»My daughter's speech was attractive (clean). But since the second or third year in high school, her speech changed a great deal. She spoke more Beppu dialect. Maybe she didn't want to stand out from the others.«

»There is much less of a boundary in the speech style between others and myself.«

self, and there are fewer and fewer unpleasant experiences.«

»I feel more relaxed when I am myself.«

»I don't put on airs. I am now beginning to understand how it is not good to put on airs. This is one of the good points of Beppu. The characteristic of this locality. But it may seem rude or lazy to people from outside.«

»Hiroshima dialect and Beppu dialect are both frank and down-to-earth, but there are differences, and my husband has a good understanding of these differences.«

»How much my husband has changed now. It seems that speech makes a person appear different. The atmosphere changes very much, I think.«

Things that she is not good at:

»Now, I change places with my husband at 3:00 p.m. Before, I took charge of the shop at night. In Beppu, there are many people working in bars and similar nightspots. When my husband has some business at night, I take care of the store at nighttime. No matter how used I become during the daytime, I have to deal with different kinds of customers at night, and so, I become tense. My husband's customers are difficult customers, and so when it becomes complicated, I have a difficult time. During the daytime, there is a greater number of customers with whom I do business. I have a rough idea of the kind of persons they are. But at nighttime, we have different kinds of customers, and so, different products that sell. So, I become tenser, and tend to use the *desu/masu* style more. I withdraw more, and I am not so active. At night, there are many travelers who come as well.«

This change was occasioned by changes in her life on the meso-level, accompanying broadening of human relationships, increase in her knowledge, etc. Since

such changes worked effectively in the pharmacy, we can see her acceptance became even more positive. We can regard this as a process of socialization. At the micro-level of daily life, we can see the way she built her position. From the third narrative, it could be said that the confidence of the knowledge strongly influences her attitude of service and her position. It is a good example of acting in such a way as to maximize one's self interest, and minimize one's disadvantage<sup>6</sup>.

#### *Some cases of position readjustment*

Finally, we will look at episodes when the woman was forced to take an uncomfortable position in a dialogue, then, she activated agency, and recovered her own position in the following two episodes.

#### *Episode 1:*

»Yesterday, I met a man from a maker company. It was our first meeting. Usually, the husband handles purchasing, and so, I do not meet many people from makers. When he first came in, he addressed me in the standard Japanese. When I responded, then, he started to speak more casually. Now our positions are different, and we are not friends. From his perspective, I am his customer. So, I spoke to him in the standard Japanese. Then, he went back to speaking the standard Japanese again. He was in his 40's. I kept up speaking in the standard Japanese, to keep him on notice.«

#### *Episode 2:*

»When I was in my early 20's, a teenage boy called me »Obachan«, and I talked back at him. »That's too much!« Also, when a young person in his 20's called my husband »Oichan, Ojichan or Oisan« (an uncle or a middle aged man), that was a shock, too. Now, young people are calling him »Oichan«. He calls back »Oisan« to those who tease him, even though he is older. It's probably meant as a joke. I

don't like it. I feel »How rude!« I thought it was too much, and so, one time, I shot back: »Ah, I was wondering who *Oisan* is.« When I say that the other party gives an embarrassed smile.«

In the first episode, she did not simply reproduce herself (in the image of) another person pushed upon her; rather, she redefined the meaning, and strove for a new position taking. Here, agency appears at the scene of resistance. In the second episode, there was a situation where one is »called« by a name which differs from her own awareness, and which she does not like. But when she is called by that name anyway, she is subjectified by that<sup>2</sup>.

From the above, it becomes clear that it is not so meaningful to differentiate »normative« and non-normative with regard to differentiated use of speech style. As the individual takes her own position in the social relationships that are constantly being forged, we find both normative use and personal and individuated use of speech. The continuation of such linkage constructs the process of that individual's identification.

## Conclusion

Viewed from the standpoint that the reality is something that is socially built, we can state that differentiated use of speech style is a manifestation of that social structure that has been built. Differentiated use of speech style is exhibited under the restrictions of the culturally shared social norms, but it must also respond to the contexts comprised by the work place, groups, community, etc., that a given individual belongs to. In this way, restrictions exist not only on the macro-level, but also on the meso-level, which is the sphere for the individual's living. From the macro-level, differentiated use of speech style on the meso-level may appear to be simply a manifestation of per-

sonality or individuality, but such perception stems from differences in the norms on the meso-level of individuals.

We cannot say that an individual is using »a normative speech style« just by looking at the use of respectful speech style and the standard Japanese in differentiated use of speech style. For to do so is to look only at the norms on the macro-level. While the meso-level is under the normative restrictions of the macro-level, there are restrictions and normative differentiation of use of speech style that are specific to the meso-level. The differentiated use of speech style by this woman at the pharmacy in front of Beppu Station toward customers is a response to the meso-level restrictions based upon the characteristics of the regional community. Unless we look at speech style in the light of the situation and context on each occasion, we will not be able to comprehend the meanings that are being communicated.

We see, then, that the individual engages in speaking under many restrictions. Nevertheless, the possibility remains for the individual to use her own differentiated use of speech style. As we saw in the results of the interviews, there is some tolerance for the norms. This concept of »tolerance« is also a socially constructed concept. Such tolerance exists in one-to-one individual relationship on the micro-level. The speech style that is tolerated may at times appear rude to the other person, but this is something that is possible only on the basis of the new relationship built by the two individuals involved. Moreover, when such tolerance extends to an entire group, it can become the norm for that group.

As noted in the title, in response to the question how differentiated use of speech style is elaborated in a personal, individualized way, we can suggest two answers here. One is for the individual to consider the macro-level norms and mul-

tifarious norms on the meso-level, and make a choice that has the greatest meaning for her. This can be called an individual and personal selection. This choice naturally determines her position in various social contexts and naturally determines differentiated use of speech style. Secondly, under the socially constructed relationship, a new one-to-one

individual relationship can create some tolerance for dialogue, which, in turn, gives rise to a highly individualized differentiated use of speech style that diverges from the norms on macro-, meso- and micro-levels. However, the personality that is born may be just for that situation and time.

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## RAZRAĐENOST STILOVA IZRAŽAVANJA KOD PREDSTAVLJANJA I NJIHOVA USKLAĐENOST S DRUŠTVENIM NORMAMA – SLUČAJEVI IZ GRADA BEPPUA (PREFEKTURA OITA, JAPAN)

### S A Ž E T A K

Cilj je ovoga rada istražiti raznolikost stilova izražavanja pri osobnom predstavljanju. U analizi deset izabranih intervjua izišle su na vidjelo neke zajedničke društvene norme. Dob, status i karijera povezuju se s odnosima s *joo/ge* (nadređenim/podređenim) i *senpai/koohai* (starijim/mlađim) osobama. Upotreba stilova *shin/so* (bliskost/distanca) i *uchi/soto* (pripadnost/neprispadnost grupi) ovisi o tome radi li se o prvom susretu ili dugotrajnom poznanstvu. U prilagodivanju stilova izražavanja posebnu ulogu igra pojam *shin/so*. Pri pripovijedanju osobnih događaja postoji nekoliko faktora koji određuju stil izražavanja i koji se ne moraju nužno poklapati s društvenim normama. Na način izgradnje odnosa, zadržavanja moći, zaštitničkih odnosa i sličnog utječu regionalni običaji koji uključuju faktore bitne za definiranje stila izražavanja kao što su generacijski jaz, spol, solidarnost, *jibunrashisa* (osobnost) i drugi.