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Reanalysis of discernment from a social constructivist perspective:  
Academic consultation sessions in Japanese universities

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## INTRODUCTION

From the social constructivist perspective, this paper examines speech-style shifts in academic consultation sessions between professors and students in Japanese universities and demonstrates that politeness is an interactional achievement. The paper attempts to show how what has previously been described as a display of discernment can be reanalyzed as an active co-construction in the sequential organization of talk.

Social constructivist theory proposes that social categories such as social identities are not given a priori in the social structure but are created and negotiated in social interaction (Bucholtz, 1999; He, 1995; Ochs, 1993; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1991). Language is seen as a tool available to the members of society for constructing a social world. An individual has multi-faceted identities, and the relevant identity is negotiated in interaction (Schegloff, 1991). In this view, social identities and relationships are fluid, and speakers may display various social identities and relationships while interacting with the same addressee(s) in a given social situation.

Furthermore, speakers are not passive observers of social norms but rather active agents who construct their social world. This view, however, conflicts with the notion of discernment (*wakimae*) proposed as politeness in Japanese society (Ide, 1989, 1992; Ide & Yoshida, 1999).

Brown and Levinson's universal theory of politeness (1978, 1987) states that politeness is an outcome of the speaker's strategic choice in order to minimize a face-threatening act. The speaker may choose to use polite expressions when his or her act may threaten the addressee's negative or positive face. One of the major challenges to Brown and Levinson's theory (1978, 1987) comes from studies on East Asian languages (Ide, 1989, 1992; Ide & Yoshida, 1999; Mao, 1994; Matsumoto 1988, 1989). They differentiate Asian societies from the Western societies by claiming that strategic politeness based on face needs is, for the most part, foreign to Asian societies. For example, Ide (1989, 1992) and Ide and Yoshida (1999) claim that in Japanese society, discernment (*wakimae*) is more important than the volitional use of politeness (strategic politeness based on face needs). Discernment (*wakimae*) is a social etiquette that the members of Japanese society must observe to act politely. According to this view, the Japanese social rules make reference to social position, power, age and formality, and the use of the formal linguistic forms is "socio-pragmatically obligatory" when talking to a person who is in a higher position, more powerful, or older. In Ide's words:

For the speaker of an honorific language, linguistic politeness is above all a matter of showing discernment in choosing specific forms, while for the speaker of a non-honorific language, it is mainly a matter of the volitional use of verbal strategies to maintain the faces of the participants...However, the two aspects are integral to the universals of linguistic politeness, working potentially in almost all languages (1989:245).

The argument for a dichotomy between volition and discernment has two underlying assumptions: (a) Some human actions are an active choice of the participants while others are passive observations of social rules; (b) Social identities are given a priori in society. However, these two assumptions are untenable from the point of view of social constructivism, which

claims that social identities are fluid and an emergent product of social interaction (e.g., Bucholtz, 1999; He, 1995; He & Keating, 1991; Ochs, 1993).

This paper examines speech-style shifts in academic consultations between professors and students in Japanese universities. This social context is especially relevant for the present paper, because it is a prototypical social context in which, it is claimed, discernment (*wakimae*) is required due to the difference in social status between the participants. In this view, discernment requires that the student use polite expressions to the professor. In what follows, I will demonstrate what is considered as discernment can be seen as co-construction of relationship in the moment-by-moment unfolding in interaction.

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## DATA

The data come from academic consultation sessions conducted by three male professors of two different universities in the Tokyo area. The professors are in their 40's to 60's. The consultation sessions of two of the professors with their male students were an hour-long each, and the entire sessions were video- and audio-recorded. The third professor's consultation sessions consist of six separate segments in which he consulted with six female students, each lasting about 20 minutes. All the consultation sessions were held in the respective professor's office in the university. The data were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively.

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## THE MASU AND PLAIN FORMS IN JAPANESE

Speakers of Japanese must choose between the addressee honorific *masu* forms and the non-honorific plain forms at the sentence-final position. The term *masu* form includes the present (*-masu*) and past (*-mashita*) tense forms, gerund (*-mashite*), and the copular present (*desu*) and past tense (*deshita*) forms.<sup>1</sup> The plain form includes the present (*-u* or *-ru*) and past (*-ta*) tense forms, the gerund (*-te*), the copular present (*da*) and past tense (*datta*) forms as well as bare nominals, which are considered to be derived by copula deletion (*hon da/desu* 'is a book' → *hon* ∅ 'is a book'). Table 1 summarizes the *masu* and plain forms.

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<sup>1</sup> The tentative form of *desu* (*deshoo*) is not included in the analysis. Since the plain counterpart *daroo* sounds rough even in informal conversation, it is typically used more by men than by women. Therefore, although *deshoo* is the *masu* form, it is normally used even in informal conversation by both women and men. Since a contrast between *deshoo* (the *masu* form) and *daroo* (the plain form) is not salient in most talk, I did not include *deshoo* as a *masu* form in the present analysis.

Table 1: Three clause types and gerund in the *masu* and plain forms

clause type	<i>masu</i> form	plain form
<b>verbal</b>	verb stem <i>-mas-u</i> (present) verb stem <i>-mas-en</i> (negative) verb stem <i>-mashi-ta</i> (past) verb stem <i>-mashi-te</i> (gerund)	verb stem <i>-(r)u</i> (present) verb stem <i>-nai</i> (negative) verb stem <i>-ta</i> (past) verb stem <i>-(t)te</i> (gerund)
<b>adjectival</b>	adj + copula <i>des-u</i> (present) <i>deshi-ta</i> (past)	adj <i>-i</i> (present) <i>-kat-ta</i> (past) <i>-ku-te</i> (gerund)
<b>nominal</b>	nom + copula <i>des-u</i> (present) <i>deshi-ta</i> (past) <i>deshi-te</i> (gerund)	nom + copula <i>da</i> (present) <i>dat-ta</i> (past) <i>de</i> (gerund)

Examples (1a) and (1b) are identical in referential meaning but differ in social meaning because the main predicate ends with the *masu* form in (1a) and with the plain form in (1b).

(1a) *Taro ga Hanako to dekake-masu.* (*masu* form)

SUB with go out

‘Taro goes out with Hanako.’

(1b) *Taro ga Hanako to dekake-ru.* (plain form)

SUB with go out

‘Taro goes out with Hanako.’

In (1a) the verb ‘to go out’ is in the *masu* form (*dekakemasu*) while in (1b) it is in the plain form (*dekakeru*). When a sentence is complex sentence, the verbal of the main clause is responsible for the contrast in social meaning. Regardless of the form of the main clause verbal, however, the verbal of the subordinate clause usually remains in the plain form, which does not affect the social meaning of the sentence as shown in (2a) and (2b).<sup>2</sup>

(2a) [[*Taro ga Hanako to dekake-ru toki*] *itsumo ame ga furi-masu*] (*masu* form)

Taro SUB Hanako with go out when always rain SUB fall

‘When Taro goes out with Hanako, it always rains.’

(2a) [[*Taro ga Hanako to dekake-ru toki*] *itsumo ame ga fur-ru*] (plain form)

Taro SUB Hanako with go out when always rain SUB fall

‘When Taro goes out with Hanako, it always rains.’

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#### DISCERNMENT OR CO-CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP?

The *masu* form has been analyzed as an honorific form that shows politeness to the addressee (Comrie, 1976; Martin, 1964). Thus, it has been called a polite or formal speech marker (e.g., Hinds, 1978; Ide, 1982, 1989; Martin, 1964; Neustupny, 1978; Niyekawa, 1991). In contrast,

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<sup>2</sup> The verb in the subordinate clause can be in the *masu* form, which sounds hyperpolite.

the plain form is referred to as a non-polite, or informal form. A number of studies on Japanese speech-styles state that to show politeness, the speaker must use the *masu* form when speaking to higher status addressee or in a formal situation.

Most academic consultation is carried out in reciprocal *masu* form exchanges between professors and students. In this context, reciprocal *masu* form exchanges index a mutual professional relationship between the two. However, the professor sometimes shifts to the plain form. Consider example (3), which illustrates a non-reciprocal exchange of the *masu* and plain forms between professors and students. In this example, the professor is asking the student if he has any questions on the assigned reading. In all the data sets, the *masu* form is in bold, and the plain form is underlined.

(3) (Professor Y and Student F)

1 P: *Nani ka shitsumon **arimasu** ka*  
'Do you have any questions?'

2 S: *eeto* ((turning the pages of the book))  
'We:ll'

3 P: *Koko made de: [wanannakatta tokoro toka soo iu no nakatta?*  
'Up to this point, isn't there anything that you didn't understand?'

4 S: [(cough)]

5 P: *Eego wa muzukashiku nakatta?*  
'Wasn't the English difficult?'

6→ S: *Atta- ((laugh)) atta to omou n **desu** kedo chotto*  
'There was- I think there were a few (questions).'

In line 1, the professor asks the student in the *masu* form if the student has questions regarding the assigned reading. In line 2, the student cannot respond immediately, so he turns pages of the book. In lines 3 and 5, the professor elaborates on his initial question by shifting to the plain form. In line 6 the student laughs as he says that he thinks he has a few questions. His laugh suggests his embarrassment because of his inability to come up with a specific question. He maintains the *masu* form here.

Exchanges of the *masu* and plain forms between professors and students such as the one shown in (3) have often been explained by the notion of social norm or discernment (*wakimae*). That is that while the professor can talk to the student in the plain form, the student, who is socially lower in status, must use the *masu* form to show politeness to the professor. In this explanation, the hierarchical relationship between professors and students is a priori given, and the speakers are using the appropriate speech-styles to reflect the given relationship. However, this account is not convincing, for the student does not always linguistically mark the hierarchical relationship.

It is more convincing if we explain that the speakers are choosing particular speech-styles to co-construct their social relationships moment-by-moment. In this view, the student in example (3) is choosing the *masu* form so that he and the professor co-construct a hierarchical relationship. In a dyadic interaction such as an academic consultation, once the professor comes

to a transition relevance place in his turn marked in the plain form, the student, who is expected to take the next turn (cf. Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), can choose either the *masu* form or the plain form and co-construct a particular type of relationship with the professor.

In this sense, the student has the power to co-construct a type of a relationship with the professor. This account is more convincing because the student does not always mark his or her lower status but rather use strategies to avoid a hierarchical relationship.<sup>3</sup>

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#### STUDENTS' STRATEGIES FOR AVOIDING A HIERARCHICAL RELATIONSHIP

The students mainly use two strategies to avoid creating an unequal status: (a) the use of an incomplete sentence so that they avoid marking either the *masu* or plain form; (b) embedding the professor's plain form utterance by co-construction. These strategies are possible due to the morpho-syntactic structure of Japanese as well as the sequential organization of talk.

As discussed above, the speech style is indicated by the *masu* or the plain form, which is a morphological marking on the tense-carrying verbal of the main clause. By the use of an incomplete sentence, however, the speaker can avoid marking a particular speech style. Since Japanese is a SOV language, the predicate comes at the end of a sentence in the canonical word order. Therefore, it is easy to say everything in the sentence except for the final verb. It is also possible to use the non-final verbal forms such as a gerundive form. In either case, the sentence is not marked with a particular speech-style. For this reason, the use of an incomplete sentence can be interpreted as the student's avoidance strategy in particular when it occurs when the professor shifts to the plain form. In other words, by not marking the *masu* or plain form, the student keeps the relationship with his professor obscure. Thus the student can avoid creating a hierarchical relationship. Consider example (4). In this example, Professor Y is asking Student F about the reading assignment.

(4) (Professor Y, and Student F)

1 P: *kore mata yominaoshite*  
'Read this again.'

2 S: *hai* ((sniffing))  
'Yes.'

3 P: *de kyoo wa Pinkaasu no tokoro na n desu ga kore wa doo deshita?*  
'And today it's about Pinkers but how was this (reading)?'

4 S: ((turning the pages of the book)) (13.00)  
'*soo desu ne:*  
We::ll'

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<sup>3</sup> The social meaning of the *masu* and plain form exchanges is not limited to that of a hierarchical relationship. For example, the mother's use of the *masu* form and the child use's of the plain form at home do not index the child's higher status but rather the mother's voice of authority (Cook, 1997). In the context of academic consultation, because the institutional power relationship is part of the social meaning of the *masu* and plain form exchange, the index of hierarchical relationship is foregrounded.

- 5 → P: *hyaku nijuu hachi peeji made wa yonda?*  
 ‘Have you read up to page 128?’
- 6 S: *hai*  
 ‘Yes.’
- 7 → P: *hu:n. muzukashikatta desho. [muzukashiku nakatta?*  
 ‘Um: it was difficult, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it difficult?’
- 8 S: *[muzukashii iya: kotchi yori wa*  
 ‘Difficult. No, it seems more
- 9 → *yomiyasukatta yoo na*  
 readable than this.’
- 10 P: *u::n un un*  
 ‘Um um um.’

In line 3, using the *masu* form, the professor asks the student how the reading went. The student is not able to answer the question right away and turns the pages of the book. He says *soo desu ne* ‘well’ reciprocating the *masu* form. But when the professor shifts to the plain form elaborating on his question in line 5, the student responds by using an incomplete sentence. The professor shifts to the plain form asking the student if he read up to page 128. He then suggests that the reading was difficult in line 7. He does so first using the *desho* (tentative form of the copula in the *masu* form) and then the plain form (*nakata*). In line 8, as an acknowledgement token, the student partially repeats the professor’s suggestion *muzukashii* ‘difficult’ in the plain form, and continues to say that the assigned reading seems easier than the other book. In this utterance, the student does not complete the predicate (i.e., *yomiyasukatta yoo na*). The complete expression is *yomiyasukatta yoo na ki ga suru/shimasu* ‘I feel that it is easier to read’, in which the verb *suru/shimasu* ‘do’ is the final tense-carrying verb and needs to be either in the plain form (*suru*) or the *masu* form (*shimasu*). But by not completing the predicate, the student does not define the relationship with the professor.

In example (5), the student uses the gerund form as an avoidance strategy. Here Professor T and Student B are talking about the student’s dialect. The professor asks the student where she lived in the past.

- (5) (Professor T and Student B)
- 1 P: *doko ni sundeta n desu ka.*  
 ‘Where did you live?’
- 2 S: *e::to umare wa Oosaka no Sakai-shi na n desu kedo:*  
 ‘Uh I was born in Sakai-city, Osaka.’
- 3 P: *u::n=*  
 ‘uh huh’
- 4 S: *=sore kara sugu Okinawa ni tennkin ni na- [narima-*  
 ‘Then soon (my father) was transferred to Okinawa.’
- 5 → P: *[Sore ikutsu gurai no toki?*  
 ‘How old were you?’



6→ S: *sore moo honto ni issai ni natta ka [naranai ka gurai de*  
'That was about just when I was almost one or so.'

7 P: [Hu::n Okinawa  
'Um Okinawa.'

8 S: hai  
'yes.'

In this example, the participants are exchanging the *masu* form up to line 4. Then in line 5 the professor shifts to the plain form when he asks the student at what age she moved to Okinawa. In line 6, she ends the turn with *de*, the gerundive form of the copula *da*. The student could complete the sentence either in the *masu* form (*deshita* 'was') or in the plain form (*datta* 'was') to co-construct a particular relationship with the professor, but does not choose to do so.

These examples show that the student often chooses an incomplete sentence or a phrase in order not to commit to a particular social relationship. Incomplete sentences and phrases serve as resource for strategies that obscure the hierarchical relationship between professors and students.

Sometimes the student changes a potential hierarchical relationship to that of a mutually equal relationship by co-constructing a sentence with the professor. As noted above, the plain form indexes social meaning only when it occurs in the main clause, in which it contrasts with the *masu* form. In the subordinate clause, it normally does not contrast with the *masu* form. Thus, the current speaker's utterance ending with the plain form can be embedded in a clause ending in the *masu* form in the next speaker's turn. Consider example (6), in which Professor T is talking with Student B about her proposed BA thesis on Japanese accent patterns.

(6) (Professor T, and Student B)

1 S: *de ano sotsuron dasu toki wa komakaku settee shinaide=*  
'And uh when I submit the BA thesis, without setting details'

2→ P: *=narubeku oomaka ni shitoita hoo ga ü yo ne*  
'it is better to leave it in a rough frame, isn't it?'

3→ S: *=desu yo ne*  
'isn't it?'

4 P: *un o- o- Oosakaben to suru no ka Osaka hoogen suru ka Kansai hoogen ni suru ka tte iu koto arimasu keredo*  
'uh there is a problem of whether it is Osaka dialect, Osaka regional dialect, or Kansai regional dialect.'

5 *maa sono taitoru o kimeru: ni attatte dakara nani o gutaiteki ni yaru,*  
'well, what to do about deciding the title so'

6 *doo iu hookoo de yaru ka tte iu koto ni tsuite no mitooshi da ya ne*  
'it's a matter of perspective on how to approach it.'

7 S: *ha:i*  
'Ye:s'

8 P: *doo o moimasu ka.*  
'What do you think?'

- 9 S: *u::n watashi mo akusento ga yappari omoshirosoo da na: to omotte iru n desu kedo*  
 ‘I also think that accent seems to be interesting’
- 10 P: *u::n*  
 ‘um’
- 11 S: *nanka*  
 ‘somehow’
- 12 P: *shibotta hoo ga ne [hontoo wa ii n da yo ne zentai bakuzen to yaru yori wa ne*  
 ‘It’s really better to focus rather than studying without focus.’
- 13 S: *[soo desu ne*  
 ‘That’s right.’
- 14→P: *anata wa akusento mo tsukai wakete iru mitai?*  
 ‘Do you use your dialect properly yourself?’
- 15→S: *na n desu kedo:*  
 ‘(that) is the case.’

In this segment we see co-constructions of a sentence in lines 1 through 3 as well as in lines 14 and 15. In line 1, the student states, “when she submits the thesis, without setting details,” and in line 2 the professor completes her sentence by saying *narubeku oomaka ni shitoita hoo ga ii yo ne* ‘it is better to leave it in a larger frame, isn’t it?’ He uses the plain form *ii yo ne* ‘is better, isn’t it?’, but the student’s turn in line 3 embeds the professor’s utterance in line 2. Because of this unfolding, the professor’s utterance becomes the subordinate clause in line 3 as shown in (7a).

- (7a) [*narubeku oomaka ni shitoita hoo ga ii*]<sub>prof</sub> *desu yo ne*]<sub>student</sub>  
 Possibly roughly do SUB good COP PRT PRT  
 ‘It is better to leave it in a rough frame, isn’t it?’

In other words, the student’s *desu yo ne* ‘isn’t it?’ frames the professor’s plain-form utterance and as a result, the co-constructed utterance ends with the *masu* form. Since the plain form in the non-final position in a sentence does not index any social meaning, the student’s *desu yo ne* changes a potentially hierarchical relationship to a mutually professional one.

Similarly, in line 15, the student co-constructs with the professor’s question said in the plain form in line 14 (*akusento mo tsukai wakete iru mitai?*) and transforms his question to a statement ending in the *masu* form as shown in (7b). Thus, again what could be a hierarchical relationship is avoided, and the mutually professional relationship is maintained.

- (7b) [*[akusento mo tsukai wakete iru mitai]*]<sub>prof</sub> *na n desu kedo:*]<sub>student</sub>  
 accent also use separate seem COP NOM COP but  
 ‘It is the case that (you)/I seem to use (your)/my accent properly’<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The original Japanese utterance does not encode the personal pronouns. The English translation include both *you* and *your* (the professor’s point of view) and *I* and *my* (the student’s point of view). The professor is implicating ‘you seem to use your accent properly’ but the student increment completely switches to the student’s point of view form that of the professor. Thus, the interpretation ‘I seem to use my accent properly’ arise at the end of (13b).

The above examples (7a and b) show that the voices of the professor and the student are merged in the co-constructed utterance. Because in Japanese the subordinate clause comes before the main clause, and the predicate verb in the subordinate clause is in the plain form, this syntactic structure is taken advantage of in the unfolding sequential organization of talk. By so doing, the student changes the potentially hierarchical relationship with the professor to a mutually professional one and co-creates a unified voice.

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## DISCUSSION

Professors and students jointly construct multiple social relationships in the course of the academic consultation session. The professor's higher status is not uniquely indexed by his use of the plain form. Similarly the student's lower status is not uniquely indexed by his or her use of the *masu* form. When the professor shifts to the plain form, the student's move in the next turn defines the social relationship between the two. From this point of view, what social relationship the participants hold is displayed in the moment-by-moment unfolding in interaction. To avoid any social marking, the student sometimes chooses to use an incomplete sentence or a phrase. Such a move obscures the institutional hierarchy and does not subject the student to be interactionally lower in status. The student also co-constructs with the professor by embedding the professor's plain form with an increment ending in the *masu* form. These strategies keep the student from constantly playing the subordinate role and obscure the institutional hierarchy expected in the academic setting.

This paper shows the emergent nature of social identities. Duranti (1997) writes:

Social structure is an emergent product of interaction in which social actors produce culture by applying native (typically implicit) methods of understanding and communicating what they are and what they care about (p. 10).

The social meanings of a linguistic form in part depend upon the sequential organization of talk. The social meaning of the *masu* form is evoked by the use or non-use of the *masu* form in the subsequent turn. Thus, the assumptions that the *masu* form is directly tied to politeness and that a lower-status person must use it to show politeness to a higher-status addressee do not hold.

The social meanings are mediated by the ideology of a particular social context or activity. The recent literature on the Japanese honorifics reports variations in the *masu* and plain form exchanges in different social contexts (Cook, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1998; Megumi, 2002; Okamoto, 1998, 1999). For example, Okamoto (1998) reports that department store clerks use the *masu* form to the customer but the street vendors do not. In Cook (1996a), I discuss that elementary school students use the *masu* form in the activity of *happyoo* but shift to the plain form outside of *happyoo* even when they talk to the teacher. The previous proposal that speakers observe social rules such as discernment (*wakimae*) cannot account for these diverse variations of the speech-styles in Japanese society.

I have argued that the use of the *masu* form in Japanese is not a matter of displaying discernment but is a choice the speaker makes to co-construct a particular relationship. Theoretically, this view is consistent with the phenomenological viewpoint that constructivism puts forward: (a)

the speaker is not a passive observer of social conventions but an active participant who makes choices to construct social identities and relationships, and (b) linguistic forms are resources available for speakers to construct social worlds. This paper also demonstrates that there is no distinction between discernment and volitional strategies to indicate politeness, for every move the speaker takes is her choice. In other words, honorifics are used strategically in interaction (see also Pizziconi, 2003). The theoretical implication of this claim is that the dichotomy between discernment and volition is irrelevant and that human actions are not split between two types of motivations. This view can also explain diverse variations found in the *masu* and plain form exchanges in different social contexts.

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APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

[	the point where overlapping talk starts
]	the point where overlapping talk ends
(0.0)	length of silence in tenths of a second
CAPS	relatively high pitch
::	lengthened syllable
-	cut-off
=	latched utterances
(( ))	transcriber's description of events
<b>bold</b>	<i>masu</i> form
<u>underlining</u>	plain form