

# Cross-cultural Analysis of Politeness Language and the Cultural and Historical Reasons

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**Abstract.** As a manifestation of human social nature in speech, politeness is vital to the development and upkeep of social relationships. People may choose to communicate the same thoughts in speech in a less direct or more oblique manner as a courtesy to both communication parties. Accordingly, politeness is a crucial field in pragmatic linguistics. The linguistic expressions of courteous language, politeness as a conflict avoidance strategy and socially indexed disparities, parameters influencing the form and function of politeness, and the impact of language type are among the subjects that researchers are presently concentrating on. The features of polite language and its origins in cross-cultural comparisons have, however, received little attention in studies. Therefore, this paper focuses on the differences and similarities in polite languages in English, French, Chinese, and Japanese, and aims to seek the reason behind using polite languages in different cultures. This study concludes that a nation's history and culture may both impact that nation's language as well as other nations' languages.

**Keywords:** Linguistics; Politeness; Cross-cultural Study.

## 1. Introduction

Politeness is necessary for building up and maintaining social relationships. It reveals the nature of human sociality as expressed in speech [1]. Being polite means considering others' feelings and thoughts and acting and speaking in a way that expresses proper concern for their social status and relationship. In speech, people may say the same idea more indirectly or be less straightforward than normal to show enough politeness for both sides of communication. Ever since ancient times, there has been a need for politeness in both spoken language and written language in China including a system of honorifics, humble language, and euphemisms. As ancient China developed and communicated with neighboring countries, the social norms of being polite and speaking politely spread and influenced the languages in other countries. Korean, as well as Japanese and Chinese communication is heavily influenced by Chinese Confucian traditional values including politeness in interpersonal communication [2]. As a result, there is a complicated system of honorifics in modern Japanese including polite language, respectful language, humble language, respectful verbs, and word beautification. Japanese honorifics are not only used among adults in society but also in daily life with seniors who are older or more experienced than themselves. Politeness in language is an important branch of pragmatics of linguistics. Researchers are now focusing on topics including the linguistic performance of politeness, the difference between politeness as a conflict-avoiding strategy and social indexing, factors determining the forms and functions of politeness, and the influence of speech type [3]. However, few researchers have studied cross-cultural comparisons of politeness language characteristics and their causes. Thus, this paper aims to study the characteristics of polite expressions by comparing different languages from different cultural backgrounds including English, Chinese, and Japanese, and seek the cultural and historical reasons for them to be used or not in modern social communications.

## 2. Literature Review

In recent years, there have been several studies related to politeness in different languages with different cultural backgrounds, which are based on speech act theory, politeness in pragmatics, and



directness. Studies on speech act theory claim that Speech acts are a part of social interactive behavior and must be interpreted as an aspect of social interaction [4]. By applying this theory, speakers' purpose for carefully speaking in different patterns facing different listeners can be explained by their desire for listeners to accept their opinions, answer their questions, enact their requests, or avoid certain conflicts with the listeners. A new approach to the study on Japanese Keigo takes a broader idea of the purpose of using polite language in Japanese. It emphasizes that the usage of polite language ensures harmony and smoothness during communication [5]. Besides, politeness in language helps people to establish a kind and modest public self-image, also called "face" in studies about politeness in pragmatics linguistics. In Goffman's theory, face-work thus includes a wide variety of practices, including among others, corrective face-work and avoidance face-work. In this situation, addressing others' needs to maintain a favourable social image and protecting one's own image requires one's application of politeness in language use and careful word choices [6]. Similarly, directness and indirectness are a popular topic in linguistics research. The well-known linguist Tannen points out that indirectness is "...one of the elements that vary the most from one culture to another and one that can cause confusion and misunderstanding..." [7]. There are many differences in the directness of communicational language use among people from different cultural backgrounds. The difference in directness in daily communication is also marked by whether a culture is classified as a high-context culture or a low-context culture according to Hall's theory [8]. High-context culture is a culture or society that communicates dominantly using contextual elements, such as specific forms of body language, the status of an individual, and the tone of voice employed during speech instead of directly using the surface meaning of words. Whether a culture is a high-context or low-context culture affects speakers' word choices as well. For example, in a study conducted by Donghoon Kim, he studied subjects from China, Korea, and the U.S., representing both high- and low-context cultures respectively [9]. His results were consistent with Hall's theory of high-context cultures. To be more specific, the participants from China and Korea are observed to be more socially oriented, confrontation-avoiding, and have more trouble dealing with new situations [9].

### 3. Politeness in different languages

The study is based on a comparison study of the politeness languages in different languages including English, Chinese, French, and Japanese. The comparison will include the forms of addressing, the second-person pronoun, and the sentence forms. The four languages in this study all have three personal pronouns and two forms (singular and plural form) of the personal pronouns. Additionally, the second-person pronoun varies when facing different listeners in Chinese, Japanese, and French. The table below briefly shows the personal pronouns in these four languages. The personal pronouns in Japanese vary markedly so only the most common forms are listed.

**Table 1.** Personal pronouns in diverse languages

	Chinese	Japanese	English	French
1 <sup>st</sup> person singular	wo	watashi	I	Je
2 <sup>nd</sup> person singular	ni/nin	kimi/anata	You	Tu/vous
3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular	ta	kare/kanojo	He/her/it	Il/elle
1 <sup>st</sup> person plural	women	watashitachi	We	Nous
2 <sup>nd</sup> person plural	nimen/ninmen	kimitachi/anatatachi	You	Vous
3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural	tamen	karera/kanojotachi	They	Ils/elles

By using the comparison in Table 1, it is not difficult to observe that among the four languages, English is the only language that has only one form of second-person pronoun. The second-person pronoun in English is the only one in the languages listed that does not change with the number and does not show a different form for normal or polite use. In China, people use "nin" instead of "ni" to address people whom they met each other the first time, or people with a higher social status. For example, when students are talking to their teachers, they should use "nin" to show their respect for

their teachers; when in a big family, younger children should use “nin” when talking with their grandparents. The using of politeness language in Japanese is almost the same. People use polite words when speaking to ones they respect very much or ones with higher social status. Besides, in the Japanese language system, Keigo, or honorifics, plays an important role in expressing respect and showing politeness in communication. Since Japanese is an Agglutinative language, their sentence pattern of showing politeness often includes adding a certain phrase after what they really are speaking. For example, “Sama”, a root word for “san” in Japanese, is usually added after someone’s surname to show a higher level of respect and is generally used towards people one admires greatly, including guests, customers, or gods. Moreover, when asking questions or making a request, the sentence pattern is not the same when between friends or between a junior and a senior person. For example, when the conversation is between friends, one may simply say “kiite ii? (ok to ask a question?)”, but when it is between a junior and a senior person, one may have to say “kiite ii desu ga? (may I ask a question?)” or even “Kikasete-itadakeru to ureshii no desu ga. (I would, however, be delighted if I may be permitted to ask (a question).)”. The greater sentence length and a more complicated sentence pattern indicate a higher level of politeness and respect. However, this does not appear to be usual in other languages in this study. When making a request, there is always an expression similar to “please” in Chinese and French, which are respectively “qing” and “s’il vous plaît”.

#### **4. Cultural and Historical Reasons**

Among the four languages in this study, Chinese and Japanese originated from Asian culture, and French and English originated from European culture. By applying Hall’s theory of high-context culture, Chinese and Japanese culture can be classified into high-context culture, since the experiment conducted by Dunghoon Kim shows that Asian people’s expression and communication tend to be more indirect and express their meanings through contextual elements. This can explain why the Japanese honorific system is complicated and they use long sentences to show their politeness.

Besides, both Korean and Japanese cultures are strongly influenced by Chinese Confucius culture. Confucius was a Chinese philosopher of the Spring and Autumn period. His philosophy theories emphasize etiquette, education, and order, and his theories can apply to an individual’s daily behavior, to society, government, and country. In Confucius’ ethics theory, which is called “Li” in Chinese, people show their respect for ancestors and deities by holding ceremonies. Society should operate in a certain order defined by social and political institutions, and individuals should follow the etiquette of daily behavior. His thoughts were chosen by the emperor as the central idea of governing the country in the Han Dynasty, and since then they have been widely spread in the whole country and deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. As the Central Plains dynasties of Ancient China continued to develop, Confucius’ Confucianism still played a remarkable role in the social and national governance of ancient China. Many people who aim to become an educated elite used his thoughts and theories as a rule of conduct. As Ancient China’s communication with neighboring countries became more frequent (as Japan sent envoys to China during the Tang Dynasty), China’s technology and philosophy were introduced to surrounding countries and continued to influence the development of the philosophy of surrounding countries. Politeness is one of the most important elements in Confucius’ theory, so as his Confucianism spread out to surrounding countries such as Japan and Korea, the idea of social status, politeness, and respect for the superior and elderly certainly affected the formation of Japan and Korea’s society norms, thus resulting in a more indirect language and high-context culture.

Considering the presence of second-person pronouns in Chinese, Japanese, and French, it seems that there is a lack of a sense of respect in English culture. However, before the time of modern English, there existed a notable polite form for second-person pronouns in English. In middle English, “thou” was singular, while “you” was plural; but before “you”, the second person pronoun was “ye”, which is more formal but plural. In the 1400s the usage of personal pronouns started shifting when British people with higher social status started using plural pronouns to refer to themselves. For example,

they refer themselves as “we”. After that, the second person plural form, “you”, started becoming formal and polite, while “thou” was given a meaning that is more casual and is more often used with people that are close with. Then in the 17th century, the use of thou began to decline while the idea of using this word changed from informal to impolite or disrespectful. More people started using “you” towards everyone since it symbolizes enough respect and politeness. Modern linguists often state that the reason for “you” to be used more broadly is the increasing identification that “you” is more consistent with polite society and the uncertainty of using “thou” to express disrespect in the rising new middle class [10]. In conclusion, “you” is already a polite form for the second personal pronoun in English and the normal form is no longer used by most people because it stands for a lower level of respect and politeness.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper compared and studied the characteristics of polite expressions in four languages including English, Chinese, Japanese, and French. This paper also discussed the cultural reason for Chinese and Japanese speakers to be more indirect and show the characteristics of a high-context culture, and the historical reason behind the second personal pronoun you in English. The author discovered that both the history and culture of a country can shape its language and influence the culture and language of other countries.

It is found that while each language has its own distinct qualities, there are certain parallels in how politeness is expressed. These characteristics are influenced by historical evolution as well as societal shifts, in addition to reflecting variations in cultural origins. Respecting the emotions and social standing of others as well as expressing one's views and thoughts in a way that is suitable are crucial components of positive social interactions in today's world. Thus, it is critical to acquire and comprehend polite phrases in many cultural situations in order to foster cross-cultural understanding and communication.

The study can inspire second language learners to research the historical background of a certain country when facing questions or difficulties in learning the language. Future research could further explore the developments, similarities, and differences of politeness languages in cross-cultural backgrounds and help second language learners find their ways of understanding a new language based on their cultural backgrounds.

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