Acknowledging a debt of gratitude in Japanese Persuasive Discourse: An Interpersonal Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the construction of Japanese politeness, through consideration of ‘on’ (恩) or a debt of gratitude, in Japanese persuasive discourse. ‘On’ is considered a core Japanese cultural value, which forms a basis for morality, social norms and expectations in Japanese culture. Drawing on the discursive approaches to politeness which focus on a localised and context-focused form of analysis, the paper is an attempt to illustrate how the concept of ‘on’ is pragmatically exercised in the social interaction, and how it constructs the social relationship between the discourse participants through the speech act realisation. The analysis reveals that ‘on’ is a communicative norm that significantly contribute to ideological linguistic politeness in Japanese discourse. It is employed in conveying deference and respect, as well as demonstrating a sense of identification and relative social standings between the discourse participants, in order to realise the communicative goals. Demonstration of ‘on’, together with an appropriate use of honorifics in Japanese discourse, is considered a vital key in lubricating social interaction, minimising friction, and allowing a smooth communication flow.

Keywords: Politeness; discourse; Japanese; honorifics; benefactives

Introduction

People of different cultures have varying interpretations of social and cultural activities. They are engaged in a variety of interactions with each other based on the shared meanings of the communities to which they subscribe. This culture-specific psychological relation between people constitutes social expectations and cultural values. Such expectations and values are consequently perceived as norms or ‘common sense’, which are conveyed from one generation to another through a joint cultural understanding and a history of shared endeavours (O'Donnel, & Tharp, 2011, Correa-Chávez & Roberts, 2012).

Reciprocity is a universal concept in human culture since the beginning of time. It is a state of obligation that people give back the kind of treatment in return for the things they have received from another (Gouldner, 1960). This human interaction has been practiced for a long time, dating back at least to the fourth century B.C., when Democritus stated, “Accept favors in the foreknowledge that you will have to give a greater return for them” (Greenberg, 1980, p.3).

In social interaction studies, obligation and feelings of indebtedness are often linked to politeness in the area of interactional pragmatics. Cross-cultural pragmatics scholars (for example, Apte, 1974; Crane, 1978; Lebra, 1976; Hinkel, 1994; Intachakra, 2004) confirm that, in most Asian cultures, indebtedness and thanking/apologising expressions are closely interrelated. Saying thank you or sorry often conveys an obligation as well as establishing social reciprocity between the interlocutors. On the other hand Hinkel (1994) finds that the rules of politeness governing expressions of thanks in most English-speaking cultures generally do not include such considerations.
There have been many studies of Japanese normative patterns of interaction and social exchange (see for example, Lebra, T. & Lebra, W., 1974; Lebra, 1976; Befu, 1980, 1989; Wierzbicka, 1997; Goddard, 2009). Nevertheless, there have been few empirical investigations into the actual practice of obligation and indebtedness concept underpinning politeness in Japanese discourse structure.

This paper draws special attention to the concept of on which can be explained in terms of English words such as favour, blessing, obligation, indebtedness, or a debt of gratitude. The paper investigates how this concept is employed in email communication from prospective graduate students to their potential supervisors. This particular speech event is chosen for three major reasons. Firstly, it is a communicative act from those of inferior status to their superiors (i.e. from a student to a professor) in a high-imposition situation (asking someone to be a supervisor). Status difference and increasing degree of imposition are the crucial factors in activating a sense of indebtedness. Secondly, it is a type of request for which the readers (i.e. potential supervisors) bear no professional obligation to give a response or take positive action, since it is not pertinent to their conduct of the course. As a result, the requestors are required to take a further step to increase the chances of success, by employing effective linguistic strategies. Lastly, it is a persuasive discourse of which the primary goal is to convince, actuate, or stimulate the audience. In such a discourse, a speaker is obliged to say what his/her discourse participant expects to hear according to the context of situation and culture. Therefore, it also serves as a rich indicative linguistic resource of social norms and awareness in the target culture.

The paper attempts to shed light on the following questions:

- Does the concept of on contribute to linguistic politeness in Japanese persuasive discourse?
- How is it constructed, if at all, in the discourse to realise the communicative goals (i.e., to convince the audience to take a positive action as desired)?

**Politeness in Japanese**

Despite the association with thanking and apologising expressions in Japanese, the concept of on does not appear in the discourse as explicitly as it might be expected. When the popular Japanese boy band, SMAP, made a live announcement over their rumoured breakup, they artfully made no direct reference to the rumour itself, but bowed deeply and apologised repeatedly to the public for causing trouble and great concern. In the speech, that lasted only 2 and a half minutes, the members kept apologising while begging fans for continued support. One of the group members, Goro Inagaki said,

このたびは僕たちのことでお騒がせしてしまったこと、申し訳なく思っています。これからの自分たちの姿を見せていただき、そして、応援していただけるように精一杯頑張っていきますので、これからもよろしくお願いいたします。

("木村さん「ただ前を見て進む」SMAPコメント全文", 2016)

_We feel very sorry that we regrettably caused so many people troubles about ourselves this time. From now on, we will strive with all our might to receive [HUM] your attention as well as your support in our performances. We beg [HUM] for your understanding and support in the future._

The underlined sentences indicate the parts where the concept of on is implied. The final ending, korekara mo yoroshiku onegaishimasu, is a conventional request formula used in demonstrating a moral debt that the speaker owes to the hearer (Ohashi, 2003).

Interestingly, one of the American fans expressed an opinion on the SMAP’s apology as follows:

_While it’s a nice for a band to do, to apologize for upsetting their fans, I find it very strange that they feel that they need to apologize simply for considering moving on in their professional lives… (“Smap Apologies Live on TV”, 2016)_

SMAP’s apology; however, is not as much of a surprise to those who are familiar with Japanese communicative norms. The utterances are not made in such a way solely for the purpose of apologising,...

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1 All Japanese text is translated by the author unless specified otherwise.
but more importantly, to convey the feeling of indebtedness that they have toward the fans, and to assure that the relationship will continue to be the same in the future.

This is also well applied to the famous public marriage announcement made by a Japanese superstar, Masaharu Fukuyama. His statement sounded awkward as if it was an apology pleading for the fans’ ‘acceptance, despite the joyous occasion of a marriage celebration.

いつも皆様には大変お世話になっております。本日9月28日、私、福山雅治は、吹石一恵さんと結婚致しました…ファンの皆様を始め、スタッフや関係者の皆様にご指導ご鞭撻を頂きながら、ささやかながらも美しい家庭を築いていければと思っております…後も変わらず、与えられた現場の一つ一つを最高のものに出るよう頑張ってまいりますので、これからもご支援賜りますよう、宜しくお願い申し上げます。

("福山雅治、吹石一恵と結婚「ささやかながらも美しい家庭を」【コメント全文】", 2015)

I am grateful to everyone’s continuing support [HON]. Today, on September 28, I, Fukuyama Masaharu, married Fukiishi Kazue… We hope [HUM] to receive [HUM] guidance [HON] and encouragement [HON] from our fans, then staff, and everybody concerned, and build a modest but cheerful family together… We will continue to give it our all in order to make each and every opportunity we are given the best as possible. We make a humble request to receive [HUM] your support [HON] in the future.

The above two examples demonstrate in Japanese culture, positioning oneself appropriately in relation to others, or observing wakimae (Ide, 1989), is considered more important than conveying the information itself. Apart from the existing key interactional concepts such as interdependence, empathy, sentimentality, introspection, or self-denial that are conventionally employed in the discourse, it is also indispensable for a Japanese speaker to amend and maintain a relationship by demonstrating a debt of gratitude – assuring the hearers that one is constantly aware of the incurred psychological debts from what the others have done. The mixture of a sense of indebtedness, together with a feeling of guilt, structurally creates a conventional thanking and apologising discourse, even in a personal case such as announcing a marriage.

There has been a long-standing interest in the study of politeness within the field of pragmatics. The most influential pioneer studies have been developed since the 1970s by Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and Leech (1983). Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced the universal politeness theory with the notion of ‘face’, and how politeness strategies are used to mitigate ‘face threats’ carried by certain ‘face threatening acts’ toward the listener.

The proposed theory has been acknowledged widely in a number of theoretical and empirical politeness researches. Nevertheless, it has also been criticised for its claim of universality, considering that the theory is constructed on the basis of European Anglo-Saxon culture and thus has limited applicability in Eastern cultures such as Japanese, Chinese, or Thai (Hill et al, 1986; Matsumoto, 1988, 1989, 1993; Ide, 1982, 1989, 1992; Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994; Wierzbicka, 2003; Tao, 2010; Intachakra, 2012). Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) argue that such a universal politeness theory cannot be applied to the Japanese politeness system, which includes some conventional etiquette and protocols such as the use of honorifics, address terms, pronouns, and speech formulas. Accordingly, Ide (1989) proposed the notion of wakimae, or discernment, as another type of linguistic politeness, with the aim to seek a universal at a higher level of abstraction. Ide (1992) suggests that politeness is oriented to social norms in a wakimae dominant society such as Japan, whilst politeness is, on the contrary, based on volition, which is oriented to the ‘face’ of the individual addressee in Western cultures.

The notion of discernment and volition proposed by Ide (1989, 1992) has, however, been critically questioned by a group of scholars such as Eelen (2001), Pizziconi (2003), Fukada and Asato (2004), Cook (2006), Kâdâr and Mills (2013), and Haugh (2013). Cook (2006) investigated speech-style shifts in academic consultation sessions between professors and students in Japanese universities, and concludes that the dichotomy between discernment and volition does not exist. Likewise, Fukada and Asato (2004) argue that discernment politeness should not be treated as a separate phenomenon, but...
rather one of the cases representing negative politeness in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework. Kádár and Mills (2013) point out that the distinction between discernment in Eastern cultures and volition in Western cultures is based on stereotypes of cultures, and is thus inadequate to account for politeness theory. Instead, Kádár and Mills (Ibid.) attempt to reconceptualise the concept of discernment and integrate it into the politeness framework (Kádár, 2013), based on the normative salience of different types of convention and ritual across cultures.

In the recent politeness research since the 1990s, there has been a significant shift of focus, from particular linguistic rules or strategies to the observation of interpersonal aspects of communication and interaction within a local situated micro-level social practice, called “second wave politeness research” (van der Bom & Mills, 2015, p.182; see also, for example, Agha 2006; Terkourafi 2005; Haugh, 2007; Bousfield and Locher 2007; Bousfield, 2008; Locher 2012) The second wave politeness research, also known as “the discursive approach” or “the postmodern approach” (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2011; Kadar and Haugh, 2013), is currently regarded as the mainstream in recent politeness research (Mills, 2011), within the paradigm of interpersonal pragmatics (Locher and Graham, 2010; Haugh et al., 2013). The discursive approach to politeness fundamentally contributes to a core of the second wave of politeness research. van der Bom and Mills (2015, p.187) note:

> Whilst discursive approaches are very much focused on local analysis and contextualized judgements, rather than generalizations about linguistic universals, they are nevertheless also very concerned to chart the way that social norms manifest themselves in the local judgements that individuals make.

Fukushima (2015) took up the discursive approach, exploring the concept of attentiveness\(^3\) in her cross-cultural study of theoretical politeness concepts. She concludes that attentiveness, or kizukai to use Marui et al.’s (1996) term, contributes to another understanding of politeness, for the fact that the demonstration of attentiveness indexes a polite stance between the discourse participants, in both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours.

Similar to attentiveness, acknowledging on or a debt of gratitude also involves the interpersonal aspect of social interaction. In line with Agha (2006), Mills (2011), Kádár and Mills (2013), van der Bom and Mills (2015), and Fukushima (2015), this discursive approach is used here to investigate another perspective on Japanese politeness, through a consideration of on with the assumption that on is part of the Japanese moral and ideological system.

**Exercise of On in Japanese Discourse**

Etiquette and protocol are essential concerns of politeness in oriental cultures (Ide & Peng, 1996). Martin (1964, p.403) highlights the importance of the formulaic stock phrases in Japanese, so that “a foreigner who memorizes about twenty or thirty of the common situational exchanges can circulate in Japanese society with surprising success, even if he knows no other expressions”.

The on concept is not only reflected through highly ritualised social practices such as a gift exchange on various kinds of occasion, but also verbally exercised in commonly used idiomatic phrases such as yoroshiku onegai shimasu (“I ask you please to treat me kindly”), okagesama de (“thanks to your good wishes and blessings”), or osewa ni narimashita (“I am indebted to you for your help”). It can also be observed in many conventional patterns and protocols of interaction, such as the use of honorifics and benefactive expressions, which learners of Japanese language always find difficult to master.

Yoroshiku onegai shimasu is a speech formula frequently used as a polite request, conveying the future dependency of the speakers on each other (Lebra, T. & Lebra, W., 1974). It occurs in a wide range of social situations, whether it be ordering and paying at a restaurant, concluding a business meeting, or getting to know a stranger. It is also used for a general request for consideration, assistance, and helpful service for oneself or a member of one’s in-group (Jorden, 1987). Webster (2002) mentions the use of this popular phrase as an example of linguistic reciprocal dependency, which can be extended to a third party, as in the sentence: Otousan ni yoroshiku otsutae kudasai (“Please pass on to your father my acknowledgement of my dependence on him”).

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\(^3\) Fukushima (2015: 271) defines attentiveness as “paying attention to the others by the work of ki, that is, reading the atmosphere in a situation and anticipating or inferring the other party’s feeling, needs, and wants through a potential recipient’s verbal and non-verbal cues.”
Ohashi (2003) concludes that yoroshiku onegaishimasu is a social lubricant, which characterises a debt-sensitive society such as Japan, accounting for Japanese culture-specific politeness orientation. It is first employed as a request speech formula, and then expanded to serve various communicative functions in various contexts, such as a greeting, giving a cue, as an acknowledgement of one’s benefit/indebtedness, and as a politeness investment.

Apology expressions such as sumimasen and moushiwake arimasen are other good examples of a routine speech formula embedded within the on concept. The literature on these expressions of apology has shown that they are often used to facilitate public face-to-face interaction, showing a sign of care and concern in order to maintain interpersonal relationships, rather than to admit responsibility (Ogawa, 1993; Ide, 1998; Kumatoridani, 1999; Kotani, 2002; Ohashi, 2010). They are also used to express a sense of unfulfilled obligation (Doi, 1973) when a person feels indebted to a kind action, which is thought of as a burden to the benefactor. Coulmas (1981) claims that apology utterances in Japanese not only serve as a speech act of apologising but also as a general conversation opener, attention getter, leave-taking formula, and gratitude formula. He also emphasises the fact that the Japanese conception of gifts and favours focuses on the trouble they have caused the benefactors rather than the aspects that are pleasing to the recipient. Ide (1998) supports Coulmas’ claim, confirming that the use of sumimasen symbolically implies an inherent feeling of indebtedness towards the other, reflecting the Japanese speaker’s ‘alter-oriented’ point of view in public discourse.

When a Japanese person meets a person who earlier gave them a favour or helped them in any way, small or big, it is intrinsically obligatory to mention the incurred debts once they meet them again. The acknowledgement of a debt of gratitude is done with a conventional speech formula, such as Senjitu wa doumo arigatou gozaimashita (“Thank you so much for your kindness on the other day”). This is a very important speech act to show your creditors a constant awareness of the benevolence they have done for you in the past. Those who happen to neglect this social norm will, unavoidably, be labelled as onshirazu (恩知らず), or an ungrateful person who forgot the moral debts.

Acknowledging a debt of gratitude, or on (恩) in Japanese, is considered a core Japanese cultural value, which forms a basis for morality, social norms and expectations in Japanese culture, often puzzling to people from other countries, especially those in the West (Benedict 1946; Wierzbicka 1991, 1997). It is characterised by an overwhelming sense of an unpayable debt to countless benefactors, which makes one at once humble and obligation bound (Lebra & Lebra, 1974).

The feeling of on starts from the very first day of one’s life with un repayable debt owed to one’s parents and one’s ancestral benefactors, who have all contributed to bringing one’s life into this world. When a person grows up, it is their teachers, their friends, their bosses, their sempai (先輩, senior friends), and every single person who is providing every kind of support, either in school, workplace, or neighbourhood. One’s life is surrounded by these on-jin (恩人, benefactor), to whom one is obliged to practice ongaeshi (恩返し), or return their favours.

The repayment of these moral debts, and the way social identities are constructed in hierarchical relationships, reflects certain crucial features of Japanese social structure, where relationship-oriented intersubjectivity is valued over right-oriented intersubjectivity (Kawashima, 1967). Japanese people learn to practice on toward their superiors for social security and protection. On the other hand, the superiors bear the social expectation to behave like a parent or carer to the subordinates. They are expected to display nurturing concern for their subordinates, no matter how personal the matters are. In return for the superiors’ benevolence, subordinates are expected to repay on, which at times functions as a moral debt with certain social obligations. These obligations are exercised in a different way depending on the status, rank, and the level of otherness between oneself and others.

Ohashi (2003) argues that caring for the debt, or in his term, ‘credit equilibrium’, is a significant politeness phenomenon in Japanese. Wierzbicka (1997) contends that the best way to practice on is to be aware of the benevolence you received from the benefactors, and to make sure to constantly demonstrate the awareness in discourse. In other words, instead of physically standing by and waiting to repay on to the benefactors, Japanese people tactfully manage to integrate the reciprocal arrangement in their several major utterances in the discourse. This is the shortcut whereby you can show your on-jin (benefactors) that you are constantly aware of the incurred psychological debts from the benevolence they have performed. Even though you may not yet have a chance to repay such debts immediately, at least, you are aware of them.
Methods

The present study attempts to illustrate how the concept of on is practically exercised in social interaction, by drawing on a case study of email communication from prospective graduate students to their potential supervisors. The data is elicited from email examples posted in online public forums collected in January 2016. It is controversial that online email examples are not considered authentic utterances employing real speech. Nevertheless, this particular communicative event illustrates idealised and normative data, which significantly portray social norms and expectations of native speakers in a language community. The corresponding exchanges between native and non-native speakers also provide valuable interpersonal pragmatic insights that can guide L2 learners to 'the norms of the given L2 speech community' (Cohen, 2006).

The study is fundamentally based on the discursive approach to politeness, which focuses on a localised and context-based form of analysis, rather than generalisations about linguistic universals. Therefore, the major concern of this paper is the manifestation of discursive ideology through language-specific social norms in the social interaction of politeness, with a particular focus in the local judgements that individuals make.

Data Analysis

The data are qualitatively analysed with regard to the existence of on in the discourse, i.e. acknowledgement of past and/or implication of future dependency obligations. The discourse is critically examined through its structure, and properties of the social interaction, together with the locutionary and illocutionary acts of the utterances. The analysis adopts the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) framework (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), to conduct the analysis of requests in the field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). The framework provides two components of request utterance structure, which are divided into a head act as the core of the request, and modifications to the request, both internal and external. It also classifies three types of request strategy, based on the level of inference the hearers need to interpret the utterance as a request: 1) direct requests, 2) conventionally indirect strategies (CI); and 3) non-conventionally indirect (NCI) strategies; with nine distinct sub-levels called ‘strategy types’, arranged in accordance to a scale of indirectness (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

Three emails were chosen from a list of online email examples written by L2 speakers, and later revised incorporating suggested changes and comments from native speakers under the keywords “指導教官 (supervisor)”, and “依頼 (request)” in the search engine results. The data was chosen for its thematic relevance (i.e. between prospective students and potential supervisors) and according to whether the email stood as a free-standing letter. The validity of the data analysis was reexamined by another researcher who has native fluency both in Japanese and English.

All of the emails conform to Japanese standard email structure, having 3 major sections; opening greeting; body of the emails; and closing greeting. Salutation, which is considered another important section, was not included in one email, possibly because the inquirer forgot to include it. One of the native speakers made a comment in the forum regarding the salutation, that in this context, surname + courtesy title (e.g. sensei) is the preferred form of address by Japanese native speakers, and a non-native speaker should be aware not to address a potential supervisor by surname + job title such as “surname + kyouju (professor)”.

Results

This section presents the results for the research questions which inquired as to the existence of on concept and investigated how it is constructed to achieve the communicative goals in the persuasive discourse. The structural analysis and implications of social interaction are presented in Table 1 (Appendix 1).

Firstly, an opening greeting in this type of email, unconventionally, starts without preliminary remarks of seasonal greetings and good wishes, as in other types of Japanese letters. The opening section of the three emails is presented in set expressions with an aim to apologise for the abruptness and the troubles brought by the writers. Secondly, the body of the emails, including self-introduction and the head acts of request, appears. There is variation in the lengths of the email body depending on the length of the contents, ranging from 137 characters (1 paragraph) in the first example, and 384 char-
acters (6 paragraphs) in the third, to 580 characters (5 paragraphs) in the second. All emails end with closing greeting, which utilises set expressions as demonstrated in the opening greeting. The closing greeting includes the offer and promise to demonstrate good will for the supervisor’s health, reverberation of the head acts, and apology for the haste and trouble.

Conventionally indirect strategies (CI) are predominantly employed in the head acts, with a mixed variety of request strategy types, for example:

1. A query preparatory to asking for the addressees’ willingness and possibility of the act being performed

   sensei no go iken o itadakereba saiwai ni zonjimasu

   “I think [HUM] that it would be fortunate if I were to be allowed to receive [HUM] your opinion [HON]” (Email 1)

2. Hedged performative to suggest a convenient and non-confrontation means of declining the request; or

   dekimashitara sensei ni watashi no shidoukyoukan ni natte itadakereba to omoitte orimasu

   “I am thinking [HUM] that it would be … [grateful - the word is left unsaid] if I could have [HUM] you as my supervisor, if that is possible” (Email 1)

3. Scope stating, to indirectly convey the request through the writers’ intentions or desire

   kenkyuusei toshite manabasete itadaku koto o kibou shite orimasu

   “I desire [HUM] to be granted a permission [HUM] to study as a research student” [Email 2]

   go shidou itadakitai to kangaete orimasu

   “I am wishing [HUM] that I could receive your guidance [HON]” (Email 3)

The perspective of all the requests is projecting toward the writers (speaker-oriented). The writers intentionally avoid positioning the addressees as the principal performer of the act to soften the impact of the imposition, for example saying: o henji o itadakenai deshou ka (“would I be able to receive [HUM] your reply?”), rather than o henji o kudasaimasen deshou ka (“would you give [HON] me a reply?”); or o henji o omachi moushiagete orimasu, (“I am waiting [HUM] for your reply”), instead of o henji o ookuri kudasaimasu you onegai moushiagete orimasu (“I ask [HUM] you to send me a reply”).

Internal modification such as syntactic down graders (e.g. embedding ‘if’ clause, or using interrogative), as well as external modification, such as a cost minimizer (e.g. sensei no ojikan no aiteiru toki ni “when you have time”) or disarmer (e.g. osore irimasu ga “I fear that I may cause you a trouble”, or oisogashi tokoro kyoushuku desu ga “I am sorry to trouble you while you are busy”), are elaborately utilised in the opening greeting, the body, and the closing greeting. It is also worthy to note that disarmer, which is used to indicate the writer’s awareness of a potential offense to the addressee, is usually found directly preceding a request in Japanese discourse.

On as Ideological Linguistic Politeness

Ide (1982), claims that there are four social rules for politeness in Japanese: 1) be polite to a person of a higher social position; 2) be polite to a person with powers; 3) be polite to an older person; and 4) be polite in a formal setting determined by the factors of participants, occasions, or topics. The data for the present study, which focuses on the communicative norms in email communication from prospective graduate students to potential supervisors, meets all four of these criteria. Since a university professor in Japan is highly regarded as a person with superior social standing and power, postgraduate students are, thus, required to demonstrate the highest level of politeness according to the Japanese communicative norms. The ultimate aim of this communicative act is to convince the potential supervisor to believe that the students are prepared to dedicate their professional and personal life under a complete acknowledged guidance of the supervisor, in order to achieve their academic aims. An occasionally used alternative term for such an email communication is deshi iri shigan me-ru (弟子入り志願メール) (Asano, 2009), or an email application for an apprenticeship.

The in-depth analysis reveals the demonstration of on in the persuasive discourse, together with other aspects of the Japanese ethos such as indirectness, empathy, and sentimentality. In order to realise
the communicative goal (i.e. convincing the potential supervisors to accept him/her in the postgraduate program), the writers attempt to manifest his/her appropriate qualifications intellectually by describing the relevant background and experiences, and socio-pragmatically by observing wakimae (Ide, 1989), or in other words, indexing social and power relations of his/her position toward the potential supervisors.

The concept of on is initially activated through the use of set phrases such as moushiwake gozaimasen [Email 1 & 3], or douzo yoroshiku onegai itashimasu [Email 2], or osore irimasu [Email 3]. It is also elaborated in the closing greeting, when the writers promise to offer good will for the supervisor’s health in return for the favour he/she requested. Apparently, the promise not only includes the physical aspect but also extend to the psychological debts that the writers promise to be obliged for (Illocutionary act: ‘I acknowledge your superior position over me and I will be forever indebted to you for your assistance.’)

On is further revealed in the discourse through the grammatical use of benefactives. Benefactives, or yarimorai (やりもらい), in Japanese, are auxiliary verbs of giving and receiving that explicitly indicate the giver and the recipient who benefits from the action of the verb. Ohashi (2013, p.109) states that

Mastery of benefactive verbs such as kureru and morau is regarded as one of the most difficult aspects of Japanese language learning, because the way the verbs are used in Japanese reflects the elaborate culture of giving, receiving and reciprocating (favours as well as goods).

While humble and honorific expressions indicate the position of the discourse participants according to the speaker’s perspective, benefactives emphasise the notion of benevolence given with a debt, in Japanese culture, through a verbal commitment. In the utterances, for example, shidoukyoukan ni natte itadakereba (lit. “to receive the act of becoming a supervisor”), kenkyuusei to shite manabasete itadaku (lit. “to receive the act of letting me study as a research student”), and go shidou itadakita (lit. “to receive the guidance”), the normative use of benefactive verbs such as itadaku, which is a humble form of morau (“to receive”), denotes the psychological debts incurred in the social relationship between the giver and the recipient. Ohashi (2013, p.108) labels this relationship as “acknowledgement of benefit/debt in balancing debt-credit equilibrium”. It is the difference between when one says Tomodachi ga kaimono shite kureta (lit. “My friend did the shopping for me”) or Tomodachi ni kaimono shite moratta (lit. “I received the act of shopping from my friend”), in comparison to Tomodachi ga kaimono shita (lit. “My friend did the shopping”). Jorden (1988) and Ohashi (2013) point out that this pragmatic function of benefactives in acknowledging benefits and debts is often overlooked by L2 learners whose native language is English, as there is no such equivalent translation in their language.

The argument in this paper is that acknowledging on or a debt of gratitude, in addition to other aspects of the Japanese ethos such as interdependence, empathy, or self-denial, is considered a vital key in lubricating the social interaction, minimising friction, and allowing a smooth communication flow in Japanese discourse. To be polite, as recognised in Japanese culture, it is important for a speaker to index a normative polite stance as well as social and power relations between the discourse participants as bound by the pragmatic conventions, through the demonstration of on together with an appropriate use of honorifics.

The present study focused on the communicative event from those of inferior status to superiors in a high-imposition situation, to investigate how status difference and higher degree of imposition can potentially become a crucial factor in activating a stronger sense of indebtedness. While inferiors tend to demonstrate a stronger sense of indebtedness to their superiors, more than the opposite, the concept of on is, nevertheless, demonstrated in all kinds of relationships, whether among equals, from inferiors to superiors, or vice versa.

The empirical study in this paper has important implications relevant in the learning and teaching of Japanese language. It reiterates the significance of pragmatic competence in L2 language acquisition in order to achieve smooth cross-cultural communication. Teachers of Japanese language should be aware that it is not only grammatical competence that L2 learners need to demonstrate but also pragmatic competence, which includes the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in a social and cultural context (Thomas, 1983). On the other hand, L2 Japanese learners should also be aware of the complexity of social-cultural implications of human relations in the culture of the target language, while attempting to take account of the on concept alongside other aspects of the Japanese ethos when they are involved as a participant in Japanese discourse. Failing to conform to certain communicative norms of Japanese politeness, such as demonstrating the on concept, inevitably give the listener an unpleasant impression, and consequently results in a cross-cultural pragmatic failure.
Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that on is a Japanese communicative norm that significantly contributes to linguistic politeness in Japanese discourse. It is employed in conveying deference and respect, as well as demonstrating a sense of identification and relative social standing between the discourse participants, in order to realise the communicative goals.

It does not matter whether one genuinely empathises with this concept or has a real intention to repay the incurred debts. If one wants to be considered ‘polite’ in Japanese discourse, the most important thing is to conform to the Japanese communicative norms, and one of the indispensable norms is to constantly acknowledge the past and future incurred debts toward one’s benefactors, in return for the benevolence one receives.

The present analysis is drawn from three email examples written by prospective postgraduate students to their potential supervisors. The small sample size may result in inadequacies in addressing cross-generational and cross-cultural differences in the demonstration of on in discourse. It is also worth noting that there are also differences in the pragmatic conventions within Japanese as used by individuals. The degree of use and awareness of the concept of on may be demonstrated differently depending on individual and contextual factors. In addition, the concept of on may be employed for other communicative purposes such as expressing social distance or producing linguistic irony, which may not necessarily link to politeness.
References


News report


## Appendix 1: Data analysis of emails written by prospective postgraduate students to the potential supervisors

### Table 1: Structural analysis and implication of social interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Email 1</th>
<th>Email 2</th>
<th>Email 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Salutation</td>
<td>○○ sensei (teacher)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>○○ daigaku ○○ sensei (university) (teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Opening greeting</td>
<td>突然のメールをお送りしてまことに申し訳ございません。 Locutionary act: I apologise [HUM] for sending [HUM] you an email without prior notice. Iloctionary act: I realise that my email may cause inconvenience to you but I hope you will understand that there is something urgent which I want you to help. Implication of social interaction: The writers start to construct his/her social identities and relationship toward the addressees through the use of honorifics such as o okuri suru, moushiwake gozaimasen or sashiageru. The use of honorifics demonstrates a strong sense ofdeference and respect to the addressee in a highly formal setting. The primary function of the opening greeting here is to set an appropriate scene as determined by the social norms, while laying groundwork for the upcoming persuasive discourse.</td>
<td>突然メールを差し上げる失礼(無礼)をお許しください。 Locutionary act: Please forgive [HON] me for the rudeness of sending [HUM] an email to you without prior notice.</td>
<td>お忙しいところ、突然メールをお送りし誠に申し訳ございません。 Locutionary act: I apologise [HUM] for sending [HUM] you an email without prior notice during your busy time [HON].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Head act in the email body</td>
<td>…できましたら先生に私の指導教授になっていただければと思っておりま</td>
<td>以上の理由を以ちまして、私は先生の研究室で研究院生として学ばせていただくことを希望しておりま</td>
<td>以上の理由で、私は貴大学の大学院生を志望しております。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Email 1</th>
<th>Email 2</th>
<th>Email 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Locutionary act:**
I am thinking [HUM] that I would be…
grateful - the word is left unsaid] if I could have [HUM] you as my supervisor, if that is possible. Therefore, I think [HUM] that it would be fortunate if I were to be allowed a visit [HUM] to your office and hear [HUM] your opinion [HON] when you have time [HON].

**Locutionary act:**
In view of the above reasons, I desire [HUM] to be granted a permission [HUM] to study as a research student at your research office.

**Locutionary act:**
Due to the above reason, I wish [HUM] to be a graduate student at your university [HON].

| Illocutionary act:
I request time for my visit and discussion about you becoming my supervisor. I request you to accept me as a student in your research office. |
|----------------|
| **Implication of social interaction:**
The writers keep acknowledging the addressee's superior position over himself/herself and promise to be obliged to the addressee's kind assistance, through the exchanges of dependency acknowledgement in structural and lexical terms such as *natteidadakereba to omotte orimasu* (I would be… [grateful if you could …), or *manabasete itadaku* (to receive a permission to study). The consistent use of honorifics strengthens the formality and perceived status of the writers to be lower than the addressees. |

4) **Closing greeting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>恐れ入りますが、先生のご都合のよろしい時間についてご返信をいただけないでしょうか。ご多忙の折とは存じますが、どうかよろしくお願い申し上げます。</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>末尾になりますが、先生の益々のご健勝を心よりお祈り申し上げます。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>お忙しいところ恐縮ですが、お返事をお待ち申し上げております。どうぞよろしくお願いいたします。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>お忙しいところ恐縮ですが、お返事をお待ち申し上げております。どうぞよろしくお願いいたします。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>末尾になりますが、先生の益々のご健勝を心よりお祈り申し上げます。</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

是非先生にお会いしご指導いただきたいと考えております。恐れ入りますが、先生のご都合のよろしい時間についてご返信をいただけないでしょうか。ご多忙中のご指摘には存じますが、どうかよろしくお願い申し上げます。末尾になりますが、先生の益々のご健勝を心よりお祈り申し上げます。
<table>
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<th>Email 3</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Locutionary act:</strong>&lt;br&gt;I fear that I may have caused you a trouble but would I be able to have [HUM] your reply [HON] regarding your convenience [HON]? I am aware [HUM] that you are terribly busy [HON] but I ask [HUM] you please to treat me kindly. Lastly, I pray [HUM] for your good health [HON] from my heart.</td>
<td><strong>Locutionary act:</strong>&lt;br&gt;I am sorry [HUM] to trouble you while you are busy [HON] but I am waiting [HUM] for your reply [HON]. I ask [HUM] you please to treat me kindly.</td>
<td><strong>Locutionary act:</strong>&lt;br&gt;I am wishing [HUM] that I could meet [HUM] you and receive [HUM] your guidance [HON]. I fear that I may have caused you a trouble but would I be able to have [HUM] your reply [HON] regarding your convenience [HON]? I am aware [HUM] that you are terribly busy [HON] but I ask [HUM] you please to treat me kindly. Lastly, I pray [HUM] for your good health [HON] from my heart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Illocutionary act:</strong>&lt;br&gt;I am sure that this might cause you troubles but I request you to tell me your availability. I am aware of your busy schedule but I expect you to go through all these troubles to do what I requested (i.e. to tell me your availability). I promise to return your assistance/favour by offering my best wishes to you.</td>
<td><strong>Illocutionary act:</strong>&lt;br&gt;I am aware of your busy schedule but I expect you to go through all these troubles to do what I requested (i.e. to reply to me as early as possible)</td>
<td><strong>Illocutionary act:</strong>&lt;br&gt;I am sure that this might cause you troubles but I request you to tell me your availability. I am aware of your busy schedule but I expect you to go through all these troubles to do what I requested (i.e. to tell me your availability). I promise to return your assistance/favour by offering my best wishes to you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Implication of social interaction:**<br>The writers demonstrate empathy with the addressee and try to mitigate the imposition by restating the apology for the arising troubles as determined by the social norms. The closing greeting also includes reverberation of the head acts (e.g. asking for availability) and the acknowledgement of dependency obligations to return the assistance/favour to the addressees in the future. Similar to the opening greeting and the body, the writers continue to position himself/herself toward the addressees through the use of honorifics.
Appendix 2: Emails written by prospective postgraduate students to the potential supervisors

Email 1:
○○先生

突然のメールをお送りしてまことに申し訳ございません。私は、このたび○○大学院に入学することになりました○○と申します。○○について研究をたく、できましたら先生に私の指導教授になっていただければと思っております。つきましては、先生のお時間の空いているときに、ぜひ研究室を訪問させていただき、先生のご意見をいただければ幸いに存じます。

恐れ入りますが、先生のご都合のよろしい時間についてご返信をいただけないでしょうか。ご多忙の折とは存じますが、どうかよろしくお願い申し上げます。

末尾になりますが、先生の益々のご健勝を心よりお祈り申し上げます。

(Source: http://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1424907844)

Email 2:

突然メールを差し上げる失礼（/無礼）をお許しください。

私は、今年の7月に卒業予定の中国・XX大学法学部4年のXXと申します。

法学部で法学部に入ったときからずっと刑法に大きな興味を持っていますので、学部を卒業した後も研究を続けたいと思っています。私はこれまでの研究を通じ日本の刑法は他の先進諸国と比較しても勝るとも劣らない優れたものであるとの思いを日々深くしてきました。ドイツの刑法から犯罪論を取り入れ、それを発展させ、独自の特色を持つ刑法理論を作り上げました。したがって、刑法理論を研究するのに、日本はもっともふさわしいところだと思います。

先行研究として、私は清華大学法学部で刑法総論・刑事政策学などを履修しましたので、刑法の研究に必要な基礎知識が身についていると思います。そればかりでなく、2009年に私は半年間の短期留学をして京都大学で勉強しましたので、私は日本の法律を学んで、その概要を理解しました。日本語で書かれた法律文献を読む力も大幅に向上しました。交換留学生としての経験は今後の研究にきっと役に立つと確信しています。

日本語の能力につきましては、私は既に日本語能力試験1級の資格を持っているので、言語面での問題はないと思います。

以上の理由を以ちまして、私は先生の研究室で研究生として学ばせていただくことを希望しております。なお、研究計画書も既に書き終えておりますので、お目通しいただければ幸いです。

お忙しいところ恐縮ですが、お返事をお待ち申し上げております。どうぞよろしくお願いいたします。

(Source: http://lang-8.com/20414/journals/799812)
Email 3:

XX 大学  XX 先生

お忙しいところ、突然メールをお送りし誠に申し訳ございません。

私は XX と申します。XX 大学の 4 回生で、2013 年 9 月から交換留学生として関西外国語大学へ留学しております。2014 年 7 月に卒業する予定です。

日本語を専攻していますが、以前から経営学に大きな関心を持っていま すので、卒業後経営学を研究したいと思います。

自学ですが、オンライン授業でロチェスター大学のマーケティング（The Power Of Markets）の勉強をしているうちに、消費者行動と心理に興味を持ちました。

先生のホームページや「インターネット上の情報探索：消費者によって発信された体験・評価情報の探索プロセス」、「ネット・コミュニティ上における消費者の意見形成プロセスと企業のマーケティング戦略」などを拝見し、私の研究したい分野に近いと感じ、先生の下で研究したいと思いました。

ちなみに、私は日本語能力試験の資格を持っているので、言語面での問題はないと思います。

以上の理由で、私は貴大学の大学院生を志望しております。

是非先生にお会いしご指導いただきたいと考えております。恐れ入りますが、先生のご都合のよろしい時間についてご返信をいただけないでしょうか。ご多忙中のご要領情報いたします。どうかよろしくお願い申し上げます。

末尾になりますが、先生の益々のご健勝を心よりお祈り申し上げます。

(Source: http://lang-8.com/323550/journals/272298239113465352631336325711663626554)