

“Fine, thank you. And you?” Linguistic politeness in Australian English and the interlanguage pragmatics of Japanese ESL speakers

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This paper examines politeness breakdowns between Japanese ESL speakers and L1 speakers of Australian English. In doing so, the paper develops a model of linguistic politeness which sees the marking of social power and social identification configurations as crucial. Using this model as a template, a possible explanation for differences in politeness strategies used by Japanese ESL and L1 Australian English speakers is suggested and research findings are cited to examine this hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

As professional TESOL teachers, we are constantly exposed to student utterances of the “Fine, thank you. And you?” variety; and, as a result, possibly get inured to them. But if we do, we run the very real risk of overlooking the potential for politeness dysfunction that the use of such utterances might have for our students in the lived reality they inhabit on a day-to-day basis outside the language classroom.

The issue this paper addresses is not why such utterances occur, but why they take the specific forms they do; and in doing so, proposes a model for investigating linguistic politeness which could be central to understanding Japanese ESL speakers’ politeness patternings.

GREETINGS: A COMPARISON OF JAPANESE ESL SPEAKERS’ AND L1 AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH SPEAKERS’ POLITENESS STRATEGIES

The observation that specific patterns of politeness behaviour do, in fact, exist amongst Japanese ESL speakers operating in an Australian sociocultural environment - and that these patterns are systematically quite different from L1 Australian English speakers’ politeness patterns - is not one simply of anecdotal evidence but is one that is empirically verifiable.

The data to be reported on here are drawn from a much larger study which utilised interactive multimedia computer technology as a way of investigating the politeness behaviour of monolingual speakers of Australian English and competent Japanese ESL speakers living and studying in Australia (Conlan, 1997). The research had three main objectives: (i) to compare the politeness types used by each group; (ii) to compare the discourse staging strategies considered appropriate by each group; and (iii) to compare the total number of utterances used by each group in attempting to achieve an identical illocutionary point (illocutionary point being, in broad terms, the pragmatic goal of the discourse; cf. Searle & Vanderveken, 1985).

Briefly stated, the custom-made software employed consisted of separate modules made up of dialogues, each module containing four such dialogues. While each of the four dialogues in each module had the identical illocutionary point, the individual dialogues in each module corresponded to one of four types of politeness defined according to social power and social identification configurations (see the discussion to follow). Individual utterances were recorded on discrete sound files to allow them to be presented in random order to informants, who were then (under experimental conditions) asked to construct a passage of discourse which they would consider to be appropriate for a given speech event. These reconstructed discourse passages were then be played back by the informants and amended as necessary until each informant was completely satisfied with the resulting passage of discourse. Fifty such modules were originally recorded, each of which was then required to meet statistically significant validation criteria by a control group of monolingual Australian English speakers. As a result of this strict culling process, only nineteen modules met the validation criteria from which fifteen were selected for use in the primary research that was ultimately conducted.

The focus of this paper is (i) (above), which required the informants to make choices about how to respond to a greeting made by a friend’s employer immediately after having been introduced to him at an informal social

gathering (a barbecue) in a manner they would consider to be contextually appropriate. The choices available are set out in Table 1. (For methodological reasons the research was unable to take into account possible extra-linguistic features which might accompany these utterances (cf. Conlan, 1985) and no attempt has been made here to indicate the prosodic markings of the utterances as such markings would be superfluous given that all of the utterances, in terms of the social power and social identification configurations to be discussed below, were previously validated by the monolingual Australian English control group.)

Hi Kerry, how's it going?	Pleased to meet you, Kerry.	How do you do, Mr Johnson.	How do you do Kerry.
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Table 1
Utterance choices available

The module from which these utterances are taken was used as part of the primary research, with a corpus of fourteen Japanese informants (seven male, seven female) and fourteen monolingual Australian English speakers (again, seven male and seven female) who were required to make choices amongst the various options available to them. The data from this part of the research are set out in Table 2 (where JF indicates Japanese females' choices, JM Japanese males' choices, AF Australian females' choices, and AM Australian males' choices) and are collapsed in Table 3 (where JS indicates Japanese speakers' choices overall, and AS Australian speakers' choices overall).

	Hi Kerry, how's it going?	Pleased to meet you, Kerry.	How do you do, Mr Johnson.	How do you do Kerry.
JF	0%	0%	57.1%	42.8%
JM	0%	14.2%	71.4%	14.2%
AF	71.4%	28.5%	0%	0%
AM	57.1%	28.5%	14.28%	0%

Table 2
Informants' utterance choices: J and A refer to Japanese and Australian informants respectively; M and F indicate male and female informants

	Hi Kerry, how's it going?	Pleased to meet you, Kerry.	How do you do, Mr Johnson.	How do you do Kerry.
JS	0%	7.1%	64.2%	28.5%
AS	64.2%	28.5%	7.1%	0%

Table 3
Summary of informants' utterance choices: JS indicates Japanese informants; AS indicates Australian informants

The bar chart in Figure 1 demonstrates that there is, in fact, a quite systemic potential for differing politeness strategies to be chosen by the two groups of speakers as part of an identical speech situation. Any attempt to explain such divergent patterns, however, must be related to existing understandings of the workings of linguistic politeness; and such understandings are firmly grounded in the work of Brown and Levinson.

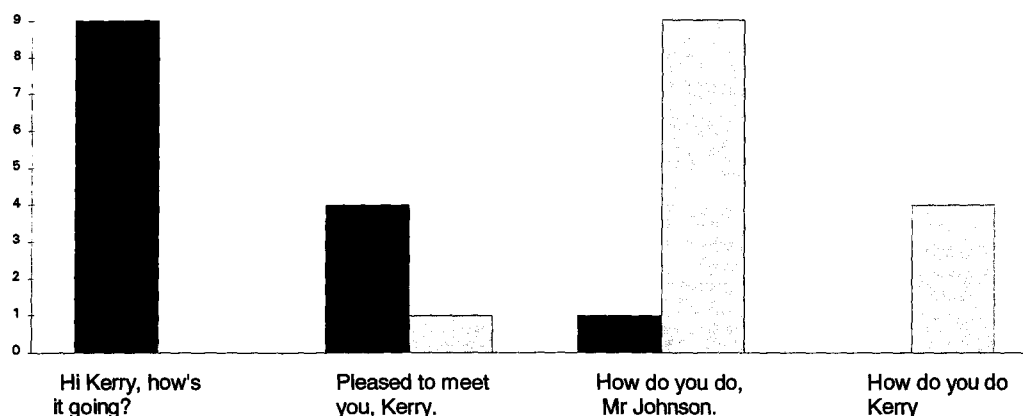


Figure 1
Relative proportions of Japanese ESL speakers' and Australian L1 speakers' responses overall:
black bars indicate Australian English L1 speakers' responses; grey bars indicate Japanese ESL speakers' responses

LINGUISTIC POLITENESS: BROWN AND LEVINSON'S MODEL

Contemporary understandings of linguistic politeness are synonymous with the concept of face as developed by Brown and Levinson (1978). Brown and Levinson characterise positive face as a social actor's self-image of social membership and negative face as that member's concomitant self-image of individuality. "Positive politeness", as a result, is seen to address the hearer's need for approval and belonging in order to satisfy the hearer's positive-face wants by communicating solidarity with that aspect of the hearer's self-image. "Negative politeness", on the other hand, serves to satisfy the hearer's negative face by the avoidance or minimisation of imposition and is communicated by speaker self-effacement, formality, restraint, and the use of conventionalised indirectness.

With respect to face orientation, and of particular importance to the perspective to be developed here, Brown and Levinson also make reference to the crucial (and culture-specific) variables of social distance (or *D*, the extent to which a speaker (*S*) and hearer (*H*) can be considered to be social equals), social power (or *P*, the extent to which power differentials define *H* and *S*'s social relationship), along with a rating of imposition (or *R*, the extent to which an FTA is liable to cause face damage). Brown and Levinson formalise the relationship amongst these variables in terms of their now-famous equation:

$$Wx = D (S,H) + P (H,S) + Rx$$

- where *W* refers to the weightiness of a speech act, and *x* to a numerical value.

This formula has legitimately been criticised for a variety of reasons (see, for example, Turner 2000, forthcoming), but it is both the very nature of these *P* and *D* criteria and the "summative basis" (Brown & Levinson 1978:81) of their formulation (Brown and Levinson's note that "[t]he numerical values are intended . . . only as a model of relative measures of proportions of *P*, *D*, and *R*, and not . . . as absolute values of some sort" (1978:297) notwithstanding) that this paper questions.

With this in mind, the paper suggests an alternative approach to examining the role of face in the manifestation of linguistic politeness. In this approach hypothetical numerical values are seen to be irrelevant; social power and social identification (as opposed to social power) configurations are seen to be crucial; and such configurations are seen to provide a conceptual template for culture-specific organisations of social reality.

SOCIAL POWER AND SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

Leaving aside (for reasons which will soon become apparent) Brown and Levinson's *Rx* stipulation, what will be suggested here is two-fold: firstly, that issues relating to social power and social distance criteria can better be visualised in terms of a grid rather than in terms of Brown and Levinson's linear format; and secondly,

that the very concept of "social distance" could usefully be reformulated.

In Figure 2, the symbol P+ is used to indicate an utterance that is marked (linguistically or extra-linguistically) in a way that indexes an asymmetrical social power differential, and the symbol P- to indicate an utterance that is not marked for such a differential. In terms of marking social distance, however, a corresponding label such as D+ would then seem logically to indicate that an utterance is marked for social distance and D- that an utterance is unmarked for social distance. Such D labels, however, clearly cannot cope with utterances specifically marked to register social "closeness" ("Hi Kerry, how's it going?") as opposed to social "distance" ("How do you do, Mr Johnson") - that is, utterances which either induce a feeling of social equality or conventionally acknowledge (or posit) a power differential. This being the case, the symbol "I" - for social identification - has been used in Figure 2 so that the label I+ can be used to index an utterance that is marked in a way that either aligns S with H in personal terms or recognises a culturally ratified asymmetric social relationship between S and H in positional terms (cf. Bernstein, 1986), and I- to index an utterance in which no overt social solidarity is marked.

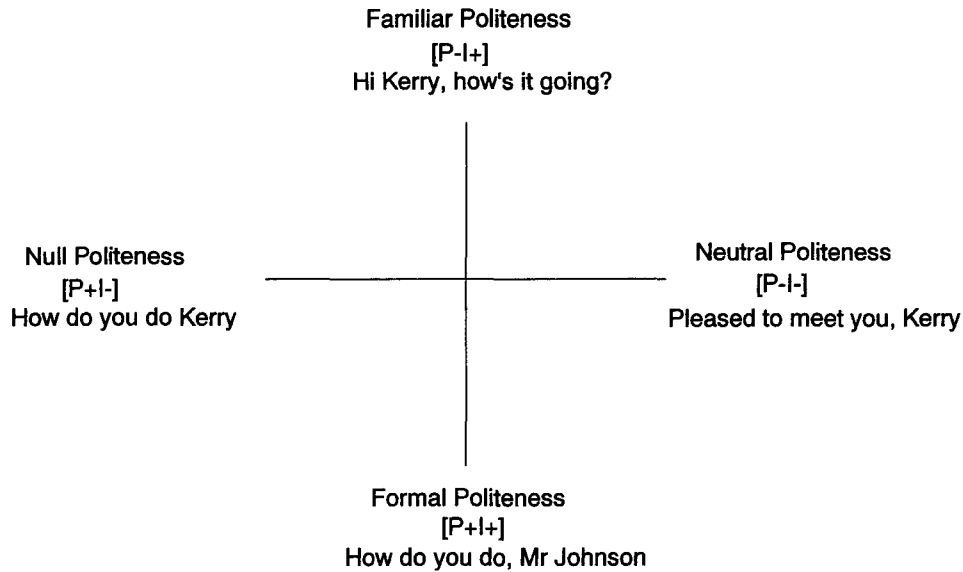


Figure 2
Politeness types as validated by the Australian-English speaking control group

Importantly in this respect, the pragmatic effect of such P and I markings derives not from the *sum* of the two variables, but rather from their value as an holistic combination; and with this in mind (and while accepting that they exist within a pragmatic continuum rather than being as discrete as their representation here might seem to imply) the kinds of core politeness that each of these four configurations index can be provisionally labelled (as they have been in Figure 2) and defined in the following terms:

- Familiar Politeness:**
- (i) Invokes covert prestige and/or encodes markers of social solidarity in terms of social identification; and is
 - (ii) Unmarked by conventional politeness formulae which suggests the presumption of a contextually zero (or near-zero) social power differential.
- Neutral Politeness:**
- (i) Invokes neither covert prestige nor overt prestige in terms of social identification; and is
 - (ii) Marked by minimal conventional politeness formulae in a manner which suggests a contextually zero (or near-zero) social power differential.
- Formal Politeness:**
- (i) Invokes overt prestige and/or encodes markers of status differentiation in terms of social identification; and is
 - (ii) Marked by conventional politeness formulae in a manner which suggests the presumption of a contextual social power differential in favour of either the speaker or the hearer.

- Null Politeness:
- (i) Invokes neither covert prestige nor overt prestige in terms of social identification; and is
 - (ii) Unmarked by conventional politeness formulae which suggests a contextual social power differential in favour of the speaker.

In Figure 2 the P and I markings for the utterances in Table 1 - as validated by the Australian English-speaking control group - are also indicated.

SOCIAL TEMPLATES AND THE FRAMING OF SPEECH SITUATIONS

While Brown and Levinson's approach to linguistic politeness focuses on Durkheim's (1915) concept of face as developed by Goffman (1955), another theme which underlies much of Goffman's work but which has not so far featured prominently within politeness theory - that is, the distinction between private and the public spheres of social operation (cf. Goffman, 1971) - is important in examining linguistic politeness from the perspective that will be proposed here.

Specifically what will be suggested is that linguistic politeness - which is first and foremost a function of the appropriateness with which P and I variables are configured - is conceptualised in terms of a familial template; and families (whether Japanese or Australian) operate within two broad social spheres: the sphere of the public - the "outside" world where the family adopts a public face; and the sphere of the private - the "inside" world where the family assumes its "private" face.

The familial social template

The notion that social realities are both constructed and interpreted in familial terms is long established. With respect to Western social organisation, Freud, for example, noted the extent to which religions are organised around a figure "undisguisedly called 'father'" (1964:163); and the operation of the same familial model is clear in both formal religious nomenclature (Mother Superior, Father, Brother, Sister, etc) as well as in register-specific vocatives such as "my son", "my daughter" etc. In a secular context too, vocatives such as "sister" and "brother" feature in the terminology adopted by feminist action groups and trade unions; and from a wider political perspective, Nimkoff (1965:70) long ago correlated the dominance of the two-party political system of the kind existing in societies such as Australia with the nuclear-family role-relationships that characterise such cultures. Wilson Key (1974), too, has provided myriad examples of the ways in which social roles based on this familial template occur and recur over and over again in the construction of extra-familial role-relationships; and this kind of "duplicative organization" (Sacks 1974:221) is readily recognisable in the organisation of such seemingly diverse social structures as hospitals (with doctors-in-charge, ward sisters, and nurses and interns), art societies (with presidents, secretaries, and committee members) and sporting clubs (with captains, vice-captains, and players). Other examples of what Barrett and McIntosh refer to as an "ideology of familialism" (1982:26 and *passim*) in which a socially constructed and politically ratified model of family "permeates the fabric of social existence and provides a highly significant, dominant and unifying, complex of social meaning" (1982:29) are not difficult to identify in Australian social organisation (cf. Conlan 1992, 1996); and that this familial model provides a culturally inscribed point of reference for the self and the self's orientation towards others is reflected in the sociolinguist James Gee's comments concerning "socioculturally determined ways of thinking, feeling, valuing, and using our native language in face-to-face communication with intimates which we achieve in our initial socialization within the 'family' as this is defined within a given culture" (1990:15).

What is being argued here, then, is that the social construction of "family" in a culture such as that of mainstream Australia plays a significant part in not only establishing the nature of the larger social reality which members of that culture mutually produce and inhabit, but also in defining for social actors what is and what is not appropriate social orientation in extra-familial social encounters; and there is ample evidence to suggest that an equally powerful familial template (although a template of a different kind) also structures Japanese social actors' understandings of role-relationships in extra-familial speech situations.

Over fifty years ago, for example, the *Nippon Times* carried a story highlighting the familial role-relationships underpinning criminal gangs in Japan (*Nippon Times*, 16 April 1948), a situation which holds true to the present day (cf. Reischauer 1978:131); and a contemporaneous anthropological investigation of the social

organisation of Japanese construction workers noted the extent to which "aspects of roles found in the family . . . carry over to non-familial relationships" (Ishino 1953:706). The Japanese psychiatrist Takeo Doi argues that the distinctive nature of the Japanese mother-child bond is fundamental to an "understanding not only of the psychological makeup of the individual Japanese but of the structure of Japanese society as a whole" (1973:28), a view which has found wide acceptance (cf. Reischauer, 1978; Vogel, 1965; Clancy, 1986 etc.). Woronoff, too, argues, that the Japanese parent-child relationship is "[t]he key relationship" (1981:31) for an understanding of Japanese social organisation; Hane that the ideology of familialism has functioned as "the linchpin of the whole society" (1986:262); and Nakane that this familial pattern "constitutes the basic scheme of Japanese organization . . . [which] . . . is to be found in almost every kind of institution in Japan" (1984:100), citing social groupings as diverse as the Japanese Parliament (cf. 1984:37-38), scientific foundations, and *ikebana*, *kabuki*, and tea-ceremony organisations (cf. 1984:122) as evidence for this claim.

Central to this familial organisation of Japanese role-relationships are transformations of the household system (cf. Bachnik 1978:90; Nakane 1984:4). As Hamabata puts it "the *ie* [household] has served and continues to serve as a template for institutions other than the family in Japanese society" (1990:41) by providing:

a normative frame of reference, to which Japanese turn when they try to determine appropriate behavior. As a normative concept, the ie shapes the answer to the question: "What should I do and say?" And by acting on the answers to that question, men and women recreate and reproduce the ie, as a social organization, in perpetuity.

The *ie*, as a normative concept, works even more decisively to shape behavior between member and nonmember, insider and outsider, between groups. This can be seen in the transposition of the word *ie* itself: *uchi* (our household), *ie* (the household), and *otaku* (your household). The expression *uchi* is used in everyday speech to signify the school, company, household, or group to which one belongs. *Otaku* is an honorific form of address that signifies a person's group affiliation; it is an honorific form of "you". These transpositions of the concept of *ie* define membership, thereby serving as starting points for determining appropriate behavior between individuals and members of groups (1990:46-47, emphasis in the original).

And, as Hamabata goes on to point out, the *uchi* itself also:

forms an extremely flexible yet absolutely precise boundary. For example, when two people are speaking with each other, they are uchi and otaku, but should a third person enter the conversation, the original two would have to decide consciously whether the third is the otaku in opposition to the original two, who might decide to form an uchi. This happens constantly in business situations, where two people of the same corporation but of different divisions are conversing. One treats the other as uchi towards otaku, but should a third person from another corporation enter the conversation, the original uchi and otaku unite as uchi and treat the newcomer as otaku (1990:48, emphasis in the original).

In terms of the data analysis to follow, these observations are of some importance; and it will be argued immediately below that while both Japanese and Australian cultures display strong familial societal orientations, they differ in important ways with respect to the manifestation of linguistic politeness from a perspective which sees the configuration of P and I variables as crucial.

The framing of speech situations

Distinctions between the private (*uchi*) and public (*not-uchi* or *soto*) faces are generally far more strongly differentiated with respect to Japanese social orientation than is the case with Australian social orientation as a function of different *mores* governing primary socialisation practices (cf. Blum-Kulka 1990:285); and given that *both* of these faces (i.e., the public and the private) contribute to understandings of interpersonal social orientation in terms of P and I configurations - and given also that they are socially constructed and culturally codified quite differently in each of the cultures - it follows that there will also be systematic and quite specific differences in the kinds of politeness strategies that will be brought to bear depending on whether a social encounter is framed predominantly in terms of the private or the public face.

That such differences in the public/private P/I markings do, in fact, exist can be demonstrated by a commonplace example. Irrespective of the lived reality of the private sphere, for instance, the public face of the Australian family is generally marked for a small or non-existent power differential between husband and wife, with a concomitant I+ marking in the interests of "keeping up appearances" of marital harmony. Evidence for this kind of maintenance of the I+ differential as part of the public face can be found in the frequent and

quite genuine surprise of even very close friends of couples who separate, who are often completely unaware that the private face of their friends' marriage did not mirror the public. Generally speaking, then, the public face of a Australian family is marked as P-I+ (or, although perhaps less often, I-). With regard to the public face of the Japanese family however, as Woronoff points out, "it is *expected* by society that a husband should behave in a *teishu-kanpaku* manner" (1981:78, emphasis added) - that is, as a "master" by unequivocally registering large power differentials - while his wife assumes a complementary role that is frequently compared to that of a servant (e.g. by Vogel 1971:198; Seward 1977:123). The public face of the Japanese family, then, is marked P+ in the husband's favour (the reverse generally being the case in the construction of the private face), but in both cases the public face is constructed in terms of P and I configurations: for the construction of Australian social reality this frequently involves the use of familiar-politeness (P-I+) strategies (and, although perhaps less frequently, neutral politeness (P-I-) strategies) while the construction of Japanese social reality frequently entails the use of formal-politeness (P+I+) or null-politeness (P+I-) strategies.

Both this notion of familial templates and the importance of the kind of in-group (*uchi*) out-group (*otaku*) distinction referred to earlier are necessary to the analysis of the data presented at the beginning of this paper.

GREETINGS: AN ANALYSIS OF JAPANESE ESL SPEAKERS' AND L1 AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH SPEAKERS' POLITENESS STRATEGIES

What will be suggested here is that Japanese ESL speakers and Australian English L1 speakers show a distinct tendency to draw societal boundaries quite differently, and also to mark these boundaries (by the use of differing politeness strategies which can be analysed in terms of P and I configurations) quite differently, in an identical speech situation, depending upon the extent to which the speech situation is framed in terms of the public and private familial faces.

The data cited at the beginning of this paper would seem strongly to support this hypothesis. Remembering that this speech situation required informants (I) to respond to a friend's (F) employer's (E) initial greeting in the relaxed context of an Australian barbecue, differences in Australian English speakers' and Japanese ESL speakers' in-group/*(uchi)*/private-face and out-group/*(soto)*/public-face role relationships can be represented as in Figures 3a and 3b: in Figure 3a, for Australian English L1 speakers, E, I, and F appear to be framed as an in-group which is socially constructed by the use of familiar-politeness strategies; in Figure 3b, on the other hand, for Japanese ESL speakers, E appears as an out-group member who is socially positioned as such (as a function of the public face) by the use of formal-politeness (or null-politeness) strategies. Similarly, and with specific reference to the politeness strategies used in the social construction of the public familial face, this kind of role-positioning might equally be represented as in Figure 4.

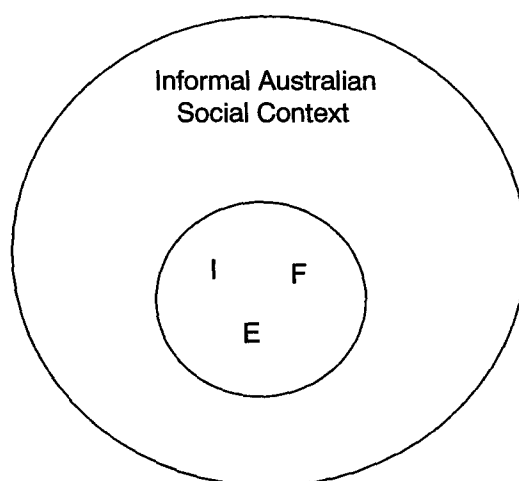


Figure 3a
: Australian-English speakers' politeness groupings

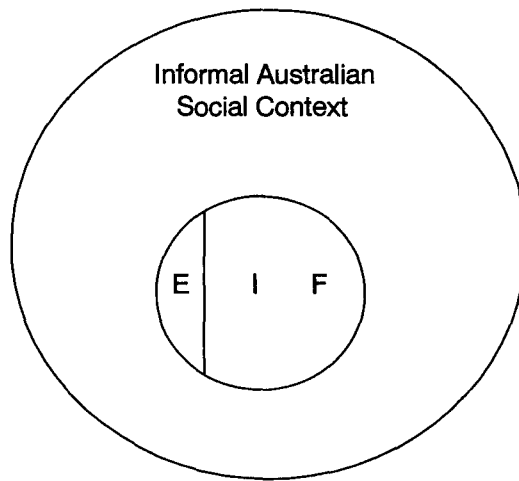


Figure 3b
Japanese ESL speakers' politeness groupings

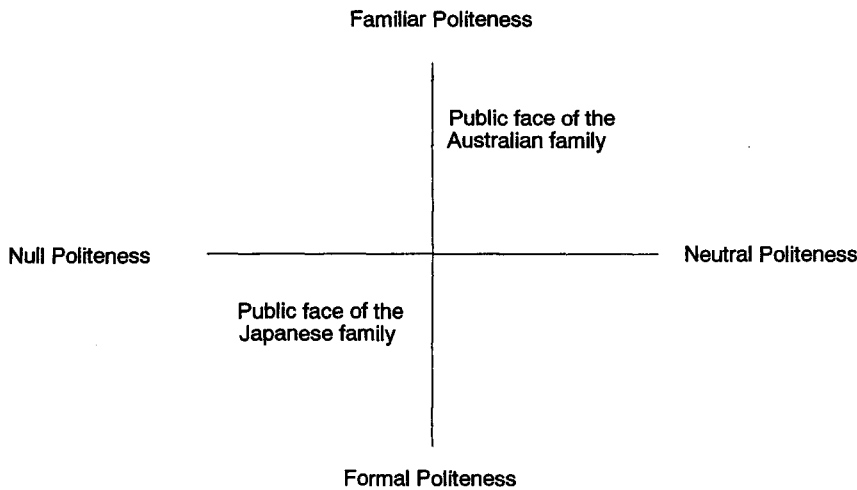


Figure 4
Role positioning in the social construction of the public familial face

CONCLUSION

What has been suggested in this paper, then, is that there is a formidable link between familial role-relationships and the politeness strategies used to frame role-relationships in extra-familial social encounters. While more work clearly needs to be done before any definitive statements can be made, related research (Conlan, 2000a; 2000b) indicates that further research along the lines suggested here could well be valuable.

Janney and Arndt have noted that breakdowns in "emotive communication" (1992:31) in cross-cultural communication cause far more damage than breakdowns related to propositional content. Given that such breakdowns in empathic communication between Australian English L1 speakers and Japanese ESL speakers can frequently be traced to a mismatching of politeness strategies, TESOL teachers working with Japanese learners should be alert to the possibility that systemic politeness breakdowns could well be a function of equally systemic differences in familial social-role identification.

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