

Emotion and instantaneous choice in interactional linguistic pragmatics: Cross-cultural perspectives



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Abstract

It is axiomatic in the study of pragmatics that speakers must make choices from a myriad of variants in phonology, morphology and syntax “on the fly” during the course of interaction. However, the specific psychological and neurophysiological mechanisms that both prompt these choices have largely been taken for granted. Theoretical approaches to this problem in the past have focused on linguistic mechanisms such as “metapragmatics” or cultural approaches such as the analysis of “habitus.” While acknowledging the importance of these approaches, in this paper I extend this view by suggesting that these instantaneous choices are largely governed by the same cognitive mechanisms that govern emotional response. Drawing on the work of contemporary neurophysiology, pragmatic philosophy and phenomenology, I draw on examples from Japanese, Persian and Javanese.

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1. Introduction—the speaker’s dilemma

All speakers in face-to-face discourse are forced to make choices that reflect both the human and the social context in which discourse occurs. The classic dilemma is summed up in the German epithet: *Wer hat die Wahl, hat auch die Qual*, “Whoever has choice also has torture.”

Nowhere is this more evident than in stylistic choice in situations involving interpersonal address. The “torture” of choice is probably present in all languages, but the codes that are used in each language to indicate proper marking of both the relationship between speakers, and the context in which they find themselves range from the simple to the extremely elaborate. Paradoxically, the simpler codes are more complex in their use, because they exhibit a wider range of multiple indexicality.

The classic T-V distinction found in second person pronouns in European languages is a case in point. When choosing to use the T or the V form with another speaker, one must take into account an extensive array of factors—relative status with all of its variants, relative age, context of discourse, etc. There are, in fact, so many variables that attempts to enumerate them result in frustration (cf. [Brown and Gilman, 1960](#); [Ervin-Tripp, 1972](#); [Friedrich, 1966, 1972](#)), and in the liberal use of *ad hoc*ing ([Garfinkel, 1967](#)) as I have here by invoking an “*et cetera*” to complete my list of factors.

When we turn to more elaborate systems, such as Persian *ta’arof*, Japanese *keigo* or Javanese speech levels, the “torture” becomes even more acute, because the choice is not just a matter of two alternative pronouns, but rather a whole array of levels of pronominal choice, verb forms and syntactic constructions. The use of such systems becomes an art

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employed by skillful speakers. In Japan today, there is tension between the need to command these skills in everyday life—particularly business life—and the incompetence of younger people in commanding these skills. Business and industry hold remedial training classes for students unskilled in this language use, and the bookstores abound in training manuals with titles like: “*Why your keigo is so bad and what you can do about it.*”

1.1. The Paradox

However, there is a paradox in the use of these interaction instrumentalities. Those who employ them well, employ them without thinking—instantaneously. Whereas a new learner of French, German or Spanish may initially be taught the mechanics of how to employ the T-V distinction, newcomers to the language soon learn that they must supplement their classroom experience with hard social experience in the correct application of this simple pronominal variable, and they make many mistakes on the road to competence even in employing this small distinction. Japanese, Persian and Javanese learners have an even harder time developing the social skills that allow them to employ this complex social language adequately because of the larger number of possible variant forms and equally complex contexts for their employment.

It is, however, the instantaneous use of these linguistic forms by native or highly skilled language users, enacted autonomically with little or no conscious appraisal of context, code or other factors at the moment of speaking—via “gut feeling”—that fascinates me. In the remainder of this discussion, I will try to discuss some of the approaches that we might make to understanding how speakers actually do this complex pragmatic task without having to engage in complex appraisal in their immediate choice of words. In approaching this problem I recognize that there is a tripartite set of theoretical dimensions that have historically been utilized in dealing with variable choice in linguistic behavior. These are

1. Linguistic—Specific studies have been cited above, but an overall theoretical linguistic approach can be seen in Michael Silverstein’s formulation of *metapragmatics* (Silverstein, 2004).
2. Cultural—This theoretical approach is articulated in many formulations of cultural patterns and habits, but it may be most effectively expressed in Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* as articulated in many of his works, but most generally in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977).
3. Neurophysiological/Psychological—this theoretical approach is the least developed, and is the principal focus of this discussion. These include the notion of “thin slicing” as developed by psychologists Nilati Ambady and her collaborators, and neurophysiologists Antonio Damasio and the research team whose results he has represented in a number of semi-popular works, dealing with the role of brain structures governing emotion in decision making. This question has also been addressed by social psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer and his collaborators in a number of works, albeit without reference to specific neurological brain structures.

The discussion which follows focuses largely on the third of these theoretical approaches. It is my feeling that all three are necessary to posit an explanation of the ways that speakers make these linguistic decisions in an instantaneous, autonomic fashion. The linguistic variables must be available. The cultural framing must also be present, and finally, the human brain must have the capacity to process the information provided by these linguistic and cultural structures in a manner that provides for this immediate behavioral output.

1.2. Thin slicing

Psychologist Nilati Ambady has pioneered the concept of “thin slicing,” which describes the ability of individuals to make accurate assessments about other people, their identities, their personality traits and their compatibility through brief observations. Her work was popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in his best-selling book, *Blink* (2005). The basic thesis of “thin slicing” was set out in her Ph.D. thesis, but summarized in an early article (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1992).

Ambady along with her mentors and students has successfully conducted studies of a large catalog of phenomena that are able to be understood through the “thin slicing” process, including emotional states, sexual orientation, and likelihood of success in professions such as teaching and sales.

As mentioned in the last section, these psychological/neurological experiments render support to Pierre Bourdieu’s widely known concept of “habitus.” Although habitus has a wide variety of interpretations, one aspect outlined by Bourdieu is particularly relevant to the question of the “thin slicing” process. In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), he describes habitus as an instantaneous engagement in conduct shaped by dispositions. His explication of disposition is helpful.

(a) ‘the result of an organizing action’, a set of outcomes which he describes as approximating to ‘structure’; (b) a ‘way of being’ or a ‘habitual state’; and (c) a ‘tendency’, ‘propensity’ or ‘inclination’ (Bourdieu, 1977 cited in Jenkins, 1992:76). One of the most interesting of Ambady’s studies was a study of politeness in language and demeanor in a comparison between Korean and American subjects. In this study Ambady and her team discovered that there were significant

differences in the employment of strategies of politeness. “Strategies used were other—orientation, affiliation, and circumspection. Americans and Koreans were more affiliative toward peers and more circumspect toward superiors whereas the reverse was the case while delivering good news. For both Americans and Koreans, circumspection was more apparent from the purely nonverbal channel of behavior. Koreans pay more attention to interpersonal and relational cues. Americans are affected more by the content of the message than by their relationship with the target of the message.” (Ambady et al., 1996:996)

The suggestion in Ambady, Koo et al. is that in making the instantaneous decisions that govern both verbal and non-verbal choices, Koreans and Americans were attending to different subsets of external phenomena.

1.3. Unconscious decision making

The work of social psychologist Timothy D. Wilson tells us more about these processes. In his work dealing with the “adaptive unconscious,” Wilson points out two salient and somewhat surprising points. The first is that the kind of “thin slice” immediate judgments detailed by Ambady and her research team are often more accurate than those made after long deliberation (Wilson, 2002). Moreover, in a famous early paper co-authored with Richard E. Nisbett, Wilson points out that individuals rarely if ever have the skills to understand their own internal processes in making these judgments. (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). Nisbett and Wilson’s research has strong resonance with research into *metapragmatics* as described by Silverstein who states that: “metapragmatics is the link that integrates [firstorder] pragmatics and metasemantics [grammar and cultural semantics] and (2) the problem of “human culture” (Silverstein, 2004:648). These results attest to adaptive behavioral processes that are largely inaccessible for humans in a conscious sense—they approach being autonomic in nature.

1.4. Emotions and gut decisions

Both Ambady and Wilson suggest that there are underlying neurological processes that are operating to allow individuals to make instantaneous behavioral choices. This would certainly involve instantaneous linguistic choices, such as the immediate choice between the T and V pronouns in European address systems, or the stylistic choices necessary for Persian, Japanese or Javanese. I explore some of these dynamics below.

Antonio Damasio has become the popular spokesman for a research team formerly located at the University of Iowa. Damasio and company have pioneered studies of the role of the pre-frontal forebrain, particularly the amygdala, thalamus and hippocampus as the basis for the generation and expression of emotion (Damasio, 1994, 1999; Damasio et al., 2000). This work has also been pursued by a number of other prominent researchers, notably Joseph LeDoux (1998).

Basically the thalamus serves as the filter for external sensory data. The hippocampus regulates the input of memories of past experiences relevant to this sensory data. The amygdala then directs the body to act based on the new sensory data in combination with the information about past experience. The result is an instantaneous physical reaction that is interpreted by the individual as “emotion,” usually after the fact. As the psychologist William James noted more than a century ago. To paraphrase: One does not run because one is afraid of the bear, one is afraid because one runs from the bear (James, 1884). The physical reaction is frequently expressed in the face, as the psychologist Paul Ekman has demonstrated in numerous studies (cf. Ekman, 1992; Ekman et al., 1983). Finally, there is a cognitive evaluation of “emotion” that places a label on the process, such as “fear,” “happiness,” etc.

These researchers have demonstrated that emotional feeling is preceded by an autonomic behavioral reaction. It is only after autonomic behavior that an individual registers the emotion that might be attached to that behavior. The basic mechanism for the generation of emotion is, then:

- External stimulus
- Internal feedback from previous experience
- Autonomic behavioral reaction
- Cognitive registering of emotion

LeDoux adds an additional dimension to this schema. He points out that there are two “roads” that are taken in the generation of emotion. The first, he terms the “low road” which leads directly from a sensory stimulus to action through the amygdala and subsequent cognitive registering of emotion. The second, “high road” proceeds from sensory stimulus to the frontal cortex for appraisal and evaluation before proceeding to the amygdala, generating action and subsequent registering of emotion. Both mechanisms appear to be adaptive LeDoux (1998:123). One does not want to wait for appraisal before reacting to immediate fear or danger—hence the utility of the “low road.” On the other hand, in an ambiguous situation one does not want to react too quickly and make a social or tactical error—sometimes thought of as “jumping to conclusions.”

Damasio and his colleagues as well as LeDoux claim that this mechanism is essential for decision making, and that if the amygdala is damaged through disease or injury, subjects are unable to make reasonable decisions for themselves.

One of the results, interesting for this inquiry, is that individuals become socially inept. They become unable to gauge the reactions of others, and they are incapable of producing proper linguistic and non-linguistic responses in social situations.

Gigerenzer's work on "gut decisions" is also relevant here. As mentioned above, Gigerenzer, a social psychologist, does not deal with the neurophysiology of emotion-based decision-making, although he references Ambady and Damasio in his important book, *Gut Feelings* (2007). Gigerenzer sees the process of "gut decision" making as the result of the interplay between immediate external stimulus and "intuition" derived from past experience. He provides a large number of case studies and examples showing how such immediate decision making is advantageous over extensive cost-benefit style analysis in reaching satisfactory assessments in personal choice. His notion of intuition can be added to the list of similar concepts: Bourdieu's notion of habitus and the linguistic concept of metapragmatics discussed above.

2. Thin slicing, emotion and linguistic decisions—case studies

All languages require that speakers make instantaneous decisions about their pragmatic choice of words as they speak. The differences from language to language have to do with the kinds of information about the social and physical environment that speakers are required to encode in their utterances.¹ Although this action involves a habituated set of presuppositions based on personal historical experience, the action of realizing one variable linguistic form rather than another is an example of spontaneous linguistic behavior, carried out without contemplation in the moment. This is a clear example of Silverstein's metapragmatic function and also the kind of emotional "gut reaction" documented by Damasio and his fellow researchers.

Some decisions are deictic in nature. A speaker needs to understand whether objects are single or multiple. In many languages the category "multiple" can be subdivided into "two" and "more than two," or even further subdivided into "two," "a few" and "a large number." These categories are designated with appropriate linguistic markers. Of course it is possible to make a cognitive error in assessing the number of objects, but once the speaker has identified the number of items, the application of the proper linguistic form is automatic. The contrast between the automatic application of linguistic forms and the non-automatic application of these forms is seen with second language learners who have not internalized the automatic linguistic responses and must calculate the correct form.

Simple number indication is, then, already a complex pragmatic behavior. Determining much more subtle distinctions in the pragmatic social universe is far more complex—particularly when they involve language governed by interpersonal encounters. These include questions of relative social hierarchy, relative intimacy, and public versus private speech.

The need for instantaneous reaction to these dimensions is seen in the discourse that speakers of any given language use to describe "proper" or "admirable" language skills. These ethno-linguistic descriptions are often couched in terms that involve "politeness," "respect," "etiquette," and similar descriptors. A person who is unable to demonstrate ability in these areas is not only an incompetent speaker, but may also suffer socially as a result of their ineptitude. People everywhere are successful in conveying their feelings toward others, and the framed understandings that allow the linguistic expression of affectivity to be interpreted by others is theoretically accessible to the linguistic anthropologist. Jules Henry (1936) in an early essay on the expression of emotion in language indicates that there are some languages which conveniently provide grammatical marking for emotional states in speaking. He provides a number of examples. In Qechua, he offers, some "suffixes are: -raya, to doubt the execution of an action; -yu, immediate action, short, but calm and not sudden; -čaku, to execute the action in a ridiculous manner" (Henry, 1936:250).

I have chosen a range of examples that show instantaneous choice from a set of grammatical alternatives below. In order to make the point that these practices are not idiosyncratic to a single language or language family, I show that they all exhibit similar pragmatic lexical choice paradigms, but they are from different linguistic families. The widespread exercise of this linguistic behavior in this autonomic and instantaneous manner constitutes, I believe, evidence of pan-human cognitive mechanisms that underscore the metapragmatic linguistic behaviors that are contained within Bourdieu's concept of habitus.

One of the example languages, Japanese, is sometimes considered to be a branch of Altaic, though this is disputed by those who see Japanese as a linguistic isolate. Persian is Indo-European and Javanese is Malayo-Polynesian. The existence of such similar structures in such widely divergent languages suggests universal linguistic processes that transcend any particular language family, and consequently for the purposes of this discussion, a universal skill in "thin

¹ This pragmatic function of language was described by Edward Sapir and his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf in what has come to be known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. As Sapir wrote: "language is the symbolic guide to culture (Sapir 1949).

slicing” in making instantaneous cognitive decisions based largely, I would maintain, on human ability to assess social and environmental context and react “emotionally” as predicted by the cognitive scientists I have referenced above.

2.1. Japanese

The marking of affective dimensions is one of the important features of Japanese pragmatics, where a rich variety of linguistic expressions aid speakers in indicating to others their assessment of relative social status, and also exactly what their mental attitude is toward the statements they are producing while not paying much attention to empirical distinctions, such as those between singular and plural, person and number, etc. (cf. Seward, 1968, Passin, 1980; Miller, 1967; Mitzutani, 1981; Suzuki, 1978; Inoue, 2006).

In Japanese the basic gloss for ability in formulating correct expressions is *enryo*, sometimes described as “empathy” or “the ability to take the perspective of the other.” When invoked in social life it often seems to be a formula for politeness. A person who hesitates to accept an invitation, or an offering of something as innocuous as tea or a bit of food is told: *go-enryo naku* (don’t “*enryo*”—i.e. please don’t hesitate to accept).

Enryo describes the psychological disposition seen in the correct and spontaneous use of language. The linguistic forms that are invoked in Japanese fall into a variety of categories, but are generally glossed as *keigo* or polite speech. *Keigo* is further divided into *sonkeigo* or “respectful speech,” and *kensongo* or *kenjōgo*, humble language. *Sonkeigo* is language directed toward other persons worthy of respect, and *kensongo* is humble self-referential speech. The dynamic of other-raising and simultaneous self-lowering is automatic for fully acculturated speakers of Japanese. Young Japanese are taught the linguistic rules for this kind of speech, but because it is complex and difficult, not all young people assimilate the emotional sensibility combined with linguistic competence to execute the pragmatics adequately (Fig. 1).

The use of *keigo* involves mastering multiple vocabulary items that differ according to whether they are addressed to a respectfully considered “other” or toward one’s self. A full discussion of *keigo* is much more complex than can be discussed in this paper, but to provide an example of the kind of instantaneous choice that speakers must make, consider the simple verb “to say” in Japanese, which has a “neutral” form, *hanasu*, or *iu* a “humble” form, *mosu*, and an “elevated” form, *ossharu*. All mean “to say” but reflect differential social status. It is entirely possible for persons who consider themselves to be of equal status (often because they are friends of the same age) to use the neutral term. In social situations where one is uncertain about the relative status of the other person, most sensitive people will use the humble form for themselves and the elevated form for the other person. The choice of verb must be instantaneous and its correct application depends on the “thin slice” judgment of speakers (Fig. 2).

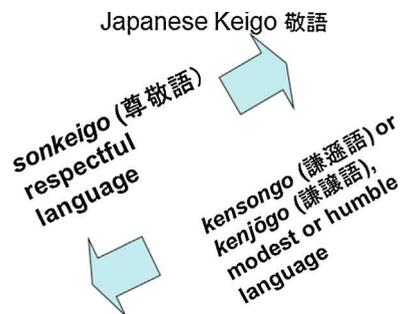


Fig. 1. Japanese *keigo*.

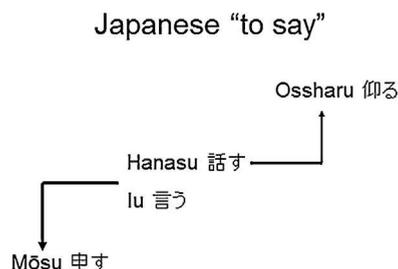


Fig. 2. Japanese “to say” showing neutral, humble and elevated forms.

Formal, Informal and Polite in Japanese

informal	polite	formal	polite formal
これは 本だ <i>kore wa hon da.</i>	これは本 です <i>kore wa hon desu.</i>	これは本 である <i>kore wa hon de aru.</i>	これは本で あります <i>kore wa hon de arimasu.</i>

Fig. 3. “This is a book” in Japanese showing formal, informal and polite forms.

To further demonstrate the complexity of this system, it is possible to be properly deferential but still not really polite. People who are adept speakers know instinctively what expression to use to express exactly the precise correct expression to show one’s *enryo* vis-à-vis the other person. Another dimension of *keigo* is *teineigo* (丁寧語), polite language. It is possible to be completely correct in applying the forms of *keigo* and still be impolite. The ideal is to be both deferentially correct and polite to the proper or desired degree (sometimes people want to be rude, after all). Consider the paradigm below for a simple sentence: “This is a book” using different expressions equivalent to the English verb “to be”: *da, desu, de aru, de arimasu* in Fig. 3.

It should be noted that because the verb is typically positioned at the end of any given sentence, a Japanese speaker has the possibility of altering the verb form to be more or less formal, more or less polite, or more or less deferential as he or she talks depending on the social “atmosphere” of any given encounter. This is an excellent example of “thin slicing in motion.” Szatrowski (1987, 1993, 2002, 2003) provides many more examples of instantaneous modification of speech during conversation in Japanese under a variety of conversational circumstances.

One more dimension in Japanese speech involves esthetics. Japanese use the terms *teichōgo* (丁寧語) and *bikago* (美化語), to refer to “word beautification”. The most adept Japanese speakers are exquisitely correct in deferring to others, exquisitely polite to the correct degree and exquisitely beautiful in their expression.

2.2. Persian

Persian has a pragmatic lexical structure similar to that of Japanese, in that there is an expectation that individuals pay close attention to relative social status in their linguistic expression. Like Japanese, Persian has multiple equivalent vocabulary items reflecting neutral, elevated and humble expression. The mechanism for this linguistic expression is very similar to that of Japanese (and see below, Javanese) in the use of verb and pronominal forms that reflect self-lowering, or humble, expressions and other-raising, or elevated expressions alongside neutral verbs and pronouns. See Fig. 4 below for an example of Persian “to give.”

From the vocabulary array in this paradigm, knowing the literal meanings of the words *taqdim* “to offer,” and *loft, marahmat, and mohabbat* (“favor,” “mercy,” and “kindness” respectively) one can read a clear semantic directionality. An implication is seen of an offering or service is directed from low status to high status and an implication of favor or reward from high status to low status. The term *dadān* has no such implication. It is simply the concept “to give” expressed neutrally. Because pronominal expressions accord with verb endings, there is a double combination of elevated or humble pronouns combined with corresponding elevated or humble verbs. Even here, there exists some “wobble room” where a neutral pronoun can be combined with an elevated verb form as if to fine-tune the expression.

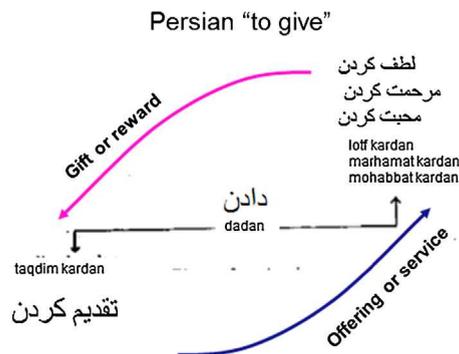


Fig. 4. Persian “to give”.



Fig. 5. Persian. "To say."

Fig. 5 is the Persian paradigm for "to say" for comparison with the Japanese example above.

The elevated verb form *farmudan* literally means "to command," and the humble verb form, *arz kardan* means "to make a petition," whereas the neutral form, *goftan*, means "to speak, to say," with no affect or relative status indication.

This use of language may seem to be rather mechanical, but it is not. In fact, *ta'arof*, despite its strong linguistic component is, like Japanese *keigo*, firmly entrenched in a much more comprehensive constellation of behavior requiring complex "thin slicing" in linguistic choice based on a variety of contextual circumstances that the speaker must assess in order to use these terms effectively. For example, an assessment of whether the linguistic expression is taking place in an intimate, or "inside" (*baten/andarun*) setting, or a public or "outside" (*zاهر/birun*) setting may govern the use of elevated or humble terms. Two individuals who are good friends or close relatives may use neutral expressions in private, but in public in the presence of others may revert to using elevated language in addressing each other, and humble language in referring to themselves. In this way they emphasize the importance of their friend or relative in the assessment of others. Also, like with Japanese, it can be used in social situations such as issuing and accepting of invitations, much like Japanese. So just as mentioned above, Japanese may say *go-enryo naku* in urging someone to accept something that is offered, Iranians may say *ta'arof nakon* (don't *ta'arof*) or some variant thereof showing proper social deference.

For the most part, exercise of *ta'arof* is habitual and autonomic for native speakers, though there may be variability in skill, just as with *keigo* in Japanese. Some adept speakers who have metalingual control over the system can use *a'arof* as a component of a social interaction strategy. Intensification of outside/*zاهر/birun* communication is generally used as a device to achieve social control within the society (cf. Beeman, 1986; see also Hillman, 1981; Sprachman, 2002). By invoking *ta'arof* expressions in language, it is possible to impose a "formal" social context on a setting or event. This shows the power of the language and its integration within a social behavioral complex.

Because of this manipulative power, *ta'arof* has an aspect that is positively valued, and an aspect that is negatively valued. In both cases, however, I would maintain that it represents a form of outside/*birun/zاهر* behavior that is more intense than normally expected, and this intensified communication serves to control the behavior of those being addressed. Positively valued *ta'arof* is often seen as consisting of exercising proper behavior toward others, particularly guests, in using polite language, giving food or gifts; or in paying compliments or showing regard for those who are truly worthy of respect or deserving of such behavior. This variety of *ta'arof* is valued because it is viewed as an expression of selflessness and humility.

Nevertheless, such *ta'arof* is definitely a control device, for it serves to immobilize the recipient. Guests are not allowed to do anything for themselves; they are literally at the mercy of their host. They cannot show displeasure or anger. They must make strenuous efforts just to leave the scene where they are being entertained. High status persons are often prevented from learning about many things because they are "protected" by those around them. This was definitely the case with the deposed shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was simply never told about much of the turmoil surrounding his rule, because his underlings only wanted him to hear flattering things about himself.

Negatively valued *ta'arof* may consist of exactly the same intensified behavior, but it is done for manipulative purposes, in order to make incumbent on the other party in interaction the ethical demands associated with the superior party in a relationship. Thus one person may be flattered into doing another person's will in order to show "generosity," or "pity" for the "poorest and most abject of servants," to cite some commonly used phraseology. This may seem to be a blatantly obvious ploy, but the strategy works often enough that it is widely used. Indeed, a skillful manipulator of the language is often extremely effective in controlling others in just this manner. This use of communication is valued negatively because it is clearly carried out for personal gain. It is in no way an expression of selflessness and humility; it is in fact seen as a disguised expression of arrogance.

The difficulty in identifying this negative aspect of *ta'arof* arises from the fact that whatever its intent, if used skillfully, it is very difficult to counter. One cannot say to another: "No, I'm not the great, magnanimous person you paint me, I am just a poor boob like you!" For, as implied, one ends up by insulting the addressor. What is most often done in the case where undue flattery is being used is to reciprocate to at least the level of the addressor. This sets off a kind of competition

which I have described elsewhere as “getting the lower hand” (see Beeman, 1986; also see Irvine, 1974, 1990 for a similar process in Wolof).

As mentioned, I have analyzed these kinds of *ta’arof* encounters extensively in other publications. However, for this discussion I want to point out the complexity of the instantaneous “thin slicing” decision making that is necessary for effective communication. Parties in interaction must not only assess the language they intend to use, but also the setting, scene, motivations of other actors and their own motivations in communicating in order to be competent speakers. Moreover, even with negatively valued *ta’arof* speakers may not be consciously deciding to use one or another form. Having the desire to flatter another person into submitting to a request for favor, the requisite vocabulary appears automatically. It is a perfect example of “thin slicing” manifesting itself as part of a more complex social interactional dynamic.

2.3. Javanese

Javanese, spoken on the island of Java is perhaps the most powerful local language in Indonesia. Bahasa Indonesia, the constructed lingua franca of the nation, is a simplified communication medium with some marking of social status and cultural context, but it cannot compare with the pragmatic richness of Javanese in reflecting social and cultural dynamics.

Javanese, like Persian and Japanese has a similar verb and noun substitution system with elevated, humble and neutral forms for pronouns and verbs. However, Javanese is more complex, with three levels of politeness in addition to elevated and humble forms (see Fig. 6, cf. Errington, 1982, 1988, 2007; Loeb, 1944; Poedjosoedarmo, 1968).

Also, just as Persian and Japanese have very different pragmatic mechanisms for using these terms, so does Javanese employ a variety of cultural norms in their use. From Fig. 7 below one can see that it is possible to be hierarchically neutral but with differing degrees of politeness, making politeness a separate pragmatic variable in the execution of Javanese speech.

In Fig. 8, one can see how these levels play out in the concrete example for “to tell, to ask to do.”

One can see immediately that the forms are not easily predictable from each other. An individual who wishes to speak to others with propriety and effectiveness must possess a multitude of such paradigms and be able to utilize them at an instant, “thin slicing” them appropriately for the social context and the immediate moment. Fig. 9 shows a more complete paradigm of equivalent forms varying by deference and politeness

Javanese has the additional dimension of speech, similar to Japanese as discussed above—an esthetic dimension defined by the terms *alus* and *kasar*. *Alus* is “smooth, beautiful” speech. *Kasar* is “rough, direct” speech. Both are

Javanese Speech Levels

Ngoko—non-polite and informal
 Madya—semi-polite
 Krama—polite
 Krama iggél—honorific (other-raising)
 Krama anḍap—honorific (self-lowering)

Fig. 6. Javanese speech levels.

Javanese Speech Levels

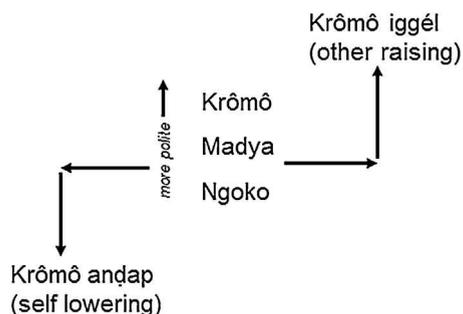


Fig. 7. Javanese speech and politeness levels.

Javanese “to tell, ask to do”

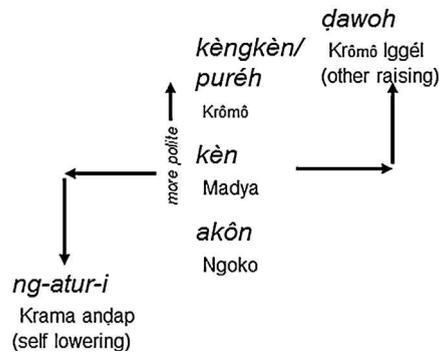


Fig. 8. Javanese “to tell, ask to do”.

Javanese Sub-levels

Category is determined by familiarity—sub-level by presence or absence of honorific particles

- | | | |
|----|--------|--|
| A. | Krômô: | 1. Muḍô-krômô (MK)
2. Kramantôrô (KA)
3. Wreḍô-krômô (WK) |
| B. | Madyô: | 4. Madyô-krômô (Md K)
5. Madyantôrô (Md. A)
6. Madyô-ngoko (Md Ng) |
| C. | Ngoko: | 7. Bôsô-antyô (BA)
8. Antyô-bôsô (AB)
9. Ngoko-lugu (Ng L) |

Fig. 9. Javanese levels of politeness with sub-categorization by deference (after Poedjosoedarmo, 1968:59).

important for competent speech. One may wish to exhibit the *alus* dimension in refined public situations, and the *kasar* dimension in intimate circumstances with comfortable equals with whom one can joke and be familiar—or possibly in situations of justifiable annoyance or anger. In this regard the Javanese pragmatic dimensions accord both with Japanese notions of beauty, and Persian reflections of inside/outside dimensions.

I wish to emphasize here as with the Japanese and Persian examples above that many—perhaps the bulk of speakers of Javanese—do not generally command the full range of language level variables shown in the paradigms above, which are the result of analysis by linguists. Even if they are aware of these forms, they may not occasion to use them in their everyday speech. Just as with Persian and Japanese above, speakers of Javanese exhibit a range of skills. There are elegant users of language who command a fuller number of linguistic variables than others, just as few French or Spanish speakers may have full command of less-used verb tenses, such as the French pluperfect subjunctive (*plus-que-parfait subjonctif*). However I am fairly confident in saying that there are no fluent adult Javanese speakers who have no competence whatever in this area. All speakers thus command a range of these forms which they are able to employ autonomically as an example of “thin slicing” as I have described above.

3. Conclusions

I began this discussion by citing three theoretical approaches to the question of instantaneous choice for speech variables: linguistic (metapragmatics), cultural (*habitus*) and psychological/neurophysiological. This discussion has focused on the third of these.

I hypothesize that the kinds of immediate judgments noted by Ambady and Wilson are linked with the sorts of emotional processes detailed by Damasio, et al. “Thin slicing” also serves as a description of the neurophysiological function that underlies the workings of *habitus* as described by Bourdieu, and meta-pragmatics as seen in Silverstein’s formulation. As Ambady’s research group has demonstrated, individuals are paying attention to different kinds of external information in making their “thin slice” judgments. Wilson’s “adaptive unconscious” is likewise variable depending on situation and individual experience.

The choice of a pronoun, a verb or a stylistic variable is a behavioral reaction. The fact that it occurs so immediately and spontaneously suggests that it is one of the kinds of immediate reactions detailed by these researchers. Moreover, it conforms to the emotional reactive process detailed by Damasio and company.

It is also clear that the criteria on which any given stylistic choice is based is cross-culturally variable. The interpersonal and contextual information that will trigger one choice over another will be different for each language and culture, and for each individual as well, based on personal life-experience. Therefore, although the cognitive mechanisms triggering the behavioral variations associated with linguistic choice may be the same for all humans, the circumstances for any given instance will be highly variable. Generalizable pragmatic rules may be discovered ethnographically, or through psychological investigation, but they will likely never account perfectly for every case.

As seen in the comparison of Japanese, Persian and Javanese examples above, the substantive mechanisms of pragmatic lexical choice can be remarkably similar. The Japanese, Persian and Javanese paradigms look very much alike, although the languages in question are not at all related. Moreover, speakers of these languages make their “choices” instantly and in all likelihood based on the emotional mechanisms posited by Ambady, Damasio and their collaborators. Nevertheless, the implementation of these structures in speech relies both on different social and cultural strategies and on different sets of cultural information. In order to predict what form a given person will use in any given situation, it is still necessary to conduct intense ethnographic research. Only then can a predictive model be constructed.

That said, it must be admitted that speakers have differential ability even in using their own language. Individuals can be mistaken. They can be inept at perceiving the phenomena around them. Their “thin slicing” can be wrong, and as a result their linguistic output can be inept or incorrect. It is not only those with impaired pre-frontal brain regions, as seen in the experiments of Damasio and his collaborators who make bad behavioral choices—it is something that everyone experiences from time to time.

It is fascinating to consider that stylistic variables can also be manipulated strategically by individuals who know in advance how others will react, as seen especially in the case of Persian. This use of stylistic variables is, by contrast with the process outlined above, not always spontaneous, but rather calculated. The individuals who have enough social and linguistic knowledge to be able to employ language in this way are truly the linguistic artists in any culture. They can be genuine benefactors—wise counselors, ambassadors and mediators. They can also be master entertainers, especially as comedians, since they know how to manipulate the rules of discourse. However, they can also somewhat socially dangerous when they take the role of flatterers, seducers and scam artists. *Caveat orator, caveat auditor!* But always realize that beneath every linguistic choice is an autonomic emotional reaction of infinite complexity and subtlety.

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