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# **Rethinking Linguistic Politeness From the Perspective of *Ba* Theory**

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The purpose of this presentation is twofold:

- (1) Rethinking of *wakimae* aspect of linguistic politeness from the *ba* perspective
- (2) Introduction of *ba* oriented frame of thinking and its relevance in language practice in general

# Linguistic Politeness in the Last Four Decades

What is linguistic politeness (LP) ?

**communication without friction**

R. Lakoff (1973)

The **rules** of language usage for politeness

1) Be formal 2) Give options 3) Be friendly

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987)

**Strategies** to mitigate Face Threatening Acts  
of the interactants to save face

Leech (1983)

**Principles** of politeness: Six maxims

# Criticisms from the Japanese perspective (Matsumoto 1988, Ide 1989):

Fundamental assumptions that underlie universal principles of LP are questionable.

- Erroneously assuming the speaker to be a rational agent that is able to consciously calculate strategies for making utterances.
- The unquestioning acceptance of principles based on Grice's Maxims and Speech Act.
- Underestimating contextual elements such as interactional relations among the speaker, the hearer, bystanders and the setting.

# Linguistic Politeness prevalent in Japan

The *wakimae* aspect of LP takes quite different assumptions.

By the very act of speaking, the speaker actively enters into the *ba*, and embeds him/herself into a context where the speaker, the hearer, and all other objects/elements are interacting with each other. The speaker discerns both what is significant enough to express and how to express this within the interactional contextual construal of *ba*, and indexes his/her sensibility of sense of place appropriately.

Hank's (1996:229) view on language practice

“How agents situate themselves relative to one another and their context may have real consequences for their ability to communicate.... In order to communicate, people must co-participate in an interpretive community with commensurate values regarding what counts as expression and how to view it. This kind of sharing –partial, orientational, and socially distributed—may be based on common schemes of **perception** that go far beyond the language.”

This is exactly what the *wakimae* LP presupposes.

-*Wakimae* LP involves language use based on common schemes of perception. It is realized by the choice of linguistic forms and the modes of speaking in various aspects of communication so as to make them commensurate to their contextual elements.

-It is realized by (1) indexing one's sense of place among the interactional participants, the setting and **(2) the choice of the modes of discourse regarding what to say, what not to say and how to say it.**

# R. Lakoff & Ide (2005) with a small modification

	<b>FTA-avoidance</b>	<b><i>wakimae</i></b>
<b>Locus</b>	West	Japan
<b>Function</b>	conflict avoidance	appropriate to situation
<b>Context</b>	individuals	group/ <i>ba</i>
<b>Relationship</b>	I vs. you	inclusive we embedded in <i>ba</i>



## Modes of discourse for *Wakimae* LP

- Japanese native accounts of LP by Sugito (1999)  
“The framework of polite expression/behavior”  
constructed based on his observation  
of everyday practices repeatedly performed  
by Japanese native speakers.
- Sugito’s framework has been received a robust  
acceptance by Japanese speakers.

Sugito (1999)

- The preliminary/basic question reflexively addressed to the speaker when the speaker enters the *ba*.

- The speaker mutters to him/herself:  
'Is it all right for me to speak now and here?'

- Why does the speaker have to mutter this question?

-The assumption on the norm of speaking is to exist in the *ba*, but to be silent.

-By default, one participates in a conversation by existing in the *ba* as a silent participant.

-Silence is NOT merely the absence of speech, but a meaningful act when considered in context.

“Silence is not simply what happens when we stop talking. It is more than the mere negative renunciation of language; it is more than simply a condition that we can produce at will.”

(Picard 1988 (1948):15)

Sugito's framework consists of two clusters of matters that the speaker must consider when deciding whether to speak or not. The speaker verbalizes these as meta-linguistic behaviors.

(A) What are the matters to be considered when making an utterance?

(B) What are the underlying community norms for the speaker to judge whether to speak or not?

( **A** ) x ( **B** )  $\Rightarrow$  **complex** mechanism of LP

(A) What are the matters to be considered when making an utterance? The speaker discerns the appropriateness of the following matters in situational context:

1. What: topic, content
2. When: timing
3. Where: place, situation
4. Who: me (in context)
5. To whom: addressee
6. How: tone/mode of speaking
7. How: choice of speech styles
8. Medium of speaking: face to face, telephone, with/without microphone
9. Order: where in the order/structure of discourse
10. Function of speech: requesting, asking, informing  
(cf: SPEAKING by Dell Hymes)

(B) What are the underlying community norms for the speaker to judge whether to speak or not? The speaker discerns his/her sense of place in the *ba* according to these norms.

1. What do other people normally do?
2. What are other people thinking they should be doing?
3. What would I like to do?
4. What do I normally want to do?
5. What does the addressee want me to do?
6. What is likely to be perceived to be as nice and sophisticated?

(B) are criteria for commensuration.

- The speaker both recognizes and perceives him/herself as an element embedded in the *ba*.

- These criteria are the guiding resources of commensuration for the speakers within the contextual construal.



All of the criteria for discernment, except for criteria 3 ‘what I would like to do’ and 4 ‘what do I usually want to do’, do not exist because of egocentric desire, but rather come from consideration of the appropriateness of the utterance within the contextual construal.

The appropriateness in terms of perception and recognition of the speaker’s sense of place is only realized by embedding themselves in *ba*.

This is the fundamental idea behind *ba* oriented LP, i.e. *Wakimae* LP

## Illustrations of Sugito LP: *ba* oriented LP (1)

Scene: In a hot day in a crowded English conversation classroom at a college. English teacher asks to to the student nearest to the window.

-Teacher: May I open the window?

Student nearest to the window: (silence)

-Returning to the faculty room, the teacher expresses his discomfort for the student's silence.

Later, when asked the reason of the silence by another teacher.

-Student: It's all right with me, but I couldn't say without knowing how my fellow students are thinking...

-The student who was asked by the English teacher recognizes herself as a part of the *ba*, and therefore, thinks that she does not have the sole right to answer the question: “May I open the window?”

-This question should be relevant to other students in the classroom as well. “Why should I be expected to answer to this question by myself?” They may ask.

- In FTA LP, there is a strategy ‘Don’t do the FTAs’. This student’s silence is not just to avoid FTA to the speaker. Instead, she could not respond because of the concern for the fellow students in the *ba*.

Illustrations of Sugito LP: *ba* oriented LP (2)

Scene: Several mothers chatting to pass the time pleasantly. They are *mamatomo*, the relationship created when a group of mothers' children go to the same kindergarten. Mother A has talked a little more than the other mothers and realizes that she is deviating from *wakimae* LP

*watashi bakari shabett-chat-te gomennnasai*  
I        only    talk   regrettable sentiment   sorry  
'I'm sorry for talking so much.'



The criteria for discernment according to Sugito's LP (B)

1. What are other people usually doing?

Each of the members gathered gives considerations to who are present, the purpose of the gathering, and then discerns the allotment of the floor.

2. What are other people thinking they should be doing?

Other people think there should be a balance in the allowance for the floor and behave accordingly.

3. What would I like to do?

I would like to speak on my own topic and be listened to.

4. What do I usually want to do?

I want to do what I want and enjoy, but at the same time show my sense of place, the observation of *wakimae* LP.

5. What do the addressees want me to do?

While they enjoy listening to me, they want me to give them chances to speak.

6. What is likely to be perceived to be nice and sophisticated?

-The speaker thinks it would be nice/sophisticated, if she displays that she knows her sense of place, *wakimae*, and presents this through a meta-linguistic message.

-The speaker displays her sense of place within the speech community by using language in a way that invites the other participants to see her decency as a person. This results in a meta-linguistic message that makes the speaker appear nice, not show off.



-Notice that (except for 3 & 4) the concerns in speaking do not come from the speaker's intention, but the concern for the norms of the community, concern for the addressee's desire, or the speaker's appearance.

-In other words, they are not ego centric concerns, but *ba* oriented concerns.

-Note also that these concerns are not like FTA strategies that are analytically and cognitively negotiated by the speaker's intention, but are perceived and performed almost automatically.

-It is said in Japan that it is imperative 'to read the air' to be appropriate in speaking. It is imperative for *wakimae* LP to have the commensurable matching of the air and the verbal /non verbal expressions.

- This is *ba* oriented LP, i.e. *wakimae* LP.

How can we move towards a better understanding of *ba* oriented LP?

- The answer to this question can be approached by questioning the notion of the self.

- Before presenting the notion of the self in *ba* oriented perspective, a explicit introduction of *ba* theory is in order.

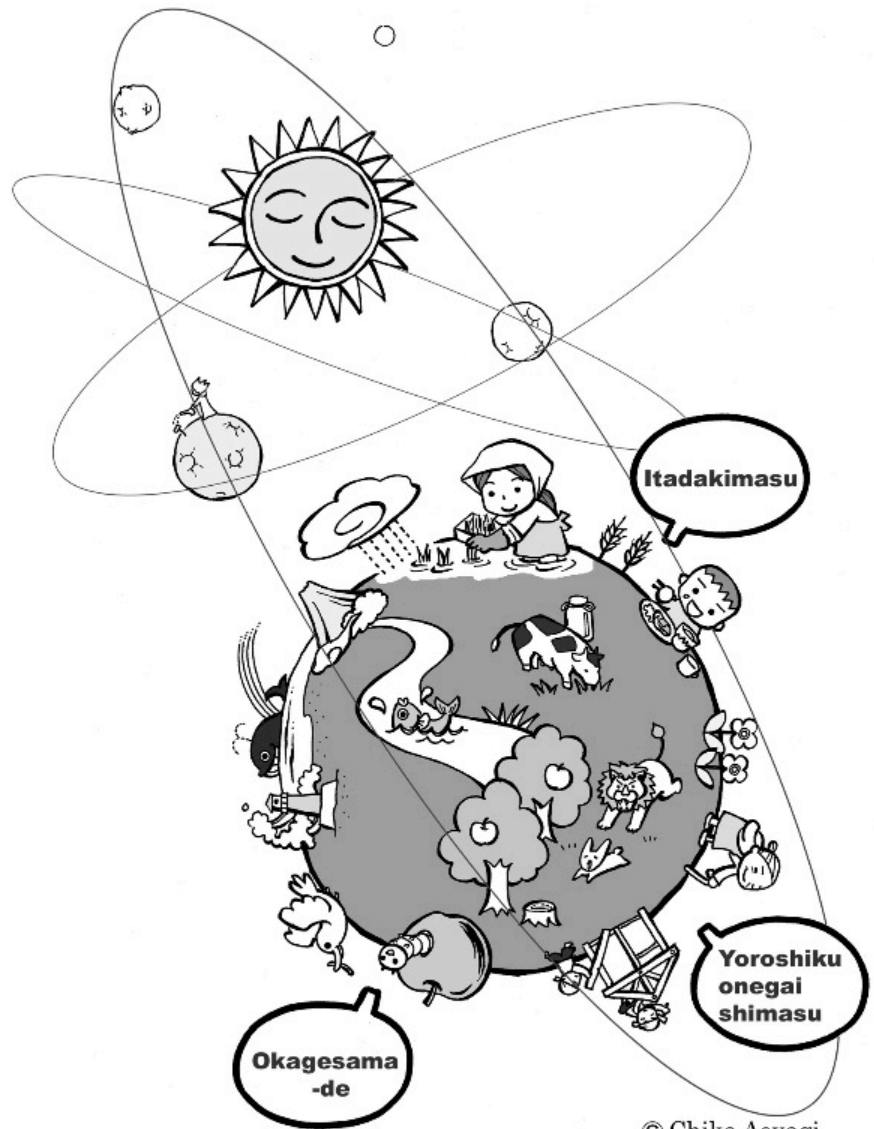
# What is *ba*? (1)

- Ba*** (*lit.* field, place) is a **semantic space**. It is the basis of thinking that **incorporates cognition** (brain/mind) and **perception** (body).
- It is a frame of thinking to compensate for the limited scientific thinking of reductionism.
- It shares roots with the philosophies of W. James 'direct experience,' Nishida's 'pure experience,' and Buddhism. (cf. Bergson, Heidegger.)
- It requires a shift from the Ptolemaic perspective to the Copernican perspective.



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An egocentric view of the globe



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A 'ba' based view of the globe

## What is the theory of *ba*? (2)

- Discovered and developed by a Japanese biophysicist: Dr. Hiroshi Shimizu
- Ba*** was based on the scientific discovery of **self-organization** in the automatic movement of the molecular level of protein taken from muscle.
- The logic of *ba***: non-linear, non reductionist  
non cause-effect, non dichotomous
- A challenge to the irreducible context elements, the characteristic of which is **complexity**.

# What is self-organization?

- It is the spontaneous often seemingly purposeful formation of spatial, temporal, spatiotemporal structures or functions in systems composed of few or many components.
- It is increasingly recognized that even the human brain may be considered as a self-organizing system as well as quite a number of manifestations of human activity, such as in economy and sociology.

# The logic of ***ba*** and quantum mechanics

Quantum mechanics: It is the complementary relation of the dual particle-like and wave-like behavior and interaction of energy and matter.

The logic of ***ba***: The complementary relation seem to exist in our consciousness of the individual and the place. This dual nature of consciousness is the basis of thinking according to the theory of ***ba***.



- The biological basis for *ba* has been found in the contemporary brain sciences, e.g. mirror neurons.
- ‘Unfortunately, philosophical and ideological individualistic positions especially dominant in our Western culture have made us blind to the fundamentally intersubjective nature of our own brains. I believe that the neuroscientific work on mirror neurons proves it.’  
(Iacoboni 2008: 152)

What is the self according to *ba* theory?

-Where is the borderline of your self?

Is it the skin around you?

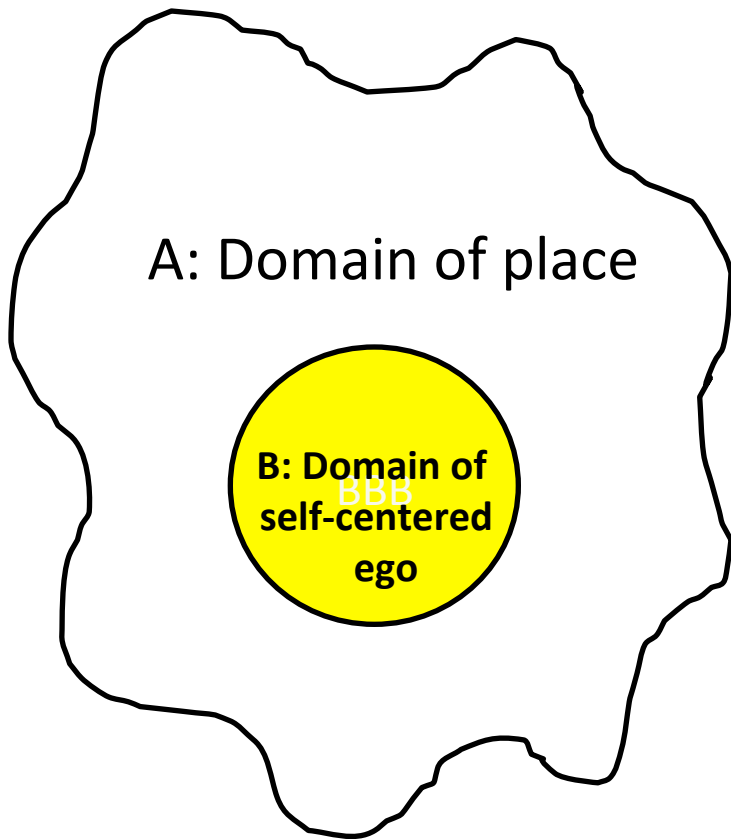
-No.

-The self consists of two domains: the domain of the self-centered ego **recognized** by your brain/mind, and the domain of place which you **perceive** through your body.

e.g. You notice somebody behind you trying to go ahead of you. This is perceived by your whole body.

Figure 1.

## The egg model of two domains of self



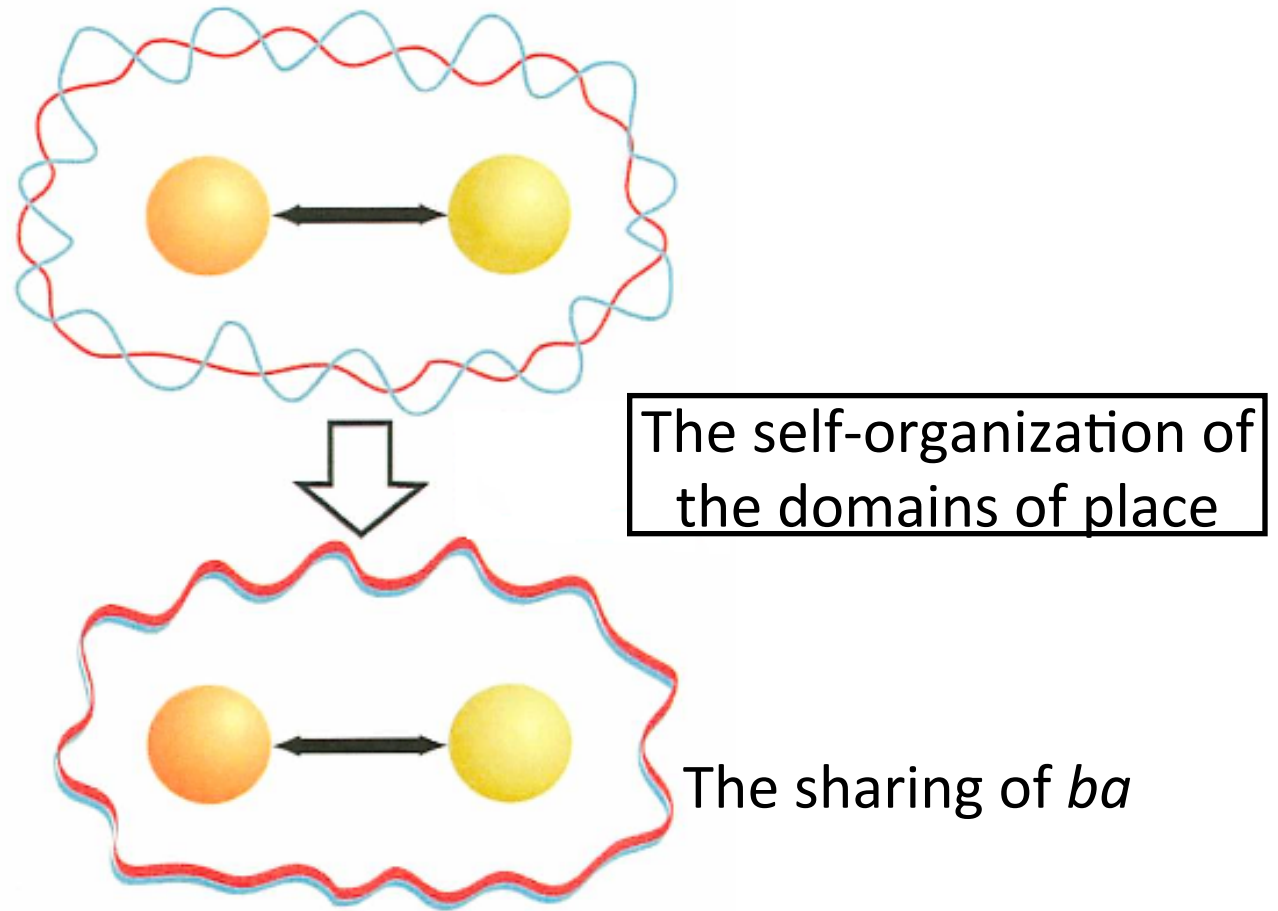
**A: Domain of self-centered ego  
recognized**

**B: Domain of place  
perceived by the body**

**A and B are working  
simultaneously**

Dual mode thinking

Figure 2. When two eggs are put in a bowl



Shimizu (2000)

## *Explanation of Figure 2:*

- When two eggs are placed in a bowl, egg white areas, the domain of self, merge.*
- The borderlines of the two egg whites merge and the differences become invisible, while the egg yolk areas remain independently.*
- It is considered that the domain of selves underwent **'self-organization'**.*
- As the result, the egg white domains of selves create a common area that is called ba.*

How can we explain *ba* oriented LP with the egg model?

-*Ba* oriented LP is characteristically performed when the domain of the self, the egg white area, has the prominence over the domain of self centered ego, the egg yolk area.

-The borderlines of the self and the other merges in the egg white area by self-organization.

Why is Sugito's framework, based on *ba* oriented LP, more accepted than FTA LP among Japanese speakers?

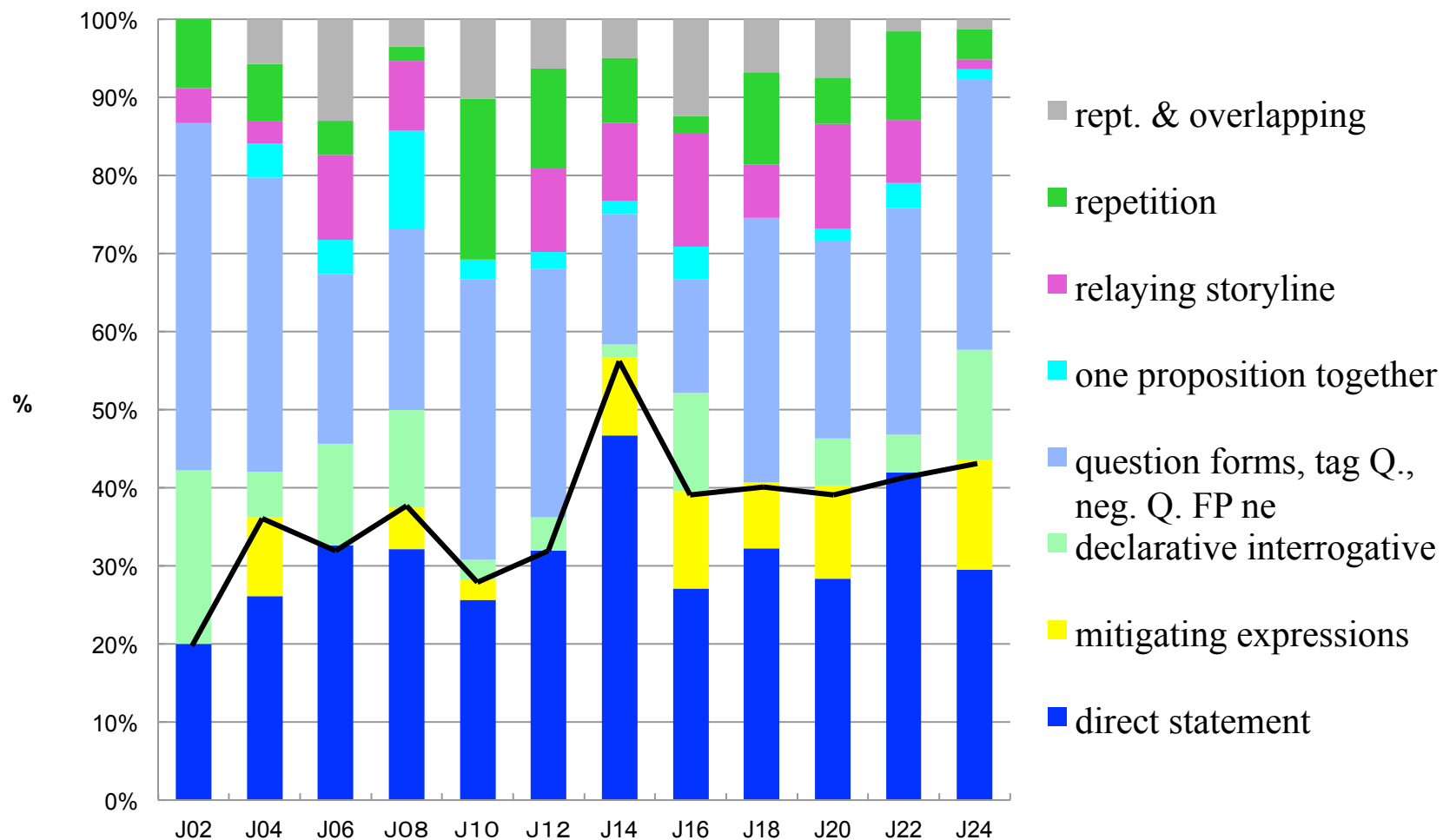
-An answer can be found in Fujii (2012)

“Differences of Situating *Self* in the Place/Ba of Interaction Between the Japanese and American English speakers”

-Fujii (2012) analyzed linguistic devices in the discourse by 12 sets of Japanese and 11 sets of American pair of speakers doing the same task.

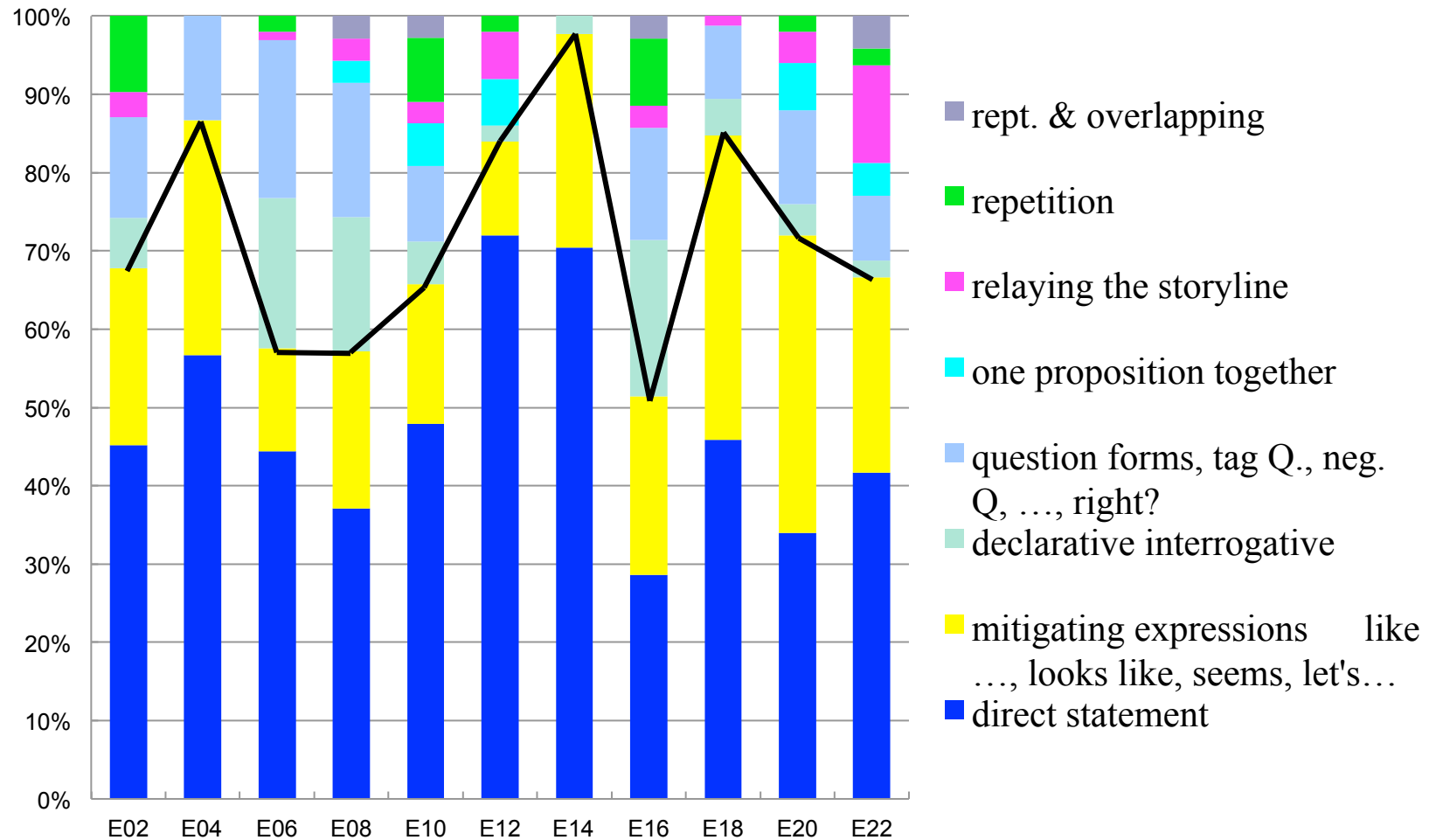
-Differences are found as shown in Fig. 3 and 4.

**Fig. 3 . Linguistic devices by Japanese pairs**





# Fig. 4 . Linguistic devices by American pairs



*To be read while showing Fig.3 and 4*  
*Differences of linguistic devices between Japanese and American speakers*

- Watch the height of zigzag lines.*
- There is a huge contrast. J. is low vs. A. is high.*
- Below the lines: direct statement, direct statement with mitigation → self assertive statement*
- Above the lines: declarative interrogative, questions, simultaneous utterances, repetition, overlapping → non self assertive statement oriented toward shared ba*
- Fujii (2012) argues that the difference reflects the following types of egg models.*

Figure 5. Japanese pattern of situating self in an interaction

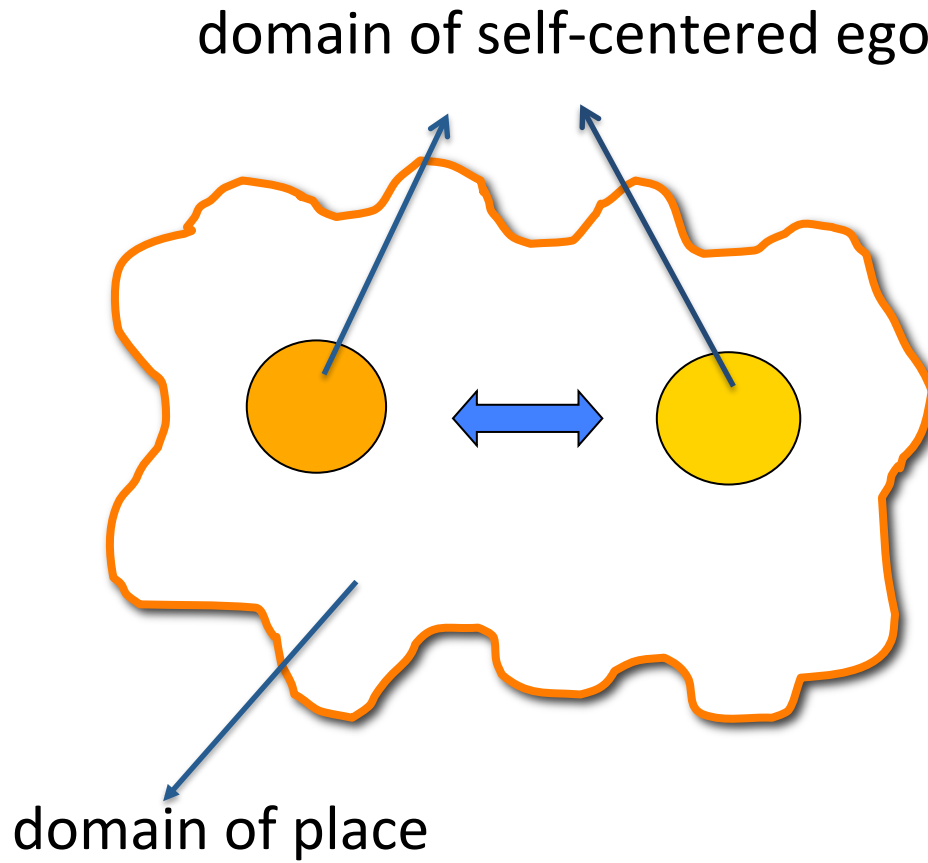
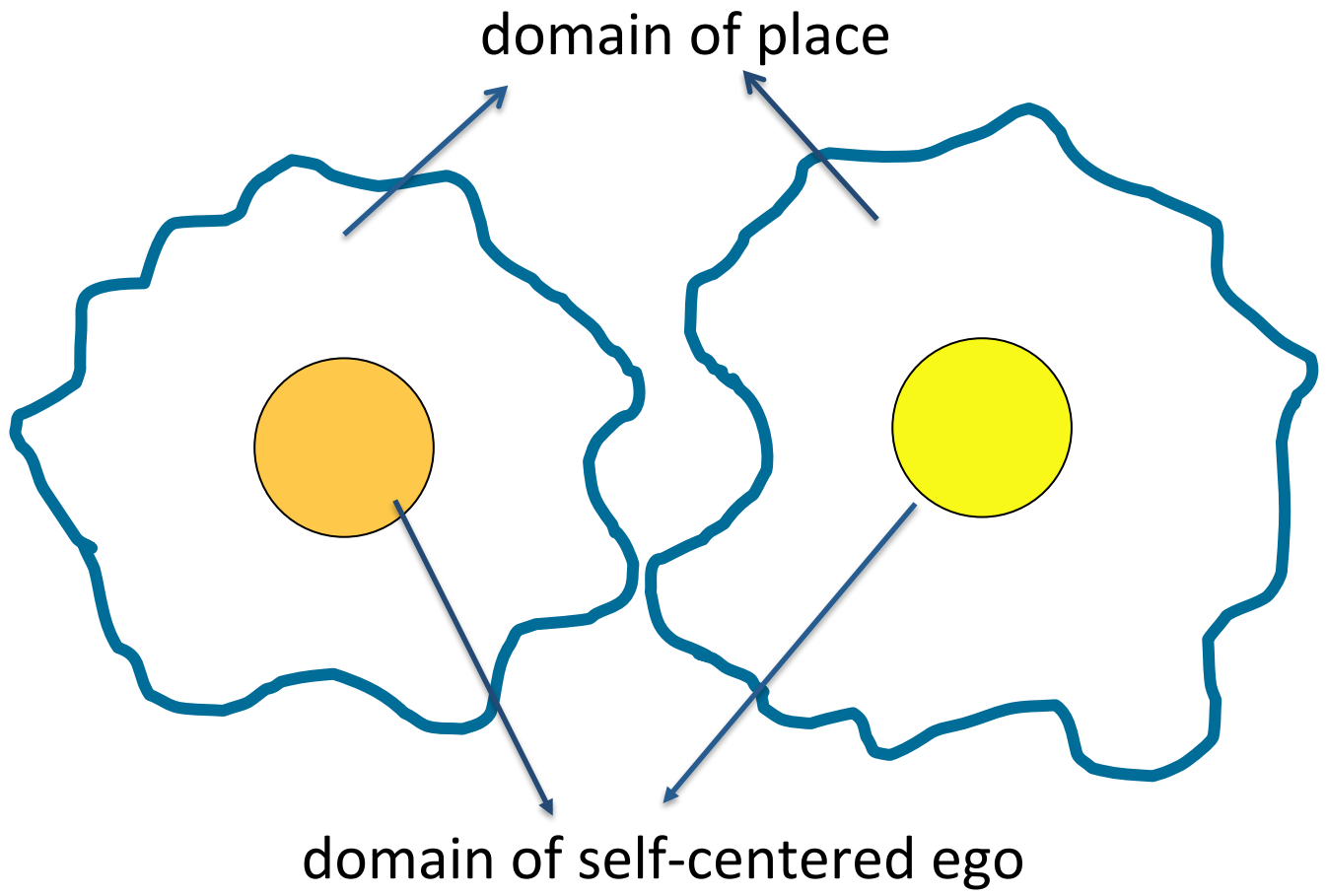


Figure 6. American pattern of situating self in an interaction



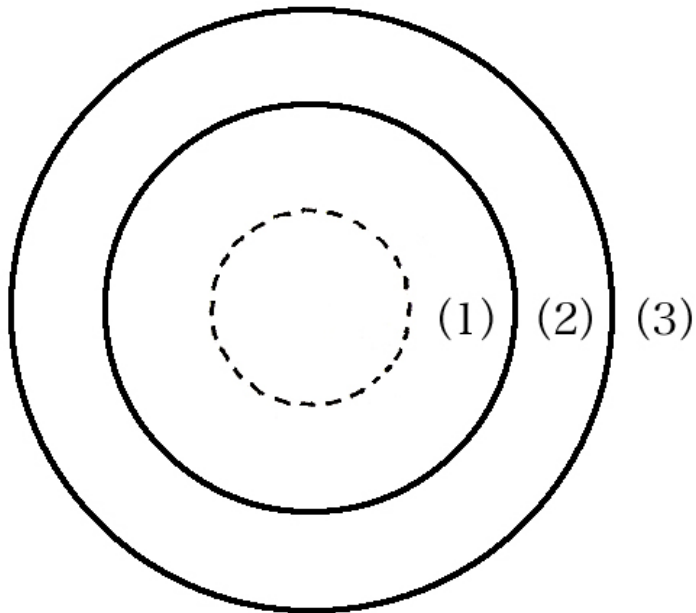
(Arranged by the author based on Shimizu (2000))

-Why do Japanese and Americans differ in their way of interacting?

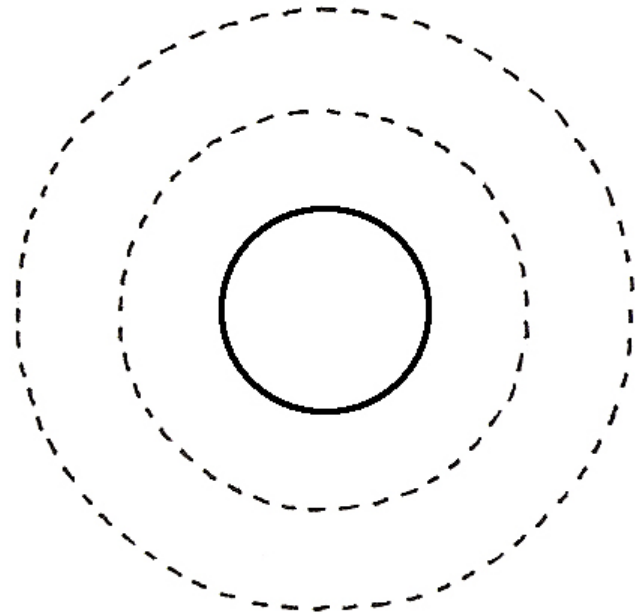
-One may suggest that it is because of the differing structures in the construal of selves of Japanese and Americans as represented in Fig. 7.

Figure 7. Structural construal of self  
in Japanese and Americans

Japanese



Americans



Ide (2012)

*To be read while showing Fig. 7*

*The construal of self in Japanese and Americans  
(Ide 2012)*

*-The set of figures is drawn intuitively based on the observation of linguistic practices in Japanese and Americans.*

*-At the center of both of the figures is a circle, which represents in both figures the individual ego.*

*-The difference is that the circle separating the Japanese ego from the first ring around is a dotted line, whereas the American one is a dark and continuous ring.*

Why are Japanese more likely to have shared domain of place in the egg model?

-This can be explained by the Japanese construal of self where the self is surrounded by dotted line.

-The dotted lines around the self stand for the ease of merging with others as illustrated by Figure 5, whereas the American construal of self is surrounded by dark solid line that does not easily merge as in Figure 6.



# Virtues of introducing *ba* theory in LP and language practice in general

- It gives a broader perspective on language practice.

- e.g. silence, non-verbal devices of communication, performance in the sub-conscious level, perception, corporeal/body level, covert communication

- It is in accord with modern scientific discoveries.

- e.g. quantum field physics, mirror neurons

## Concluding remark

- LP from the perspective of *ba* theory is NOT unique to Japanese, even though it is notably observed in the behavior of Japanese.

- Illustration from non-Japanese:

In corporate boardroom meetings around the world, participants spend most of their time listening to others.

- Ba* theory is NOT unique to Japanese phenomena, but it is universal.

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# Thank you!

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