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Thematic panel "Cultural Values and Language Practice: In Search of an Enriched Pragmatic Theory"

Title:
Why Japanese can't live without honorifics: The practice of modal expressions and the logic of *ba*

Abstract
When defining honorifics, Irvine (1995) states, 'Linguistic honorifics are forms of speech that signal social deference, through conventionalized understandings of some aspects(s) of the form-meaning relationship. ' This paper challenges this definition by attempting to clarify the utility of Japanese honorifics in the daily lives of native speakers. Honorifics play a crucial role in the spoken Japanese but their usage cannot be fully explained by Irvine's definition. The notion of *'ba'* must also be taken into account.

This presentation frames the practice of honorifics in Japanese society in terms of '*ba*', a semantic space which functions as the background philosophy of Japanese speech. Japanese speech is better understood in ontological rather than epistemological terms. An ontological understanding means that the speakers speak by situating themselves contextually rather than situating themselves to look at the speech event objectively. This framework presupposes the concept of '*ba,*' thus involving both the conversational participants and the context of speech. Because of this, the speakers must index themselves by the use of modal expressions that correspond to the context of their conversation. As there is no neutral copula in Japanese, no Japanese speech is made without modal expressions that index the context. Even a simple propositional sentence such as, 'Today is Saturday,' requires choosing to use or not use the addressee honorific '*desu.*'

This presentation will exemplify how the use and non-use of addressee honorifics is fundamental to providing the necessary context to natural conversation. The primary argument is that the theory of the '*ba*' is a useful and necessary device to make sense of what is happening in automatic indexing of honorifics in Japanese conversation.