

# The Mastering of the Da and Desu/Masu Forms in Spoken Japanese by Singaporean Learners of Japanese: Cultural Attitudes Toward Level of Politeness and Their Effect on Language

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**Abstract:** The research described in this paper was undertaken to find out why it is difficult for Singaporean learners to switch from one linguistic form to the other between the *da* and *desu/masu* forms when they converse in Japanese. It first makes a cross-cultural comparison of the ways politeness is perceived differently in the Japanese and Singaporean sociolinguistic systems of language use. This is done through the study of requests for a pen in Japanese and in Singaporean English, a method based on Hill et al. (1986).<sup>1</sup> The paper then looks at how the view of politeness in the native sociolinguistic milieu may affect the sentence-end switching between the *da* and *desu/masu* in the case of Singaporean learner's performance in Japanese conversations when encountering various changes in the level of addressee. To study this effect, this paper contrasts the learner's role-play conversations in situations where the addressee's level is the same but the language differs between English (the native language)<sup>2</sup> and Japanese (the foreign language). From the findings of this investigation, it is hoped that suggestions can be derived for classroom instruction in the Japanese language.

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<sup>1</sup> In this research, in order to compare views regarding politeness levels within the Japanese and American English sociolinguistic systems, a cross-cultural study of requests for a pen in the two languages was implemented. See the research for explanations on why the choice of "requests for a pen" was made over other possibilities.

<sup>2</sup> According to Altehenger-Smith (1987), approximately 85 percent of the pupils attending school in Singapore are taught in a language, English, that is not spoken at home. Since English may not be spoken at home although it is used as the academic medium, terming English as the native language of the Singaporean students therefore needs clarification. Though no doubt there are many Singaporeans, especially the younger generations, who have spoken English since birth, there are also others who pick it up in school, gradually master it and become most eloquent in it compared to all other languages they may know. As the latter case seems more befitting for the students who participated in the research, English as the native language thus means the language in which they can best express themselves.

## 1. Introduction

Switching from one linguistic form to the other between the *da* and *desu/masu* forms as the addressee situation changes is a common practice in Japanese conversations. Generally, the abrupt form of *da* is used when the speaker is talking to someone familiar and the polite form of *desu/masu* when the addressee is someone of a relatively higher social status than the speaker. While native Japanese speakers can easily perform this switch, the same task is not necessarily simple for non-native Japanese language learners.

The reason why it is important that the correct form be used at the correct time is because any inappropriate usage may well result in a communication breakdown between a speaker and an addressee, usually with a negative reflection on the speaker. For example, usage of the *da* form when speaking with the so-called *meue no hito* (people who are of a relatively higher social status than oneself) such as one's senior, professor, boss and so on, is considered rude within the Japanese sociolinguistic environment. On the other hand, the continual usage of *desu/masu* form among people of the same age or among colleagues who entered the company during the same season can also create an unpleasant atmosphere. Although non-native speakers may be excused inappropriate usage, one would still agree that correct usage leads to language proficiency.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that this switching from one linguistic form to the other between the *da* and *desu/masu* forms poses an acquisition problem for Singaporean learners of the Japanese language. According to some informal reports, Singaporean learners tend to use the wrong form at the wrong time. For example, some learners may use the *da* form instead of the *desu/masu* form when speaking to their academic advisor and yet others may use the *desu/masu* form instead of the *da* form when speaking to their friends. One possible explanation for such inappropriate usages lies within the question of how the Singaporean learner perceives politeness in his or her native language environment and how different this view is from that of the Japanese sociolinguistic system. For example, if the learner were to deem his or her academic professor as someone close (which is quite a deviation from the Japanese norm) within the native sociolinguistic environment and still hold to this view when speaking in Japanese, then it is very likely that the learner would end up using

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<sup>3</sup> Although there are possibilities such as the *desu/masu* form being used sporadically in an utterance in which there is a dominance of *da* form for purposes such as humor and sarcasm (cf. Haga: 1962) and abrupt utterances made within a *desu/masu* framework when the awareness of the "other", the "thou" momentarily lapses (cf. Maynard: 1991), such combinations do not reflect the norm. Generally, Japanese speakers adhere to the "rule of consistency in sentence-final forms (*bunmatsu ikkan no gennsoku*) as advocated by traditional prescriptivists and Japanese grammarians.

the abrupt form rather than the polite form when speaking with the academic professor. Such inappropriateness can therefore be the result of unsuitable language transfer, precisely sociopragmatic transfer, whereby learners fall back on their native language's sociocultural norms and sociolinguistic conventions in realizing speech acts in the target language (cf. Thomas: 1983, Wolfson: 1989, S. Takahashi: 1996).

## 2. Background

The concept of language transfer can be divided into **borrowing transfer** and **substratum transfer** (cf. Thomson and Kaufman: 1988). Borrowing transfer refers to the influence a second language has on a previously acquired language, usually one's native language, such as the appearance of English words in educated Malaysians' speech in Bahasa Malaysian.<sup>4</sup> Substratum transfer, on the other hand, involves the influence of a source language, typically one's native language, on the acquisition of a target language regardless of how many languages one already knows<sup>5</sup> (see for example, Schachter and Rutherford: 1979).<sup>6</sup> This latter case of transfer is similar to what Lado (1957) pointed out, **that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture – both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and culture as practiced by natives** (cited in Gass and Selinker 1983: 1).

Research so far has shown that substratum transfer occurs not only at the written level where culturally specific knowledge affects written work of learners, (see for example, Ibrahim: 1978,<sup>7</sup> Winfield and Barnes-Felfeli: 1982,<sup>8</sup> and Tannen: 1984),<sup>9</sup> but also at speech

<sup>4</sup> This type of language transfer, involving interviews of pop-stars, professors and so on, happens frequently on the television screen of Malaysian channels, which are readily observable in Singapore via satellite.

<sup>5</sup> However, as Odlin (1989: 12) cautions, not all cases of cross-linguistic influence can be neatly classified as borrowing or substratum transfer. Some cases (see for example, Thomason and Kaufman: 1988) suggest occurrence of both kinds of transfer while others, such as cases of young children learning two languages simultaneously (see for example Taeschner: 1983), show cross-linguistic influence which is considerably different from typical instances of borrowing or substratum transfer.

<sup>6</sup> This is a study in which Chinese and Japanese students' inappropriate uses of syntactic structures such as *There is* and *It is*, as in *There were many new patriots in my country gathered together and established a new country*, are analyzed as reflections of discourse influences from the Chinese and Japanese languages even though these languages do not have syntactic structures comparable to *There is* and *It is*.

production level where native language speech strategies are being employed for communication in the target language (see Kasper: 1992 for review of pragmatic transfer). For example, Beardsmore (1982) shows that in adult foreign language learning, learners develop coordinate linguistic codes with a single pragmatic system based on the native language. It is therefore probable that Singaporean Japanese language learners also rely on their native view of what is sociolinguistically appropriate towards various addressees in order to carry out their sentence-end performances in Japanese.

Although, as Long and Sato (1984) have stated, one cannot depend on an analysis of a *linguistic product* to yield meaningful insight into a *psycholinguistic process* such as language learning, teaching proposals based on empirical studies of learner and native speaker discourses as well as comparisons of L1 and L2 data have proved to be both sensible and effective (see for example for the teaching of L2 English, Holmes and Brown: 1987 on complimenting, and Rose: 1994 on requesting).

### 3. Review of Hill et al. (1986)

The study reported in Hill et al. (1986) was undertaken as an empirical investigation of certain aspects of linguistic politeness in Japanese and American English so that comparisons of sociolinguistic politeness in making requests in the two languages could be made based on the quantitative evidence obtained. By highlighting similar strategies and identifying different ones, the study hoped to provide statistical support for claims regarding politeness

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<sup>7</sup> This is a study of hypercorrections whereby Arabic speakers sometimes make ESL (English as a Second Language) spelling mistakes involving substitutions of the letter *b* for *p* as in *blaying* and also inappropriate use of *p* as in *hapit* in mistaken attempts to avoid *b/p* substitutions. Such corrections are regarded as overreactions to a particular influence from the native language.

<sup>8</sup> In this study, two groups of ESL students, Spanish and non-Spanish speaking, were asked to read paragraphs of about two hundred words and then write summaries of the paragraphs. One of the two paragraphs was about the Spanish classic *Don Quixote*, while the other was about the Japanese *Noh* theatre. The Spanish-speaking students were able to write longer descriptions of the *Quixote* paragraph than their non-Spanish-speaking counterparts though in other respects, there were no clear-cut differences between the two groups. It was thus concluded that cultural knowledge of the Spanish-speaking group, who were already familiar with *Don Quixote* but not the *Noh* theatre, must have contributed to their relative fluency.

<sup>9</sup> Tannen (1984) shows that Greek and American students produced rather different narrations about a short film that they had seen. While Greek students provided more details about possible social or psychological characteristics of the individuals seen in the film, the Americans provided more details about actions performed by the individuals and about filmmaking techniques. This difference in performance is attributed to their cultural differences.

within the two systems as well as to offer a deeper insight into cross-cultural (mis)-communications between Japanese and Americans.

According to Hill et al. (ibid.), politeness is defined as one of the constraints on human interaction, whose purpose is to consider others' feelings, establish levels of mutual comfort, and promote rapport.<sup>10</sup> Under this definition, a system for polite use of a particular language, as hypothesized by the authors, will thus exhibit two major aspects: the necessity for speaker **discernment** and the opportunity for speaker **volition**. Discernment,<sup>11</sup> the closest English substitute for the Japanese concept of *wakimae*, refers to the almost automatic adherence to socially agreed upon rules and applies to both verbal and non-verbal behavior. For example, within the Japanese sociolinguistic environment, if one wants to be considered "polite", s/he has to choose the correct linguistic form according to the setting of addressee situation and also to behave appropriately (such as bowing to someone of a higher social status and so on) as expected by the social norm. Ignorance or violation of the rules of discernment will offend others and hurt the speaker's social image. Consequently, it is very important that a learner of the Japanese language masters the social functions of sentence-end *da* and *desu/masu* forms and uses such linguistic forms appropriately. Volition, on the other hand, allows the speaker more freedom to choose according to his or her intention. Unlike discernment, the criteria defined by volition are, according to Hill et al. (ibid), optional from the standpoint of universal pragmatic strategy, and the standards by which they are employed differ from one sociolinguistic system to another.

Results of the study show that, when addressees are characterized in terms of occupation, status, relative age, degree of acquaintance with the speaker, the particular situation and so on, Japanese speakers show a very high agreement on the appropriate form(s) for making the request. On the other hand, the Americans show a more diffuse correlation between those particular person/situation features and the appropriate form(s) for making the request. The study therefore suggests that, while the discernment factor operates in both sociolinguistic systems, it plays a relatively greater part in the decision-making regarding which expression to use for the Japanese speakers than it does for American English speakers. Thus, although both the Americans and Japanese follow the same overall model of polite use of language, they differ in the weight assigned to the various factors subsumed under discernment and volition. Within the Singaporean sociolinguistic system where the volition factor seems to

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<sup>10</sup> This, according to the authors, is the affirmative view of politeness and once such conventions have been established, they can be manipulated for negative ends such as sarcasm or mockery.

<sup>11</sup> A capsule definition of *wakimae* would be "conforming to the expected norm". See Ide (1982) for a description of the function of *wakimae* within the Japanese sociolinguistic system.

prevail as in the American one, how well Singaporean learners of the Japanese language can adapt to the Japanese sociolinguistic system where rules of discernment take dominance is thus of interest.

#### 4. The Research Question

The problem under investigation is the question why it seems to be difficult for Singaporean learners to switch from one linguistic form to the other between the abrupt *da* and polite *desu/masu* forms in their spoken Japanese according to changes in addressee situation. This paper looks at one possible explanation, which is the influence of the learner's view of the level of politeness appropriate towards various addressees within the sociolinguistic milieu of the native language on his or her Japanese speech. It assumes a possible reliance on this view of politeness on the part of the learner even when s/he is engaged in Japanese conversations with an addressee. The hypothesis assumed is that if the Singaporean learner's view of politeness towards a certain social group within the native sociolinguistic context coincides with that of the Japanese people within the Japanese sociolinguistic context, then s/he will have no problem in using the appropriate linguistic form when speaking in Japanese to that same social group of people. However, if the learner's view of politeness towards a particular social group differs from that of the Japanese people, then s/he will have difficulty in using the appropriate linguistic form when speaking to that particular group.

According to this paper, “**the learner's view of politeness towards various levels of addressees**”, can also be restated as “**the learner's sociolinguistic schema of interpersonal communication**”. This schema of interpersonal communication consists of four frameworks of perception of the relationship between speaker and hearer: that of perception of social distance between speaker and hearer, (D); perception of their relative power, (P), or their relative authority (A); and perception of ranking of imposition (a culturally and situationally defined ranking of impositions by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent's wants of self-determination or of approval), (R) (cf. Brown and Levinson: 1978, Leech: 1983). These frameworks of perception of D, P or A, and R will serve as guides for politeness as a speaker carries out his or her speech and behavior in a particular sociolinguistic milieu. This paper is therefore interested in how this sociolinguistic schema of interpersonal communication, in other words, view of politeness in the native sociolinguistic environment

may affect the Singaporean learner's *da-desu/masu* performance during Japanese conversations.

## 5. Method

Firstly, in order to obtain quantitative evidence as a basis for comparing sociolinguistic politeness in Japanese and Singaporean English, a total of sixty-five students<sup>12</sup> of different majors from the National University of Singapore were approached at random and asked to fill out a three-part questionnaire as shown in Appendix One. This questionnaire was devised and used by Hill et al. (1986) to find out certain aspects of linguistic politeness in Japanese and American English and has been slightly modified to suit the Singaporean sociolinguistic context. Part One of the questionnaire requires the participants to rate the politeness, according to a five-point scale, of a list of expressions commonly used for making a request for a pen. The least formal expression represents a 1 and the most formal represents a 5. Part Two of the questionnaire requires the participants to gauge the distance they perceived between themselves and certain categories of people in typical situations, again, according to a five-point scale. The **perceived distance** (PD), as defined by Hill et al. (ibid.), is the distance perceived by a speaker to exist between the self and a particular addressee in a particular situation. PD has been introduced as a measurable abstract concept for politeness, since Hill et al. (ibid.) deem politeness as a matter of relative distance between people involved in interaction. The logic given is that the speaker-addressee relationship will be helped to operate smoothly when an appropriate degree of distance is marked by the use of the proper strategy. This PD is in turn indirectly measured by the degree of inhibition or carefulness attributed by a speaker towards specific expressions and people. Even though PD is designed to measure all three factors of D, P, and R, the imposition factor R is kept constant by the focus on politeness of requests for a pen so as to reduce the number of variables. The findings obtained from these two parts of the questionnaire will therefore provide us with outlines of Singaporeans' views concerning politeness. These findings are then compared with outlines of the Japanese views regarding politeness, which were the findings obtained from Hill et al. (ibid.) (see Figure 1 and 2).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The group of 65 students consists of 47 females and 18 males. The age of these students ranged from 18 to 25 years ( $M = 23.35$  years).

<sup>13</sup> Although there is a gap of more than a decade between the research results of Hill et al. and the present, a pilot test of twenty-six Japanese students shows no significant change in their judgment of

Secondly, in order to see how the schemata of interpersonal communication in the native language will affect Singaporean learners' spoken Japanese, a case study of three Japanese language major students who had taken part in filling out the questionnaire was made. These three students were asked to converse in English on some topic and then in Japanese on the same topic with the same interlocutor (see Appendix Two). Their conversations were taped and analyzed according to the degree of politeness reflected in the expressions used in the English conversations, and in the Japanese conversations. By comparing politeness strategies employed in both English and Japanese conversations, the transfer of views concerning politeness from English to Japanese can therefore be pinpointed.

## 6. Discussion of Results

### 6.1. Quantitative Evidence Obtained from Questionnaire Findings

The average score of each request expression evaluated by the sixty-five Singaporean participants is calculated and taken to be the representative politeness ranking of that expression. Figure 1 below shows the contrast between Japanese and Singaporean English in the ranking of politeness of request forms. The politeness ranking of Japanese on the left is the result of the research of Hill et al (1986) while that of Singaporean English on the right is the finding of this paper. Although Singaporean English has its range of politeness, Figure 1 shows that the highest rank of politeness stops at approximately 4.5 while that of Japanese marks a 5. This suggests that when politeness is most called for in the Singaporean sociolinguistic system, expressions that Singaporean English speakers may use lack the politeness that the most polite Japanese expressions embody in the Japanese sociolinguistic system.

Figure 2, on the other hand, shows the ranking of politeness of the person/situation categories of the two countries, Japan on the left and Singapore on the right. Again, the average score of each person/situation evaluated is calculated and taken as the representative politeness ranking of that category. Figure 2 depicts no significant differences in politeness ranking of most of the person/situation categories between the two countries except for the category of "close friend". For Japan, the category of "close friend" is within the range of 1 ~ 2, whereas for Singapore the same category falls within the range of 2 ~ 3. This

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politeness. Also, since the 1986 research involved more than five hundred Japanese students, it can be assumed that the rankings of Hill et al. are highly reliable.



suggests that while Japanese people may be least formal and most relaxed when speaking with their close friends, Singaporeans may still maintain a certain degree of formality when speaking with their close friends. If it is the case that Singaporean learners remain quite formal when speaking in English to a close friend and a transfer were to take place when they speak in Japanese to the same category of person, it is likely that they will end up using the *desu/masu* form rather than the abrupt *da* form when engaging in speeches with their close Japanese friends. Since usage of abrupt *da* form when speaking to close friends is the norm within the Japanese sociolinguistic milieu, the position of this paper is that the use of *desu/masu* form with close Japanese friends is what leads others to consider the language use unnatural and the result of non-proficiency in the language.

## 6.2. Findings of Conversation Recordings

Appendix Two contains the transcripts of various role-play conversations carried out by the three students mentioned above. Those conversations were first done in English and then in Japanese without any breaks in between. The purpose of not allowing a break was to encourage impromptu speeches as much as possible from the students and also to prevent pre-rehearsed Japanese expressions from being included in the conversations. There was no sign that the students were nervous during recording. In fact, they appeared relaxed and seemed to enjoy their roles as they laughed out loud together with the examiner when something being said sounded funny. Thus we can safely rule out the possibility that any inability to use the correct linguistic form is due to nervousness or psychological pressure of facing the examiner and having their voice recorded.

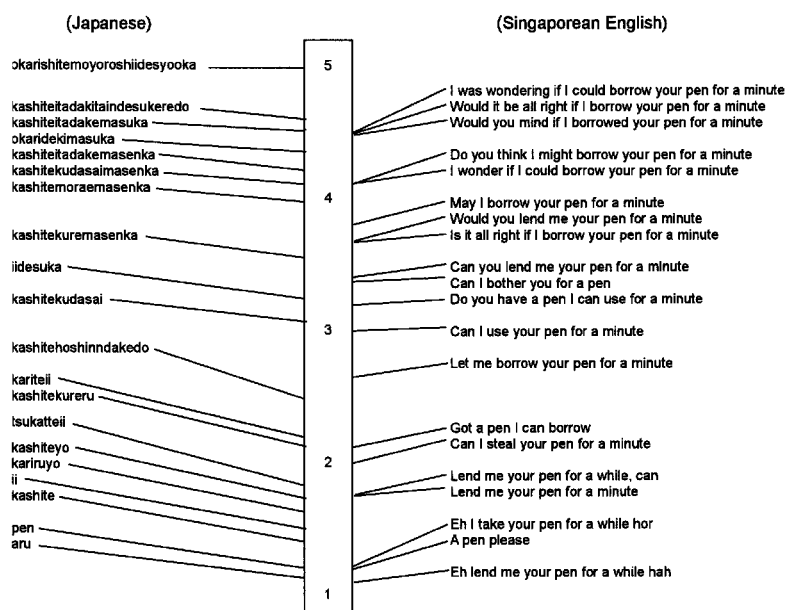


Figure 1: Ranking of politeness of request forms, constituting a part of the sociolinguistic schemata of interpersonal communication.

Glosses for the Japanese forms in figure 1 as given in Hill et al. (1986):

<i>aru</i>	'is (there)'
<i>pen</i>	'pen'
<i>kashi-te</i>	<i>kashi-</i> = 'lend', <i>te</i> = progressive aspect
<i>ii</i>	'(is it) all right'
<i>kariru-yo</i>	<i>kariru</i> = 'borrow', <i>yo</i> = confirmatory particle
<i>tsukat-</i>	'use'
<i>kureru</i>	'let me'
<i>hoshii</i>	'(I) want'
<i>da-ke(re)do</i>	<i>da</i> = copula, <i>ke(re)do</i> = 'but'
<i>kudasai</i>	imperative of <i>kudasaru</i> , the honorific humble form of <i>kureru</i>
<i>desu-ka</i>	<i>desu</i> = formal form of <i>da</i> , <i>ka</i> = question particle
<i>-masen</i>	<i>-mas-</i> = formal auxiliary, <i>-en-</i> = negative
<i>morae-</i>	'you hand down to do'
<i>itadake-</i>	honorific humble form of <i>morae-</i> 'I humbly receive'
<i>o-</i>	honorific prefix
<i>deki-</i>	'be able'
<i>-tai-</i>	'wish'

# The Mastering of the Da and Desu/Masu Forms in Spoken Japanese

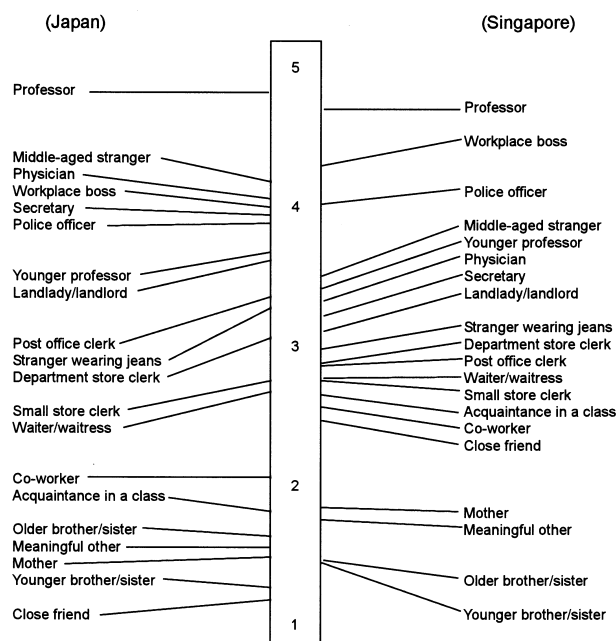


Figure 2: Ranking of politeness of person/situation categories, constituting yet another part of the sociolinguistic schemata of interpersonal communication.

Conversation Type One is a role-play situation in which student A, acting as a worker, is having a conversation with the examiner, acting as the boss, in the company lounge or canteen. The English conversation shows that student A was rather polite to the supposed “boss” as is evident from expressions like “*You like me to get any drinks for you?*” and “*I think I can accept*”. Although volitional choices such as “*So what can I get for you?*” and a couple of “okay” expressions did appear as a result of the casual atmosphere, one would agree that the formality of the conversation had not been upset. The Japanese conversation, too, reflects formality and politeness towards the “*shachoo*” (workplace boss),<sup>14</sup> with honorific expressions and the expected *desu/masu* form being employed by student A. When Figure 2 is referred to, it is observed that the politeness ranking of “work place boss” for

<sup>14</sup> The Japanese word “*shachoo*” and the word “boss” are deemed as equivalents in this paper, although the former may suggest a higher social status than the latter.

both Japan and Singapore is within the range of 4 ~ 5. Thus, the argument is that since student A has to be polite when speaking with the boss even in her native language, it becomes easier for her to maintain the same formality when engaged in the same situation with her Japanese boss.

Conversation Type Two is a role-play situation in which students B and C were to ask their professor, acted by the examiner, for a deadline extension for their essay. The English conversation, as evident from expressions such as “*There is something we would like to discuss with you*”, “*If it is possible, we just hope to...*” and so on, shows that students B and C were formal and polite in their choice of words as they spoke to their professor. The Japanese conversation, with honorific and polite expressions like “*go-soodan*” (versus “*soodan*”), “*yoroshii desu ka*” (versus “*ii desu ka*”, “*ii*”), “*sumimashita*” (versus “*sunda*”) and so on, too shows formality and politeness towards the sensei. Again, the argument is that since the ranking of politeness towards the category of “professor” is the same as the Japanese view, this lets the Singaporean learners maintain the same formality and thus use polite Japanese in their conversation with the sensei.

Conversation Type Three is a role-play situation that requires students B and C to speak to someone of a higher status and also to communicate between themselves. Students B and C were assumed to be close friends working in the same company and the examiner, the boss. Even though there were a few casual “okay” remarks throughout the English conversation, probably again because of the relaxed setting, expressions like “*Shall we go for a cup of tea?*”, “*Boss, would you like to have some sugar?*” and so on suggest that the students were formal and polite to their supposed boss. Similarly, the Japanese conversation also shows formality and politeness towards the *shachoo* as shown by expressions such as “*ikagadeshoo ka*” (versus “*doodeshoo ka*”, “*doodesu ka*”, “*doo*”) and “*shooshoo omachikudasai*” (versus “*chotto mattekudasai*”, “*chotto matte*”). The results thus substantiate the conclusion made about the students being able to use the Japanese linguistic forms correctly due to transfer of politeness view from the native language.

On the other hand, because both students were rather polite to each other even while they were conversing in English, difficulty in using the appropriate *da* form in Japanese is therefore expected if the same line of argument as the above is followed. Judging from the politeness ranking depicted by Figure 1, their English conversation shows that the expressions used, such as “*Would you like to have a cup of tea?*”, “*Can you pass the sugar please?*” and so on, would most likely rank between 3 and 4 on the politeness scale. Perhaps consequently as mentioned earlier, their Japanese speech with each other was that of a

polite *desu/masu* form. However, one may argue that their politeness towards each other could be attributed to the presence of the boss. Hence the next conversation had the two students speaking with each other without a third party involved.

Conversation Type Four is a dialogue between students B and C role-playing close friends in the university with the classroom as the setting. The English dialogue reveals a greater formality on the part of student B compared to C: student B did not use Singlish<sup>15</sup> in her speech whereas C did; in addition, repetitious utterances such as “*Sort of lah*,<sup>16</sup> *sort of lah*” and “What? What?” produced by student C suggest informality towards her close friend. Because of this, it is anticipated that student C’s Japanese speech performance will be better than that of B. The two Japanese dialogues indeed prove so, with student C showing a greater competency in using the *da* form compared to student B. Student B’s first conversation with her friend in Japanese was in the *desu/masu* form and although she did try to use the *da* form in the second conversation, she tended to revert to the *desu/masu* form. Student C, on the other hand, used the *da* form throughout both dialogues. Since both students had been exposed to the same kind of teaching method and had learnt the Japanese language for the same period of time, one possible reason to account for such performance differences is therefore what has been argued in this paper: politeness ratings within the native sociolinguistic milieu has affected the students’ Japanese speech performance.

## 8. Conclusions and Implications of the Study

The conversation evidence thus confirms the prediction made about the effects of the learner’s politeness ratings on the acquisition of Japanese speech. Therefore, one possible conclusion which can be made, is that when the learner’s view of politeness towards a certain group of people within the native sociolinguistic context coincides with that of the Japanese people, s/he will be able to use the appropriate linguistic form of native Japanese speakers when speaking to that particular group in Japanese (as in the case of students A, B and C speaking with the *shachoo* and *sensei*). However, when the view of politeness

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<sup>15</sup> Singlish is usually referred to as sub-standard English used in Singapore. In Singlish, sentences are mixed with various Chinese dialects and Malay, thereby reducing its intelligibility for English speakers outside the Singaporean culture.

<sup>16</sup> In Singlish, “*lah*” is a particle of various pragmatic functions, such as an expression of frustration, reluctance and so on.

differs, then difficulty in using the appropriate form according to the addressee situation will arise (as in the case of student B speaking with her close friend).

The study indicates that when teaching Japanese to Singaporean learners, instructors should stress upon the difference in the perception of politeness between the Singaporean and Japanese sociolinguistic systems. The study suggests that language instructors should examine the learner's individual style of speaking in the native language so that native influences on the acquisition of the new foreign language may be utilized where they are beneficial, and minimized where they are obstructive. It is thus a merit to have bilingual language instructors, for by knowing both the native and foreign language, they know the similarities and differences between the two linguistic systems and are thereby able to impart them to their students.

In addition, the study also implies that future research should focus on the relationship between politeness and interpersonal distance and such relationship differences in English and in Japanese. This is because while the *desu/masu* form of Japanese seems to mark distance and space between speaker and addressee as described by Hori (1985), English expressions such as "Would you like to have a cup of tea?" sometimes seem to mark politeness more than speaker-addressee distance. Although this study has been conducted based on the equation of politeness with the perceived distance that exists between a speaker and an addressee, such an equation cannot explain cases of, for example, a wife's usage of very polite forms towards her husband in English. Factors, other than the politeness factor, such as the individual's way of speaking, the way s/he has been taught to socialize and so on, need to be taken into account for such performances.

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## The Mastering of the Da and Desu/Masu Forms in Spoken Japanese

### Appendix One

#### Questionnaire

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex: \_\_\_\_\_ Majors: \_\_\_\_\_  
 GCE"A" Level Score For English: \_\_\_\_\_, Chinese: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Japanese Language Proficiency Test: Pass Level (Circle the appropriate number: One, Two, Three, Four)  
 Home Country (if not Singaporean citizen): \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part One

1. Suppose that someone with whom you are interacting has a pen that you want to borrow. Below is a list of expressions you might use in such a situation. If there are any expressions on the list, which you would NOT use under ordinary circumstances, please cross them out, e.g.: ~~Your pen or your life.~~

- a. Can you lend me your pen for a minute?
- b. I was wondering if I could borrow your pen for a minute.
- c. Would you lend me your pen for a minute?
- d. Do you have a pen I can use for a minute?
- e. Lend me your pen for a while, can?
- f. Let me borrow your pen for a minute.
- g. May I borrow your pen for a minute?
- h. Can I bother you for a pen?
- i. Would you mind if I borrowed your pen for a minute?
- j. Can I use Your pen for a minute.
- k. Do you think I might borrow your pen for a minute?
- l. Eh I take your pen for a while hor?
- m. Lend me your pen for a minute.
- n. Can I steal your pen for a minute?
- o. I wonder if I could borrow your pen for a minute.
- p. Would it be all right if I borrow your pen for a minute?
- q. Got a pen I can borrow?
- r. Is it all right if I borrow your pen for a minute?
- s. Eh lend me your pen for a while hah.
- t. A pen please!

PLEASE IGNORE THIS BOX UNTIL  
YOU REACH QUESTION 4

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

2. Of the expressions now left on the list, which one do you think you would be most likely to use when you were being most careful in your speech and behavior? Please write its letter in the bracket: ( )

3. Of the expressions now left on the list, which one do you think you would be most likely to use when you were being most uninhibited (relaxed) in your speech and behavior? Please write its letter in the bracket: ( )

4. If we have a scale of 1 to 5, the expression you chose as "most careful" represents a 5, and the one you chose as "most uninhibited" represents a 1.

With this scale in mind, please refer back to question 1. Examine each expression, which you have not crossed out and rate its rank on the scale from "uninhibited" to "careful"(1,2,3,4,5). Circle the appropriate number on the scale at the right of the expression.

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**Part Two**

5. Below is a list of people and situations. If there are any on the list totally foreign to your experience, cross them out. e.g. ~~The Queen of England, behind you in a supermarket line.~~

- A. The professor who is your academic advisor, in his/her office.
- B. A middle-aged, well-dressed stranger standing behind you in line at the bank.
- C. A physician in his/her office, after an examination.
- D. A clerk in large department store.
- E. Your current landlady/landlord presenting a lease for renewal.
- F. A stranger wearing faded-blue jeans, standing behind you in line at the bank.
- G. A city police officer issuing you a parking ticket which you know you deserve.
- H. Your department secretary giving you an appointment with a professor.
- I. A clerk in a small store at which you shop regularly.
- J. A younger brother/sister with whom you are talking at home.
- K. A younger professor with whom you have a small class, who is sitting with you in the department lounge.
- L. A person who works with you at your regular/part time job.
- M. A waiter/waitress at the place where you go most often to have coffee.
- N. Your workplace supervisor/boss on the job.
- O. An older brother/sister with whom you are talking at home.
- P. An acquaintance in a small class you attend, while you are waiting for class to begin.
- Q. A clerk in a post office.
- R. Your "meaningful other" (spouse, lover, etc.) talking in your room/apartment.
- S. Your mother with whom you are talking at home.
- T. Your close friends

PLEASE IGNORE THIS BOX UNTIL  
YOU REACH QUESTION 4

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
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1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

6. Of the people left on the list in the situations given, towards whom would you be most careful in your behavior? Please put the letter representing that person in the bracket: ( )

7. Of the people left on the situations given, towards whom would you be most uninhibited (most relaxed) in your behavior? Please put the letter representing that person in the bracket: ( )

8. On this scale from 1 to 5, the person to whom your attitude is "most careful" represents 5:

uninhibited <-----> careful  
1 2 3 4 5

The person to whom your attitude is "most uninhibited" (most relaxed) is a 1 on the same scale.

With this scale in mind, refer back to the people listed in Question 5 whom you have not crossed out. Imagine yourself dealing with those people in those situations, with no one else listening to the conversation. Rate how careful/uninhibited you would be.

If you deal with a number of different individuals in one of the people-categories (for example, you may be relaxed with some co-workers and careful with others), your answer may cover a range. In such cases, indicate the range thus: 1 (2 3 4) 5

On the other hand, many of your answers may be represented by a single point on the scale. In such cases, circle that point. 1 2 ③ 4 5

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### Part Three

Suppose you want to borrow a pen from the people listed below. In each situation given, imagine that the pen is nearby and visible to both of you (e.g. on the desk, in a shirt pocket etc.).

The following is a list of expressions you might use in such situations. For each person, please choose the expression(s) you think you would be MOST LIKELY to use and write the appropriate letter(s) in the bracket provided.

Cross out any category with which you have no contact.

#### List of Expressions

- a.Can you lend me your pen for a minute?
- b.I was wondering if I could borrow your pen for a minute.
- c.Would you lend me your pen for a minute?
- d.Do you have a pen I can use for a minute?
- e.Lend me your pen for a while , can?
- f.Let me borrow your pen for a minute.
- g.May I borrow your pen for a minute?
- h.Can I bother you for a pen?
- i.Would you mind if I borrowed your pen for a minute?
- j.Can I use your pen for a minute?
- k.Do you think I might borrow your pen for a minute?
- l.Eh I take your pen for a while hor?
- m.Lend me your pen for a minute.
- n.Can I steal your pen for a minute?
- o.I wonder if I could borrow your pen for a minute.
- p.Would it be all right if I borrowed your pen for a minute?
- q.Got a pen I can borrow?
- r.Is it all right if I borrow your pen for a minute?
- s.Eh lend me your pen for a while hah.
- t.A pen please!

- A stranger wearing faded-blue jeans standing behind you in line at the bank. ( )
- A clerk in a small store at which you shop regularly. ( )
- A person who works with you at your regular/part-time job.( )
- Your workplace supervisor/boss on the job. ( )
- An acquaintance in a small class you attend, while you are waiting for class to begin. ( )
- Your mother with whom you are talking at home. ( )
- A physician in his/her office, after an examination. ( )
- A clerk in a post office. ( )
- The professor who is your academic advisor in his/her office. ( )
- An older brother/sister with whom you are talking at home. ( )
- Your current landlady/landlord presenting a lease for renewal. ( )
- A middle-aged, well-dressed stranger standing behind you in line at the bank. ( )
- Your "meaningful other"(spouse, lover, etc.),talking in your room/apartment. ( )
- A city police officer issuing you a parking ticket which you know you deserve. ( )
- A clerk in a large department store. ( )
- A younger professor with whom you have a small class, who is sitting with you in the department lounge. ( )
- A waiter/waitress at the place where you go most often to have coffee. ( )
- Your department secretary giving you an appointment with a professor. ( )
- A younger brother/sister with whom you are talking at home. ( )

#### Glossary

- Eh* a particle used in Singlish for getting attention from the addressee. (informal)
- Hor* a question-end particle in Singlish, meaning "Is it all right?". (informal)
- Hah* a sentence-end particle in Singlish, used for emphasizing what has been previously said. (informal)

## Appendix Two

### The Conversation Recordings

#### 1. Conversation Type One

Setting: A role-play situation where student A, Mary, pretended to be the worker (W) and the examiner, the boss, (B). Student A was told to imagine that the boss and she were in the lounge or the canteen of the company.

##### 1.1. English Conversation

B: Hi Mary would you like to sit together?

W: Hi okay.

B: So how's work recently?

W: Recently? Fine for me but except a bit busy.

B: A bit busy.....

W: Probably because I'm new, so got a lot more to learn.

B: Ah.....so can you get used to the company's way of doing things?

W: I think I can accept.

B: Mhmm..... how are you enjoying the work here?

W: The work?... It's challenging... the kind of job I'm looking for.

B: Good. Do you want anything to eat?

W: Oh yah, sure.

Laughter

W: So what can I get for you?

B: Maybe you get me some curry puffs.

W: Okay.

B: Are you thirsty?

W: Oh yah. You like me to get any drinks for you?

B: Okay, maybe you get ice-lemon tea for me.

W: Sure.

##### 1.2. Japanese conversation

B: Mary-san issho-ni suwarimashoo ka? (formal)

*together sit let's Q*

W: A, hai.

*oh yes*

B: Dodesu ka kono kaisha wa? (formal)

*how about Q this company T*

W: Kono kaisha? mm.....(laughter) ii to omoimasu. (formal)

*this company good QM (I)think*

B: (Laughter)... kochira no shigoto ni moo nareteirundesu ka? (formal)

*here L work IO already get used to Q*

W: Hai, \*jikan(jikan ga tatsu) ni-tsurete suki ni-narimashita. (formal)

*yes time L pass bring together like became*

B: Soodesu-ka. Ano..... ja... mazu nani-ka tabemashoo ka? (formal)

*is that right Well in that case first something eat let's Q*

W: Hai.

*yes*

B: Dore ni surundesu ka. (formal)

*which IO choose Q*

W: Shachoo-san wa nani o meshiagarimasu ka? (honorific)

*boss T what DO eat Q*

B: Watashi? Ja "curry puffs" ni shimasu. (formal)

*I right IO choose*

W: O-nomimono wa? (honorific)

*drinks how about*

B: Watashi wa ...soodesu-ne...ocha o kudasai. Ocha ga hoshindesu. (formal)

*I T well tea DO give (me) tea S (I) want*

W: Hai kashikomarimashita. (honorific)

*yes understood*

#### 2. Conversation Type Two

Setting: A role-play situation where students B and C, Rose (R) and Kaye (K) respectively, were trying to ask their professor (P), the examiner, for an extension of the deadline for their essay.

##### 2.1. English Conversation

Knock on the door.

P: Come in.

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R: Professor X, there is something we would like to discuss with you.  
P: Yes?  
K: Well, the essay that you have given us to do...mm... the deadline is this Friday, right?  
P: Yes.....  
K: But because we have difficulties looking for the materials...they are all taken up in the RBR(1)...  
R: And so we are asking for an extension of the deadline. Is it possible?  
P: But you should have started earlier.  
K: Yes but it just happened that we were in the same group for our language module and we were busy on the project that Dr. Z has given us so that's why we have to start until now.  
R: If it is possible we just hope to have an extension of about two days. We are very sure that we can finish the work within two days.  
P: Okay.

(1). RBR stands for Recommended Book Reference

### 2.2. Japanese Conversation

R: Sensei chotto go-soodan shitai koto ga arundesu ga. (honorific)  
*Professor a little consultation want to do something S is however*  
P: Hai nandeshoo? (formal)  
*yes what is it*  
K: Ano... jitsu wa watashitachi no ronbun no shimekiri wa konshuu no  
*well actually T we L report L deadline T this week L*  
kinyoobi desu ne. Ano... sensei chotto..... (formal)  
*Friday BE P well professor a little*  
R: Ronbun wa mada \*dekinaidesu(dekiteinaidesu) ga... ano...chotto futsuka-kan (formal)  
*report T not yet ready however well a little 2 days' time*  
enkishite-itadakitai to omoimasu ga, yoroshiidesu ka? (honorific)  
*extend (I)humbly want to receive QM (I)think but is it all right Q*  
P: Soodesu-ka? Dooshite konnani osoi desu ka? (formal)  
*really why this late BE Q*  
K: Ano... jitsu wa watashitachi wa 302 no onaji purojekuto \*ni(o) shita kara  
*well actually T we T L same project DO did because*  
ano...kino made \*ni(-) sumimashita. Dakara kyo... hajimete toshokan  
*well yesterday until finished that is why today for the first time library*  
e iku to... shiryoo-hon wa... zenbu moo nakunatte-shimaimashita (formal)  
*PP go when reference books T all already gone done with*  
R: Moo hoka no gakusei ga karita node, futsuka-kan dake enkishite-kudasaimasen ka. (honorific)  
*already other L students S borrowed for 2 days' time only extend won't you please let me Q*  
P: Hai wakaimashita. lidesu yo. (formal)  
*yes understood all right P*  
R and K: Arigatogozaimashita. (formal)  
*thank you*

### 3. Conversation Type Three

Setting: A role-play situation where students B and C, Rose(R) and Kaye(K) respectively, pretended to be the workers and the examiner, the boss, (B). Student B was told to invite both her colleague and boss for a drink. Students B and C were supposed to be close friends.

#### 3.1. English Conversation

R: Kaye would you like to have a cup of tea?  
K: Oh okay.  
R: How about you Shachoo(2)? Shall we go for a cup of tea together?  
B: Okay.  
R (to the boss): Where would you like to go?  
B: The canteen?  
R: The canteen would be fine. Okay then let's go.  
All three: Yeah, let's go.  
B: Shall we sit here?  
R: Mmm... don't you think it's a bit hot? Why not over there?  
B: Yeah, sure.  
K: Okay.  
R: It's windy over there.....  
R (to Kaye): I would like to have tea, what do you want?  
K: Black coffee.  
R: How about you Shachoo?  
B: Err... Ice-lemon tea.  
R: Ice tea and black coffee. I'll be back in a minute.

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K: Thank you.  
 R: Shachoo here's your ice tea and (to Kaye) your black coffee.  
 Both B and K: Thank you.  
 K: Can you pass the sugar, please?  
 R: Sure no problem.  
 K: Boss, would you like to have some sugar?  
 B: Sugar?  
 R: Sugar for ice-tea?  
 B: Maybe there's already sugar inside. Thank you.  
 Laughter.

(2). Shachoo: the Japanese equivalent for "boss"

### 3.2. Japanese Conversation

K: Shachoo-san, ano ocha ippai ikagadeshoo ka? (formal)  
*boss well tea a cup how about Q*  
 B: Ee iidesu yo. (formal)  
*yes all right P*  
 K: Rose-san wa?  
*how about (you)*  
 R: Iidesu yo. (formal)  
*all right P*  
 K: Issho-ni ikima-shoo. (formal)  
*together go let's*  
 B: Ee ikima-shoo. (formal)  
*yes go let's*  
 K (to the boss): Kochira de iidesu ka? (formal)  
*here with all right Q*  
 B: Ee iidesu yo. (formal)  
*yes all right P*  
 K: Ano Shachoo-san wa nani-ka ikagadeshoo ka? (formal)  
*well boss T what is good Q*  
 B: Watashi? Eto... ja aisu-remon tii o kudasai. (formal)  
*me mmm right ice-lemon tea DO please give(me)*  
 K: Hai wakarimashita. Rose wa? (formal)  
*yes understood how about you*  
 R: Mmm... watashi wa ocha to omoimasu. (formal)  
*I T tea QM think*  
 K: Hai shooshoo omachikudasai. (honorific)  
*yes a little please wait*  
 K: Hai doozo.  
*right here you are*  
 B: Sumimasen. (formal)  
*thank you*  
 R: Arigatogozaimasu. (formal)  
*thank you*  
 K: Itadakimasu.  
*I humbly receive (this food)*  
 B and R: Itadakimasu.  
*I humbly receive (this food)*

### 4. Conversation Type Four

Setting: A role-play situation where students B and C, Rose(R) and Kaye(K) respectively, acted as close friends. The conversation took place in the classroom and centered around the application of the Monbusho scholarship.

#### 4.1. English Conversation

R: Kaye...  
 K: What? What?  
 R: Has your reply from Monbusho come?  
 K: Ah... Monbusho. No... probably I think I wasn't offered the scholarship.  
 R: Mmm..... don't be so disappointed. Probably you would be offered.....but imagine going to Okinawa for a year of studies, wouldn't that be fun?  
 K: Yah, I'll think so and Okinawa's weather is much more similar to Singapore.  
 R: Yah, similar but cooler not that hot.  
 K: Yes yes and they even have four seasons, so I can see the maple leaves turning red too.  
 R: They have four seasons?  
 K: Sort of lah, sort of lah.  
 R: What are you gonna do in Okinawa if you are offered?

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K: What am I gonna do? Probably I'm gonna do the Japanese language 'cos I'm not so good in the cultural aspects, so yah probably I'll just major in the Japanese language and I heard that err.....mm studying Japanese is much more relaxing so maybe I might go and learn how to drive.  
 R: Drive? You mean you can do that in Okinawa?  
 K: Yah, I think so, yah I've heard of foreigners yah learning to drive there.  
 R: Oh okay mmm.....  
 K: And I heard Okinawa's roads are not so flat, so... if you try to walk... like you do in Singapore, you're going to do a lot of hr...hr...hr... panting, so yah... probably... I hope if I'll really get the scholarship, maybe I'll try to use a portion of it to ha...ha... buy a car ha...ha...ha...  
 R: Buy a car?  
 K: Yes!  
 R: In Japan?  
 K: It's much cheaper, you know?  
 R: What about bringing it back to Singapore?  
 K: Oh I'll just sell it. Never thought of bringing it back anyway.  
 R: Oh I see.  
 K: It's just for a year's use.  
 R: Okay, so good luck to you.  
 K: Thank you.

### 4.2. Japanese Conversation

R: Kaye konnichiwa

*hello*

K: Konnichiwa

*hello*

R: Monbusho no shoogakukin wa doodeshita ka? (formal)

*ministry of education*

*L scholarship*

*T how was it*

*Q*

K: Tabun damedatta. (informal)

*probably unsuccessful*

### 4.3. Japanese Conversation

Setting: A similar role-play situation as 4.1, and the conversation was also centered around the Monbusho scholarship except that in this case, student C was the inquirer and B was the one who applied for the scholarship.

K: Rose...

R: Hai.

*yes*

K: Ano...shoogakukin wa doo? (informal)

*well scholarship T how is it*

R: Mmm... mada wakaranai, mada henji wa konai \*ga (no). (informal)

*not yet (I)do not know not yet reply T does not come P*

K: Junbi wa doo? (informal)

*preparation T how is it*

R: Amari junbi shiteinai. (informal)

*not really preparation not be doing*

K: Ano... sorede nani \*ga(o) benkyoo suru tsumori? (informal)

*well and then what DO study do plan*

R: Tabun nihongo o benkyooshi-tsuzukeru to omoimasu. (formal)

*probably Japanese DO study continue QM (I)think*

K: Sonoue?

*In addition to that*

R: Okinawa ni-tsuite no bunka toka rekishi nado o benkyoo shitai to omoimasu. (formal)

*about L culture or history or the like DO study want to QM (I)think*

K: \*Omoshiroi-soo (omoshiro-soo) ne. (informal)

*interesting seems P*

R: Tabun ne. (informal)

*probably P*

K: Okinawa wa nihon no doko? (informal)

*T Japan L where*

R: Soodesu-ne. Nihon no zutto minami desu. (formal)

*right Japan L all the way south BE*

K: Aa...ano... tenki (kikoo) wa ii (yo) ne. (informal)

*oh well climate T good P P*

R: Ii to omoimasu. Tabun shingapooru to onaji gurai to omou. (formal, informal)

*good QM (I)think probably Singapore as same about QM (I)think*

**Abbreviations used in glossing the Japanese conversations.**

A	adjectival marker
AD	adverbial marker
BE	various forms of copulative verb "be"
DO	direct object marker
IO	indirect object marker
L	linking nominal (cf. Maynard, 1991)
P	interactional particle
PP	prepositional marker
Q	question marker
QM	quotative marker
S	subject marker
T	theme marker

\* marks ungrammaticality whereas () encloses the grammatical form.