

Politeness in Sign Expressions: A Comparison of English, German, and Japanese

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is twofold: (1) to compare functionally equivalent English, German, and Japanese sign expressions in public spaces with respect to politeness and (2) to reveal whether and how politeness is formulated in sign expressions in each language in relation to explicitness. A total of 208 Japanese and 198 German sign expressions were collected through fieldwork. Among them, 35 functionally equivalent correspondence pairs between the two languages were confirmed, and they were compared, along with their English equivalents, with respect to politeness. The results showed that English signs tend to use explicit expressions, whereas Japanese signs frequently contain honorific items, and German signs use infinitive phrases to avoid mentioning personal relationships. Based on these findings, it is pointed out that each language has its preferred styles of politeness, even for sign expressions, which are expected to give relevant information or instructions to passengers in a clear, direct manner.

Keywords: Politeness, sign expression, routine formula, English, German, Japanese

1. Introduction

Public spaces such as railway stations, airports, etc. often display signs for visitors. These signs include linguistic routine formulas, and they can therefore be termed “sign expressions.” For example, the English expression *No cigarette disposal* can be found in airplane restrooms. Its corresponding German and Japanese expressions are *Nicht für Zigaretteneabfälle* [not for cigarette.trash] ‘not for cigarette trash’ and *Tabako wa sute naide kudasai* (たばこは捨てないで下さい) [cigarette PART.TOP waste NEG IMP.HON] ‘as for cigarette, don’t waste please’, respectively. These three expressions are functionally equivalent as a prohibition, but they are formally different.¹ Furthermore, they differ in terms of politeness or consideration for others

¹ Note that the research materials should be equivalent expressions that are formulated independently and appear in corresponding places in different countries. Multilingual signs are increasingly seen; however, they sometimes include inappropriate equivalents, such as *Keep within the boundary fences*, which seems to be an English translation of the Japanese sign expression *Hodō gai tachiiri kinshi* (歩道外立入禁止) [walking.path outside entry.VN prohibition.VN] ‘Entry prohibition outside walking path’. In the English translation, the use of the preposition “within” is not correct. Instead, the preposition “behind” should be selected. The reason the wrong preposition is selected lies in a difference between Japanese and English regarding the perspectives from which sentences are formulated. For a more detailed discussion on this issue, see Nishijima (2013a).

in smooth communication (Ide, 1982). The English and German expressions do not overtly contain polite linguistic items like the honorific expression *kudasai* ‘please’ in Japanese. They do, however, seem to be more explicit than the corresponding Japanese sign expression. In general, explicitness and politeness are relevant to effective communication in sign expressions, but they seem to be in a trade-off relationship. This study compares functionally equivalent sign expressions in corresponding situations in public spaces in the three languages in order to clarify the typical characteristics of sign expressions in each language, especially with respect to politeness. The main object of the study is to point out that politeness can be formulated even in sign expressions, which are designed to give passengers clear, direct information, and to reveal in what situations and in what way politeness is expressed on public signs in each language. The results of this analysis suggest that each language has its preferred ways of expressing politeness. The findings shed light on the different communication styles represented by English, German, and Japanese.

2. Description of the Problem

In general, signs can be classified into the following two types (Nishijima, 2014):

- (a) legally and systematically stipulated signs
- (b) relatively freely described signs

Traffic signs and information signs typically belong to (a) and (b), respectively. As a result of standardization, the former are relatively similar in different countries, such as *Vorgeschriebene Fahrtrichtung* [prescribe.PTCP go.direction] in German and *Shitei hōkō gai shinkō kinshi* [prescription.VN direction except go.VN prohibition.VN] in Japanese, which are equivalent to *Straight through only* in English. However, the latter differ from place to place, as in *Vorsicht! Stufe* [caution step] in German and *Ashimoto chūi* [foot.under caution.VN] in Japanese, which are equivalent to *Watch your step* in English. Therefore, most studies of public signs have addressed type (b) as examples of multilingualism and diversity. Of course, the two types of signs have been also studied with respect to routine formulas (Nishijima, 2013a, b).

Previous studies have analyzed sign expressions from the viewpoint of linguistic landscape. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997), linguistic landscape refers to visible linguistic expressions on public and commercial signs, and these signs have informational or symbolic functions for the status of the linguistic communities in the region where they are located. Recent studies have revealed how and which characters are selected in relation to local citizens and visitors (Backhaus, 2005; Tanaka, Kamikura & Niizaka, 2005; Tanaka, Kamikura, Akiyama, & Sudo, 2007; Kou, 2009; Someya, 2009; Shoji, Backhaus & Coulmas, 2009; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009; Shohamy, Ben-Rafael & Barni, 2010). Tanaka et al. (2005), for example, pointed out that multilingual signs are found in railway stations along the Yamanote Line in Tokyo and that the languages on these signs vary from station to station.

In addition, researchers have studied sign expressions regarding the perspectives from which they are formulated (Nishijima, 2013a, b). These studies examined the claim that Japanese differs from English or German in terms of such perspective (Ikegami, 2000; Nakamura, 2004;

Narita, 2009; Nishijima, 2010; Nomura, 2010). Nishijima (2014), for example, compared traffic signs in Japanese and German to reveal a difference in perspectives between the two languages. However, the percentage of emerging different perspectives is only around 28%, which seems to be smaller than expected given the claim that the perspective differs between Japanese and German or English.

Traffic signs are one type of sign commonly appearing in public spaces. Contrastive studies have examined explicitness in traffic signs in Japan and the U.S. (Mine, 2008). Mine (2008, p. 24) presupposed that Japanese people tend to use a communication style that relies on implication rather than stating things directly, due to politeness. For example, the question *Oshio ari masu ka?* (お塩、ありますか) [HON.salt be HON Q] ‘Is there salt?’ suggests *Oshio ga hoshii* (お塩が欲しい) [HON.salt PART.NOM want] ‘I want salt’ but does not actually mention the speaker’s desire. On the basis of this presupposition, Mine (2008) points out that implications can be also observed on traffic signs in Japan, which represent cases where politeness seems unnecessary, in contrast with those in America. According to Mine (p. 30), in American English, signs for prohibition and instruction both use direct expressions such as *Don’t enter* and *Stop*. However, in Japanese, direct expressions are used for instruction and indirect expressions for prohibition, as in *Tomare* (止まれ) [stop.IMP] and *Shinnyū kinshi* (進入禁止) [entry.VN prohibition.VN]. Mine (2008) argues that prohibition is expressed indirectly because *kinshi* [prohibition.VN] is regarded as an indirect expression. Yet this claim can be criticized because both *Don’t enter* in American English and *Shinnyū kinshi* in Japanese convey explicitly that vehicles cannot enter, though there are of course differences in style. A detailed analysis of explicitness will be given below, in relation to politeness.

Previous studies of sign expressions have not paid much attention to politeness because the main purpose of sign expressions is to convey relevant and useful information to the general public in a clear, direct manner, within the spatial constraints of the sign itself, not to establish or maintain a relationship with readers. Furthermore, because sign expressions address the general public, it is fairly difficult to suppose a specific personal relationship, which is relevant in determining politeness strategies (Isono & Long, 2012). Therefore, it is commonly assumed that sign expressions are formulated without regard to interpersonal relationships, and thus, it is not surprising that only a few studies have addressed politeness in sign expressions. Among them are Kim (2011), Kishie (2011), and Kawabata (2013). Kim (2011) compared prohibition expressions in Japanese and Korean in relation to the different locations where they appear. The results showed that Korean uses much more direct and explicit expressions than Japanese; therefore, Kim concluded that Japanese speakers consider the audience when formulating sign expressions. Indeed, this conclusion is not surprising, but nonetheless, the study has a methodological problem. Although Kim collected various prohibition expressions in corresponding areas of Japan and Korea (e.g., parks, universities, hospitals, shrines), the collected expressions are not necessarily equivalent because they sometimes convey different prohibitions.

As the previous studies suggest, sign expressions are formulated according to each language’s rules of politeness. This is illustrated by the following examples observed in railway stations, etc.

- (E) *Keep out*
- (G) *Zutritt verboten*
entry prohibit.PTCP
'Entry prohibited'
- (J) *Tachiiri Kinshi* [立入禁止]
entry.VN prohibition.VN
'Entry prohibition'

(E), (G), and (J) are signs in English, German, and Japanese, respectively. They are functionally equivalent in that they instruct train passengers not to enter a certain place. However, their formulation patterns are fairly different. (E) is phrased as an imperative, but (G) and (J) are ellipted forms. In (G), the copula (*ist*) is omitted; the expression consists of only a noun and a past participle. In (J), the accusative marking particle (*o*) and pro-verb (*suru* in normal form or *shi masu* in polite form) are omitted from the possible form *tachiiri o kinshi suru/shimasu*. The fact that imperative forms and ellipses are common in sign expressions indicates that the information or instruction on the sign is more important than the relationship with the addressees.

However, politeness may be reflected in sign expressions in various ways. As mentioned, (E) is an imperative form that gives readers an instruction directly, thereby seeming to ignore politeness. In (G) and (J), however, direct instruction or ordering of readers is avoided. (G) states the prohibition objectively as a general rule or situational restriction in an ellipsis form with no copula. In (J), the verb is nominalized by omitting the accusative particle and pro-verb. Furthermore, *tachiiri* and *kinshi* are verbal nouns that denote verbal actions as objective ones; this makes the expression less related to prohibiting as interaction and more like a situational explanation of the prohibition. These strategies make the expressions more abstract and objective. Therefore, the expressions are regarded as a description of the circumstance, not direct instructions as might be given to others during interaction. In this sense, politeness is taken into account and reflected in sign expressions in different ways.

3. Research Question

In general, sign expressions seem not to include considerations of politeness or concern for the relationship with readers; indeed, such consideration may be regarded as unnecessary because the main purpose of signs is to give relevant information to passengers in a clear, direct manner. Therefore, as the examples in Section 2 suggest, politeness is not necessarily considered in the formulation of sign expressions. This gives rise to the following question: How and in what situations is politeness considered in the formulation of sign expressions in each language? This is the main research question of the current study. The analysis is expected to reveal the preferred politeness styles used in routine formulas of sign expressions in each of the three languages.

4. Method

4.1. Categories

Corresponding sign expressions in Japan and Germany were collected through fieldwork and compared. The fieldwork was conducted in several cities in each country from January 2011 to April 2013. During this time, 208 Japanese and 198 German sign expressions were collected.

The sign expressions were divided into two groups, which were each further divided into two subgroups, as shown in (1) and (2) below:

- (1) functional correspondence
 - (a) formal, semantic, and functional correspondence
 - (b) only functional correspondence
- (2) no functional correspondence
 - (a) correspondence with different functions
 - (b) no correspondence

There are not many examples of (1a) in the data. The correspondence pair *Zutritt verboten* and *Tachiiri kinshi*, which are equivalent to *Keep out* in English, can be regarded as (1a). Examples (3) to (5) show this correspondence set.

- (3) *Keep out*
- (4) *Zutritt verboten*
entry prohibit.PTCP
'Entry prohibited'
- (5) *Tachiiri kinshi* [立入禁止]
entry.VN prohibition.VN
'Entry prohibition'

The expressions in (4) and (5) consist of semantically equivalent items, i.e., *Zutritt* is equivalent to *tachiiri*, and *verboten* to *kinshi*. *Zutritt* and *tachiiri* are topic words that mean 'entry', and *verboten* and *kinshi* are comment words that mean 'prohibition'. The word order "topic – comment" of the two expressions is also formally equivalent. However, the structure of (3) differs from those of (4) and (5). The expression *Stop requested* in (25) can be regarded as an example of a structure similar to (3) because it consists of a topic and comment. Examples similar to (4) and (5) are the corresponding pair *Parken verboten* [park.NMNL prohibit.PTCP] in German and *Chūsha kinshi* (駐車禁止) [parking.VN prohibition.VN] in Japanese. The English equivalent is *No parking*, which is structurally different from the German and Japanese expressions.

Examples of (1b) include *Einstieg freihalten* and *Sutepu ni tata naide kudasai*, which are functionally equivalent to *Federal Law Prohibits Standing in Stairwell*.

- (6) *Federal Law Prohibits Standing in Stairwell*
 (7) *Auftritt freihalten*
 step free.keep.INF
 ‘To keep step free’
 (8) *Suteppu ni tata naide kudasai*
 [ステップに立たないでください]
 step on stand NEG IMP.HON
 ‘Please don’t stand on step’

The expressions in (6), (7), and (8) are surely functionally equivalent, but they are formulated differently. (6) has the word order subject + verb + object and states that the prohibition is a federal law. (7) consists of an infinitive phrase, whereas (8) is an imperative form with a polite expression.

Expressions of type (2a) are located in corresponding places but are not formally, semantically, or functionally equivalent. For example, (9) and (10) are seen before escalator entrances in Germany and Japan, respectively.

- (9) *Benutzung auf eigene Gefahr*
 use.NMNL on own risk
 ‘Using at own risk’
 (10) *Tesuri ni otsukamari kudasai* [手すりにおつかまり下さい]
 Handrail on HON.hold. IMP.HON
 ‘Please hold handrail’

(9) is a routine formula that informs passengers they should use the escalator at their own risk, whereas (10) is an expression to instruct passengers concretely to hold the handrail for safety. Although the expressions are located in corresponding places, their functions are not necessarily equivalent, though both request that passengers pay attention to their use of the escalator. The English corresponding expressions would be a set of warnings and imperatives: *Caution, Passengers only, Hold handrail, Attend children, Avoid sides*.

In the last group, (2b), the data show no direct corresponding expressions in corresponding places. (11) appears in railway stations in Germany but not Japan. Conversely, (12) can be observed in railway stations in Japan but not Germany.

- (11) *Eingang nur mit gültigem Fahrausweis*
 entrance only with valid ticket
 ‘Entrance only with valid ticket’
 (12) *Kakekomi jōsha wa oyame kudasai*
 [駆け込み乗車はおやめ下さい]
 rush.VN boarding.VN PART.TOP HON.stop IMP.HON
 ‘As for rush boarding, please stop’

(11) is infelicitous in Japan because there are ticket gates at Japanese railroad stations that prevent passengers from going through the gates and boarding the train without valid tickets.

Therefore, there is no Japanese sign expression corresponding to (11). Similarly, (12) is not relevant to German passengers because rushing onto trains is not a common problem in Germany. Therefore, there is no corresponding sign expression in German.

This study focuses on functionally corresponding sign expressions, i.e., expressions of types (1a) and (1b).

4.2. Point of View

The comparison of functionally corresponding sign expressions may take several points of view: formulation patterns, positive-negative constructions, perspectives, politeness, responsibilities, etc. This paper focuses exclusively on politeness, defined as consideration for others in smooth communication (Ide, 1982). The following sections will analyze how and in which situations politeness is reflected in sign expressions.

5. Results

A comparison of functionally equivalent Japanese and German sign expressions confirmed 35 correspondence pairs. In 8 of these pairs, two types of perspectives from which sentences are formulated can be distinguished: the perspective either outside or inside the situation where a certain event occurs. The first perspective is external to the situation of the readers and is usually found in English and German descriptions. Such descriptions concretely and objectively mention the objects that are focused on (e.g., *Wagen hält* [vehicle stop.PRS]). The second perspective is internal to the situation and is typical of the Japanese expressions. Such descriptions depict the situation through the eyes of the readers (e.g., *Tsugi tomari masu* [next stop HON]). These results confirm there is a difference in the perspective of functionally equivalent texts of the three languages, although the percentage of difference (about 23%) is small. In Nishijima's (2014) analysis of corresponding expressions, the percentage of emerging different perspectives is approximately 28%.

This investigation, however, will compare politeness in sign expressions using a qualitative approach, not a quantitative method, because the data are limited.

In the data, four types of sign expressions can be distinguished:

- (a) Prohibition
- (b) Information
- (c) Instruction
- (d) Warning

Sections 5.1 to 5.4, respectively, discuss these types of sign expressions.

5.1. Signs for Prohibition

This section presents example correspondence pairs of signs for prohibition. Note that the English signs are shown as reference because they are not part of the field data.

Places where parking is prohibited are generally marked with *No parking* signs in English; see (13). The German and Japanese corresponding expressions are *Parken verboten* and *chūsha kinshi*, shown in (14) and (15), respectively.

- (13) *No parking*
 (14) *Parken verboten*
 park.NMNL prohibit.PTCP
 ‘Parking prohibited’
 (15) *Chūsha kinshi* [駐車禁止]
 parking.VN prohibition.VN
 ‘Parking prohibition’

(14) and (15) are both composed of ‘parking’ and ‘prohibition’, which are structured as the topic and comment. In contrast, the corresponding expression *No parking* in English consists of two linguistic items, *no* and a gerund, which means that a certain event, action, or thing does not exist.

Another example is the signs in airplane restrooms indicating that passengers are not allowed to smoke. These rooms display signs with the English expression *No smoking in lavatory*. The corresponding German and Japanese sign expressions are *Im Waschraum nicht rauchen* and *Keshō shitsu nai kin’en*, respectively.

- (16) *No smoking in lavatory*
 (17) *Im Waschraum nicht rauchen*
 in washroom not smoke.INF
 ‘Not to smoke in washroom’
 (18) *Keshō shitsu nai kin’en* [化粧室内禁煙]
 toilet room inside prohibition.VN.smoke
 ‘In restroom, smoke prohibition’

The function and meaning of (16)–(18) are prohibition of smoking in an airplane restroom. The prototype of (16) consists of two linguistic items: *no* and a gerund. The pattern for prohibition in (17) is composed of the negation *nicht* and an infinitive. The basic form of (18) is *kin* 禁 and an object, which means to prohibit a certain object, as in *kinshu* 禁酒 [prohibition.VN.alcohol] because *kin* is a verbal noun that is normally used as a verb in the form *kin zuru* by adding a pro-verb *zuru* (variant of pro-verb *suru* [do]).

Another correspondence pair conveying prohibition is *Nicht für Zigarettenabfälle* in German (20), and *Suigara o suttee wa ike masen* in Japanese (21), corresponding to *No cigarette disposal* in English (19).

- (19) *No cigarette disposal*
 (20) *Nicht für Zigarettenabfälle*
 not for cigarette.waste.PL
 ‘Not for cigarette butts’

- (21) *Suigara o sutete wa ike masen*
 [吸殻を捨ててはいけません]
 cigarette.butt PART.ACC waste PART.TOP go.POSS HON.NEG
 ‘Cannot waste cigarette butts’

The English (19) is an impersonal expression and has the same structure as (13): *no* and a noun phrase. (20) shows an impersonal use of sign expressions. What is not for cigarette butts is a trash box located beside the sign. The expression conveys the prohibition indirectly. In (21), the sign expression conveys impersonally that the act of *suigara o suteru* [waste cigarette butts] is prohibited because the act cannot proceed due to the expression *ike masen* ‘cannot go’, which is regarded as a polite routine formula for prohibition. This softens the imposition on readers.

5.2. Information Signs

This section presents corresponding sets of expressions found on information signs.

- (22) *No entrance*
 (23) *Kein Eingang*
 no entrance
 ‘No entrance’
 (24) *Haire masen* [入れません]
 enter.POSS HON.NEG
 ‘Cannot enter’

(23) and (24) are functionally equivalent to (22) in English. However, they show politeness in different ways. (23) is regarded as an impersonal use and a description of the situation, much like the English expression in (22). In (24), the subject is not mentioned, and it is ambiguous who cannot enter, “you” or “we.” Therefore, (24) can be regarded as a kind of impersonal expression as well. Moreover, it uses an honorific expression and is polite.

Another correspondence set consists of sign expressions found on buses.

- (25) *Stop requested*
 (26) *Wagen hält*
 vehicle stop.PRS
 ‘Vehicle stops’
 (27) *Tsugi tomari masu* [次とまります]
 next stop HON
 ‘(I/we/bus) stop next’

(25), (26), and (27) all function to inform passengers that the bus will stop. However, they differ in form and meaning. (25) means that one or more passengers have requested the stop, and it conveys that the bus will stop. (26) informs readers that the bus will stop. (27) mentions the concept of stopping next but does not specify who or what stops.

5.3. Signs for Instruction

This section presents the following correspondence sets for signs for instruction.

- (28) *Stand on the right side*
- (29) *Rechts stehen*
right.ADV stand.INF
'To stand right'
- (30) *Migigawa ni otachi kudasai* [右側にお立ちください]
right.side on HON.stand HON.IMP
'Please stand on right side'

(29) is an infinitive form and can therefore be regarded as impersonal. In contrast, (30) is an imperative sentence; however, it contains an honorific expression, which softens the imposition on readers.

- (31) Please lock door
- (32) *Bitte Tür verriegeln*
please door lock
'To lock door please'
- (33) *Kagi o kakete kudasai* [鍵をかけてください]
lock PART.ACC put IMP.HON
'Please lock'

(31), (32), and (33) each include a polite expression (i.e., *please*, *bitte*, or *kudasai*). However, they differ in terms of explicitness. In (31) and (32), the object to be locked (i.e., the door) is mentioned overtly, whereas in (33), it is not.

5.4. Warning Signs

This section presents a correspondence set for warning signs.

- (34) *Watch your step*
- (35) *Vorsicht! Stufe*
caution step
- (36) *Oashimoto gochūi kudasai* [お足元ご注意ください]
HON.foot.under HON.mind HON.IMP
'Please mind under your foot'

(35) is very simple and is expressed in an impersonal form. (36) is an imperative form but is considered polite because of the three honorific expressions. (34) is also an imperative form, but it is expressed somewhat politely because the second person is mentioned.

6. Discussion

6.1. Linguistic Expressions for Politeness/Explicitness

In German sign expressions, imperative forms are avoided; instead, infinitive constructions are preferred as a means of impersonalizing the message. In contrast, in Japanese, nominalization is often used, along with imperative constructions. However, Japanese imperatives are formulated politely due to their use of honorifics. Related to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, strategies for negative politeness are preferred in German and Japanese. In contrast, English expressions tend to include imperative forms due to positive politeness, i.e., imperative forms in English can be regarded here as solidarity markers. Furthermore, in prohibition sign in English, *no* + noun/gerund constructions are observed.

6.2. Situational Differences

- (37) *No parking*
 (38) *Parken verboten*
 parking prohibit.PTCP
 ‘Parking prohibited’
 (39) *Einfahrt freihalten*
 driveway free.keep.INF
 ‘To keep driveway clear’
 (40) *Chūsha kinshi* [駐車禁止]
 parking.VN prohibition.VN
 ‘Parking prohibition’
 (41) *Chūsha wa goenryo kudasai*
 [駐車はご遠慮ください]
 parking.VN PART.TOP HON.withdraw.VN HON.IMP.
 ‘As for parking, please withdraw’

In the correspondence set above, there are differences between the two German sign expressions, (38) and (39), as well as between the two Japanese sign expressions, (40) and (41). Specifically, (39) and (41) are more polite than (38) and (40), respectively. The former are seen mainly in front of individual houses, and the latter in public parking places. This suggests that politeness in sign expressions depends on where the sign is located, i.e., on the relationship with readers. If signs are situated in highly public places like (38) and (40), they are less polite but more explicit. Conversely, if they are located in highly individual places, they are more polite but less explicit.

7. Concluding Remarks

This paper investigated how and in what situations politeness is considered in the construction of sign expressions in English, German, and Japanese.

The comparison of functionally equivalent sign expressions in the three languages revealed that politeness is indeed a factor and that each language has its preferred politeness styles in relation to explicitness and situation. The degree of politeness in sign expressions differs based on where the sign is located, i.e., on the relationship with communication participants. If signs are situated in highly public places, they are less polite but more explicit. Conversely, if they are located in highly individual places, they are more polite but less explicit. As the data employed in this study are limited, it is expected that future work will examine the results using more data. In addition, future studies should focus more on theoretical considerations. However, the results of the current study are of interest to intercultural communication studies.

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Appendix

List of abbreviations

| | |
|------|--------------------------|
| ACC | accusative |
| HON | honorifics |
| IMP | imperative |
| INF | infinitive |
| NEG | negation |
| NMNL | nominalizer |
| NOM | nominative |
| PART | particle |
| PL | plural |
| POSS | possible |
| PRS | present tense |
| PTCP | participle |
| Q | question particle/marker |
| TOP | topic |
| VN | verbal noun |