

SPEECH-LEVEL SHIFTS IN JAPANESE MANGA (COMIC): A DISCOURSE POLITENESS THEORY APPROACH

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Abstract. This research concludes that speech-level shifts in Japanese manga (comic) are not arbitrary linguistic variations but are dynamic communicative strategies that function within the framework of Mayumi Usami's Discourse Politeness Theory (DPT). Problem statement existing research on Japanese manga and anime has predominantly relied on Brown and Levinson of 1987 framework, which focuses on sentence-level strategies to avoid Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). However, these models often overlook socially obligatory language use (*wakimae*) and fail to systematically account for discourse-level phenomena, such as how shifting between polite and non-polite forms creates meaning across an entire interaction. There is a significant gap in understanding how Discourse Politeness (DP) Defaults are constructed and manipulated in fictional worlds to produce specific interactional effects. Thus, this research aims to analyse linguistic factors which motivates speech-level shifts among characters in Japanese manga. This study is using qualitative method in analysing the manga series *Case Closed: Zero's Tea Time*, focusing on the character Toru Amuro, whose three distinct social roles (*café worker*, *detective*, and *criminal*) provide a rich dataset for observing language variation. The results indicate that several linguistic factors motivate speech-level shifts, including sudden topic changes, the mitigation of difficult or sensitive content, and the creation of friendliness through stylistic incongruity. Overall, this research contributes to Japanese discourse studies by demonstrating how speech-level shifts operate as discourse-level politeness strategies within interaction. It also provides an alternative perspective to politeness research that has traditionally been dominated by Western theoretical frameworks.

Keywords: *Japanese politeness, discourse politeness theory, manga, speech-level*

Introduction

The study of linguistic politeness in Japanese discourse has evolved from traditional structural analyses to more dynamic, functional perspectives. Early frameworks, such as Brown and Levinson (1987) universal theory of politeness and Ide (1992) concept of *wakimae* (discernment), established that linguistic choices are often dictated by social norms and a speaker's sense of place within a social hierarchy. *Wakimae* serves as a prescriptive social norm, where politeness is achieved by complying with expected behaviors based on situational factors and relative status, such as the *senpai-kohai* (senior-junior) relationship. However, contemporary research emphasizes that language is not merely a static reflection of social reality but a primary tool for linguistic creativity, allowing speakers to perform specific characters and negotiate power. This shift is particularly visible in Japanese popular culture, including manga and anime, which offer multiple layers of speech and thought representation. Manga serves as a rich site for sociolinguistic inquiry because it provides visual context that synergistically enhances verbal messages, allowing researchers to observe interpersonal impacts that are often obscured in real-life spoken data by face-saving maneuvers.

Over the years, politeness research in discourse analysis has been redeveloped and repeatedly discussed since the introduction of Face Threatening Act (FTA) by Brown and Levinson (1987). In Japanese language, where its mainly relied on honorific cue to show politeness has reshaping the FTA theories which more suitable for Japanese context. McCready (2019) defines honorifics as linguistic expressions that mark honorification encode relationships of social status, respect, or deference between interlocutors in communication. Usami (2002; 2006; 2024) perspective on Brown and Levinson (B&L) Politeness Theory (1987) significantly reframed the discussion of Japanese politeness by shifting the focus from the sentence-level to the discourse-level, thereby providing a more dynamic and context-sensitive model. Brown and Levinson (1987) theory centers on avoiding Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) through volitional strategies (意向), Usami (2024) work, along with that of scholars like Ide and Yoshida (2017), highlights that much of Japanese politeness is not a reaction to a potential FTA but is governed by prescribed social norms known as *wakimae* (discernment). Volitional strategies express a person's will or intention to do something; "I will just go to sleep tonight. [今晚はもう寝よう]" or an invitation to do something with another person; "let's go have a drink? [飲みに行こうか]" or "shall we eat? [食べに行こうか]".

Meanwhile, '*wakimae*' (わきまえ) refers to the ability to discern what is appropriate in a given social situation and act accordingly, encompassing knowledge, understanding, and good judgment in conforming to social norms. There isn't a single *wakimae* form in Japanese grammar; instead, *wakimae* is a cultural concept that influences how people use different grammatical forms, such as honorifics (*keigo*), to show awareness of social context, speaker/listener relationships, and social status Ide & Yoshida (2017). This study investigates speech-level shifts through the lens of Usami (2002) Discourse Politeness Theory (DPT). DPT posits that politeness is a dynamic process where marked or unmarked behaviors emerge from deviations or adherence to expected discourse norms. While grammatical honorifics (*sonkeigo*) are traditionally seen as indicators of respect, DPT allows for the analysis of strategic impoliteness, where high honorific forms are manipulated to assert dominance or create psychological distance. By examining Amuro Toru's dialogue in *Zero's Tea Time*, this article explores how intent and relational goals drive speech-level shifts beyond mere grammatical correctness.

Statement of the research problem

Challenges Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory for focusing too narrowly on strategic face-saving moves to minimize FTAs, while overlooking socially obligatory language use. Ide (1992) argues that honorifics, for instance, are not only used to protect face but also appear in contexts without FTAs. To explain this, she distinguishes between volition, or the intentional use of politeness strategies, and discernment, the culturally expected practice of speaking politely regardless of personal intention. Volition-based politeness aligns with Brown and Levinson's model, however, discernment-based politeness functions more like a grammatical or sociopragmatic rule (Ide and Yoshida, 2017). Thus, Ide (1992) contends that Brown and Levinson's framework is incomplete, as it accounts for only one dimension of politeness. She further suggests that in Western societies, volitional politeness dominates, whereas in Japanese society, discernment is more central. Later, Ide (1992) tested this claim by asking Japanese and American participants to link adjectives with interactional

situations. Their results showed that Americans often equated polite with friendly, while Japanese participants distinguished between *teineina* 'polite' and *shitashigena* 'friendly'. These findings support the idea that American politeness is largely volition-based, while Japanese politeness is mainly rooted in discernment.

Ide (1992) argued that Brown and Levinson (1987) face FTA model, which treats politeness mainly as strategic, intentional face-saving, misses an important part of how politeness works in languages with rich honorific systems. In Japanese, many choices (honorifics, speech levels) are socially obligatory and used even when no clear FTA is present. In short, politeness is not always a volitional strategy to save face Usami (2024). Ide (1992) introduced the terms volition (strategic; intention-driven politeness) and discernment (the culturally prescribed, often automatic selection of polite forms). She treated discernment as something like a grammatical or sociopragmatic requirement which is a rule-governed norm rather than a deliberate face-saving tactic. This idea reframes some honorific usages as conformity to social form rather than strategic moves.

A significant gap exists in the ability to observe the interpersonal impact of these linguistic choices in real-world spoken data. In natural conversation, the true psychological effect of a speaker's discourse is often obscured because participants engage in face-saving maneuvers to avoid direct conflict or to maintain social harmony. Consequently, identifying the specific factors that trigger speech-level shifts and determining whether those shifts result in marked (non-normative) or unmarked (expected) politeness behaviors remains a complex challenge in discourse analysis. This research addresses this problem by utilizing manga as a specialized case study to explore sociolinguistic realities. Unlike traditional spoken data, the multimodal nature of manga integrates visual imagery and internal monologues that allow for a transparent 'reading between the lines'. This study applies Usami (2002) Discourse Politeness Theory (DPT) to determine the factors contributing to speech-level shifts in the dialogue of the character Amuro Toru. The central research question asks: What factors contributed to the speech-level shifts in manga dialogue which produce marked or unmarked politeness behaviors as described in DPT? By examining these shifts, the study aims to uncover how situational intent and relational goals override static social status to drive functional politeness in Japanese discourse.

Literature review

The study of Japanese politeness has historically been dominated by two contrasting paradigms: the universal, strategic framework of face proposed by Brown and Levinson, and the Japanese-specific concept of discernment (*wakimae*), which views politeness as an obligatory adherence to social norms and conventions. However, modern pragmatic research demonstrates that Japanese politeness is not merely a passive, automatic application of rules. Instead, it is a highly dynamic and interactive process known as situated politeness, where speakers actively manipulate honorific and non-honorific forms to construct specific contexts, identities, and interpersonal relationships. This paradigm shift is encapsulated in Discourse Politeness Theory (DPT), which expands politeness beyond sentence-level grammar to the discourse level Usami (2002). DPT introduces the concept of the Discourse Politeness (DP) default (the unmarked), expected baseline of speech in a specific context. Politeness is thus viewed relatively; deviations from this default (marked behaviors) generate specific pragmatic effects, such as solidarity, sarcasm, or psychological distance

Usami (2002) develops a discourse-level theory based on a large corpus of Japanese conversations (e.g., many recorded interactions) rather than focusing solely on sentence-level strategies. Ide (1992) argued for a separate category of discernment politeness for Japanese (the automatic observation of social rules). However, DPT integrates both elements of language usage according to social norms and an individual's strategic language use Usami (2024). The DP default represents the social norm, while deviations from it are strategic choices made by the speaker. The models applicable on how discourse phenomena (speech-level shifts, topic management, etc.) produce politeness effects. Usami (2002) introduces a formal way to assess politeness effects by measuring the discrepancy (De) between the speaker's estimation (Se) and the hearer's estimation (He) of how face-threatening weighted. When $Se - He$ is near zero (within an acceptable range), behavior is seen as appropriate (neutral) $Se \approx He$ ($De \approx 0$), larger discrepancies produce plus effect (pleasant) or minus (unpleasant/polite-insolence) politeness effects. DPT gives a mechanism to predict when apparently excessive or insufficient politeness will be perceived as polite, neutral, or rude. This makes Usami (2002)'s De a useful tool for explaining exceptions Ide (1992) observed (e.g., when honorifics look excessive or insufficient) in experimental findings (e.g., teineina vs shitashigena) which are consistent with a pattern where Japanese discourse relies more on culturally encoded form-choice (leading to small Se-He discrepancies in normal interaction) (Table 1).

Brown and Levinson's formula: $Wx = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + Rx$.

DPT formula: $Wx = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + Rx - DSF(S)$

DSF: Desire for saving his/her own face (Usami, 2002; 2024)

Table 1. *Determining politeness effect in Japanese Discourse.*

Situational conversation	Meeting for the first time	Married couple
DP defaults (unmarked speech behaviour)	Polite	Non- polite
Deviation from DP defaults (marked behaviour)	Non-polite	Polite
Discrepancy effect (De)	Positive-politeness/ Neutral-politeness/ Negative- politeness	

Source: Usami (2024; 2002).

When a conversation takes place between unfamiliar individuals, polite forms (P) function as the dominant and unmarked speech level, serving as the discourse-pragmatic (DP) default. In this context, continued use of P maintains unmarked politeness, whereas the use of non-polite forms (N) becomes marked and acquires specific functions, such as expressing empathy or signaling a shift in topic Usami (2024). Conversely, as seen in Table 1, in conversations between friends or married couples, the DP default differs: non-polite forms constitute the unmarked speech level. Here, the use of non-polite form is regarded as appropriately polite, while the use of polite form becomes a marked choice. Departing from the perspective that equates politeness solely with linguistic forms, employing polite form in this context may create a minus-politeness effect such as sarcasm or perceived impoliteness precisely because it disrupts the DP default. This tendency is often intuitively recognizable in everyday interactions. This helps explain politeness in ordinary conversations that do not contain obvious FTAs.

Usami (2002) argues that Brown and Levinson (1987) explanation on politeness produced sufficient outcomes on the surface level, but do not systematically account for neutral or minus effects that arise from discourse misalignment. DPT therefore broadens the explanatory scope to include the interactional, perception-based dimension of

politeness. This idea also in line with Ide and Yoshida (2017), objecting to treating politeness solely as intentional FTA mitigation at the sentence-level. Ide (1992) emphasizes socially obligatory form choices (discernment) as central in honorific languages and Usami (2002) emphasizes discourse-level interactional alignment and perception (De) as central to the actual politeness effect. Ide (1992) identifies what is the rule-like use of honorifics and Usami (2002) formalizes how such usages produce interactional outcomes at discourse level. Research applying DPT has yielded significant insights into how politeness functions dynamically in Japanese conversations. The core finding is that politeness effects are produced relatively, through movement toward or away from the established DP default for a given interaction. Shifting to formal speech can soften something hard to say (like criticism or a request) or reduce the suddenness of a topic change, thereby maintaining distance and avoiding imposition. This strategy can create negative politeness function. On the other hand, the shift in utterance can be used to emphasize an important point, making the speech clearer for the listener, or to add humor by creating stylistic incongruity, which reduces distance and builds rapport. The humorous use was found to be the most frequent function in conversations between friends that can establish positive politeness function.

Japanese politeness in manga and anime

A growing body of research using Japanese manga and anime to study various linguistic and social phenomena, including politeness. These media are seen as valuable data sources because they are an essential part of Japanese popular culture, shaping identities and disseminating messages about appropriate and inappropriate ways of speaking to a mass audience. Kartika and Jumanto (2024) investigated refusal politeness strategies in the anime *Kaguya-Sama: Love is War* to explore how Japanese youngsters learn to refuse. Their objective was to discover how politeness strategies for refusal speech acts are elaborated in anime for learning purposes. They identified two main types of refusal strategies: direct (using non-performative verbs like *muri* 'impossible') and indirect (presenting reasons, stating principles, apologizing, or evasion). This suggests that Japanese youngsters are presented with a range of politeness strategies for refusals through anime. They noted that while many studies on refusal speech acts exist, using anime as a data source for how youngsters learn these strategies is unique. Their research question focused on how politeness strategies for refusal speech acts are elaborated in anime for learning purposes.

Ningsih (2016) analyzed politeness strategies in the manga *Detective Conan* (81st edition), focusing on contexts involving criminal cases where face-threatening acts (FTAs) are common. The study found all four of Brown and Levinson (1987) 's strategies were used: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. The "bald on record" (direct) strategy was the most dominant, which the researcher attributed to the dangerous and urgent situations in the story that necessitate direct speech. The study aimed to describe the use of politeness strategies in this specific manga edition, however, given the nature of the manga storyline, the situational based politeness depicts in the manga mostly in urgent and detective mode were bald-on-record were prominently used. Future research needed to account for other situation in order to account for various politeness strategy. Septiana and Haristiani (2021) analyzed criticism speech acts and politeness strategies in the anime *Boruto: Naruto Next Generation*. Both direct and indirect criticisms were common, with direct

strategies being slightly more frequent (52.2%). The most common direct strategy was 'negative evaluation' ('It's really bad...'), often used between characters with a close relationship. All four of Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness strategies were also present. The study aimed to identify the types of criticism strategies and how politeness is applied, noting that this area is minimally explored in movie media.

These research on manga and anime mostly rely on Brown and Levinson (1987) framework or general speech act theory. While these studies provide valuable findings, they do not leverage DPT's strengths in analyzing discourse-level phenomena like speech-level shifts or its concept of relative politeness based on a DP default. Research question arising from this gap is how would an analysis using DPT change or deepen our understanding of politeness in manga? For example, how do characters manga use speech-level shifts as a politeness strategy, and what does this reveal about the DP defaults constructed in these fictional worlds.

Research objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the dynamic nature of linguistic politeness in Japanese discourse through the analysis of manga dialogue. Specifically, this research aims to identify the determinants of speech-level shifts by identifying the specific situational and relational factors that trigger speech-level shifts in manga dialogue, moving beyond traditional social hierarchy models. This research also aims on analysing on how these shifts produce marked or unmarked politeness behaviors as defined by DPT, distinguishing between normative social compliance and strategic linguistic manipulation. By adopting Usami (2002; 2024) DPT framework, this study seeks to provide a functional perspective on how honorifics and speech levels are utilized to negotiate power, establish psychological distance, or foster cooperation in contemporary Japanese communication.

Materials and Methods

This research studies employed qualitative analysis using manga as the main data. Saunders et. al (2018) has outlined a detailed argument on the importance of qualitative analysis approach when the research needs to be examined in depth and requires systematics interpretation on certain type of sample data including discourse analyzation. Manga is a rich resource in extracting Japanese politeness strategy as it has more dynamic social interaction (Maynard, 2008; Tanaka, 2016). Although it is fictional based content, many Japanese linguistics scholars has utilized manga to understand the Japanese social construct showing that manga is one of the crucial resources in comprehending Japanese language and culture (Tanaka, 2016). Observing Japanese real-life discourse within Japanese strict privacy law is difficult and minimising the variety of interactions style that can be investigated. Thus, analyzing manga discourse gives an option where many interaction examples are available for researcher to disseminate the linguistics aspects in it (Tanaka, 2016).

Furthermore, in manga narrative, certain language choices are motivated by context, and observation on the certain utterance can be widen to examine hearer response, characters body language (sweating or frowning), location and characters relationship. While the naturalness of these interaction combo might be debatable, manga dialogue example also has been used in Japanese language learning and accepted by the reader. However, it can be said that slice-of-life manga genre has more natural interaction than

SF (Science Fiction) manga in general (Tanaka, 2016). The analysis based on the textual method of manga in this study uses a popular Japanese manga series. On January 3, 2021, TV Asahi broadcast a special program titled “150,000 People Vote for Manga”, where 150,000 participants announced their favorite manga, and the Detective Conan series ranked fourth in the poll. The Detective Conan series further expanded through its spin-off series created by Gosho Aoyama, titled Case Closed: Zero’s Tea Time (Japanese: 名探偵コナンゼロの日常 ティータイム/ Meitantei Konan Zero No Nichijo Taitaimu). This manga focuses on the character Toru Amuro, who plays multiple roles and uses different names depending on his social context. The roles are as i) Police Detective: 降谷零 (Furuya Rei); ii) Part-time Café Worker: 安室透 (Amuro Toru); iii) Member of a Criminal Organization (Dark Society): バーボン (Bourbon).

This character is significant because his language use varies according to the role he is performing during conversations with his interlocutors. The advantage of a manga featuring such a multifaceted character is that it provides valuable data for studying aspects of politeness and humility in the Japanese language through natural dialogue interactions. In addition, this manga is focusing on his daily life as he carrying different role in the society which can be considered as slice-of-life type of manga. This kind of manga have naturalness in the interaction exchange as mentioned by Tanaka (2016). The first part of this manga was serialized in Weekly Shonen Sunday Shogakukan from May 2018 to May 2022 and consists of six volumes. A six-episode anime adaptation produced by TMS Entertainment aired from April to May 2022 and is also available on Netflix, following the manga’s widespread popularity. Analytical richness comes from detailed, systematic analysis rather than huge sample size which also can be achieved using qualitative analysis with multi-method (Saunders et.al 2016). Textual analysis allows close examination of how language is used (forms, markers, structure) in context, not just how often. If politeness strategy involves particular honorifics, grammar style and certain lexical markers, textual analysis is well suited (Fairclough, 2023). Following sociopragmatic and discourse analytic approaches to this study uses close textual analysis to examine how politeness strategies are constructed in interactional context. Discourse in textual analysis allows investigation of form–function relations (morphosyntactic honorifics, particles, turn-taking, multimodal cues) in selected instances rather than requiring exhaustive corpora (Takiura, 2017; 2021). In order to address the research question on the speech level shift, this study will screen all the dialogues in this series and then evaluate the marked and unmarked conversation context.

Speech-level shift in Japanese language often occurs at the final-sentence. For formal conversation, the final-sentence in Japanese ends with *desu/ masu*. However, for more detailed honorific forms, the final-sentence in Japanese can be split further. The Japanese politeness system is a central component of its grammatical and sociolinguistic structure, commonly referred to as *keigo* (敬語). This system encodes social relationships, hierarchy, and interpersonal distance directly into linguistic form. Broadly, *keigo* is divided into three main categories: *teineigo* (丁寧語), *sonkeigo* (尊敬語), and *kenjōgo* (謙譲語) (Ide, 1992). *Teineigo* represents general politeness and is marked by sentence-final forms such as *-desu* and *-masu*. It is used in neutral formal contexts regardless of hierarchical relations. For example, *tabemasu* (食べます, “eat”) is a polite form of the verb *taberu* (食べる). In contrast, *sonkeigo* (honorific language) is used to elevate the status of the interlocutor or a third party. This is typically achieved

through special verb forms or constructions. For instance, the plain verb *iku* (行く, “to go”) becomes *irasshaimasu* (いらっしゃいます) in *sonkeigo*. Similarly, *taberu* (食べる, “to eat”) can be expressed as *meshiagarimasu* (召し上がります) when referring to the actions of someone of higher status.

Conversely, *kenjōgo* (humble language) is used to lower the speaker’s own actions in relation to the listener, thereby showing respect. For example, *iku* (行く) becomes *mairimasu* (参ります), and *taberu* (食べる) may be expressed as *itadakimasu* (いただきます) when referring to one’s own action. These forms are not merely grammatical alternations but reflect the speaker’s awareness of social hierarchy (*jougekankei*) and group alignment (*uchi-soto*). The appropriate selection of politeness level depends on contextual factors such as relative status, familiarity, and situational formality, making mastery of *keigo* particularly challenging for learners of Japanese (Ide, 1992). In the data sample, all the speech-level shift in the dialogue has been analysed. The speech-level shift will be highlighted in this paper as this phenomenon is crucial in understanding the naturalness of Japanese politeness strategies (*Table 2*).

Excerpt 1:

Zero Tea Time (Volume 1) Episode 1 (page 1-20)

Default Politeness (DP)

Amuro (waiter/ co worker)- Polite

Azusa (waiter/ co-worker)- Polite

Old man (customer) - Non-polite

Table 2. *Zero tea time (volume 1) episode 1 (page 1-20) manga panel dialogues.*

Character	Dialogue	English Translation	Linguistic Form
Amuro	おはようございます、梓さん！	Good morning, Azusa!	Polite
Azusa	早いですね、安室さん！	You’re early, Amuro-san	Polite
Toru Amuro	僕もきたところですよ	I just got here too.	Polite
Old man	梓ちゃん、アイス一つね。	Azusa-chan, one ice.	Non-Polite
			[No speech level shift (plain to plain)]
Azusa	はい！	Okaay!	Polite
Azusa	今日はアイスコーヒーよく出ていますね。	Iced coffee is selling really well today, isn’t it?	Polite
	知っていましたか？ 安室さん。。	Did you know, Azusa-san...	
	。春先だったら23度夏場だったら30度を超えたら、関東ではホットよりもアイス飲まれるようですよ。	In early spring, when it’s around 23°C, and in summer when it goes above 30°C, people in the Kanto area tend to drink iced beverages more than hot ones.	
	。		
Amuro	へえー、そうなんですか？	Oh really? Is that so?	Polite
Azusa	マスターに教えてもらったんです！	The master (boss) taught me that!	Polite
Amuro	確かに。。。	That makes sense...	Non-Polite
	今日みたいな少し汗ばむ陽気は僕もアイスが飲みたくなる。。。	On a slightly warm day like today that makes you sweat a bit, even I feel like drinking something iced...	[Speech-level shift (formal to plain)]
Azusa	ふふ。。。	Hehe...	Polite
	お皿、洗っちゃいますね！	I’ll go wash the dishes now!	
SFX	♪	♪ (singing)	

*Note: *SFX: Special Effect (special sound effect)*

This interaction demonstrates that politeness in Japanese discourse is not solely motivated by the mitigation of Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Despite the absence of any significant FTA, speakers consistently employ polite forms, indicating that politeness operates as a socially prescribed norm. This supports Ide (1992) concept of *wakimae*, where linguistic behavior is governed by role-based discernment rather than strategic face management. Furthermore, from the perspective of DPT, politeness emerges as a dynamic interactional resource that facilitates conversational flow, alignment, and relational maintenance. Data from Zero's Tea Time demonstrates that the use of plain form in workplace interactions between Amuro and Azusa does not constitute marked behavior. Although polite forms serve as the default baseline in service settings, the coworker relationship introduces flexibility, allowing shifts to plain form without violating *wakimae*-based expectations. Consequently, the behavior value (B) remains 0, indicating no deviation, and the resulting De value confirms the utterance as unmarked. The indication of this unmarked behavior also can be seen with the symbol ♪ to show that Azusa continuing her work while singing which seems unbothered and rather happy with Amuro's speech level shift. This supports Ide (1992) claim that Japanese politeness operates through discernment rather than strict adherence to formality. Even though speech-level shift is seen in this dialogue to ease and lighten the conversation, the overall speech still in polite mode. In this result, shows that the Japanese politeness includes speech-level shift to show friendliness and closeness (formal-plain form).

The data also illustrates that the customer's utterance when ordering iced coffee utilizes the plain form (*da-tai*). This interaction is characterized by the omission of polite markers such as *-kudasai* or *-onegaishimasu*, resulting in the direct statement:

“梓ちゃん、アイス一つね” (Azusa-chan, aisu hitotsu ne)
 “Azusa-chan, one ice, okay?”

The use of the sentence-final particle *ne* serves as an interactional enclitic to seek confirmation or shared understanding Maynard (2008). Although the conversation remains entirely in the non-polite form without any speech level shifts, the exchange is considered unmarked behavior. According to Usami (2002) theory of Discourse Politeness, the behavior value (B) is 0 which the lack of formal honorifics does not signify rudeness here because the linguistic choice aligns with the social expectations of the context. This linguistic behavior is further explained by Ide (1992) concept of *wakimae* (discernment), where polite usage is determined by social norms rather than individual intent. In Japanese society, a customer possessing a higher power ranking (P) due to age or social role is often socially permitted to use plain forms with service staff. The choice of the honorific *-chan* instead of the neutral *-san* highlights a degree of psychological proximity and familiarity. Furthermore, the visual evidence from the manga confirms a significant age gap, where the older customer's use of the plain form and diminutive suffixes is perceived as a natural expression of seniority and closeness rather than a violation of etiquette.

Another example of speech level shift can be found in excerpt 2. This scene starts with Camel talking about the origin of American coffee in Japan after ordering the drink and Amuro praised him for the knowledge. Camel make a short comment with FBI indication where he wanted to showed that his role as FBI agent makes him full of many information about Japan (Table 3).

Excerpt 2:
 Zero Tea Time (Volume 2) Episode 2 Page 24-32
 Default Politeness (DP):
 Amuro (waiter) - Polite
 Camel (customer) - Non-polite

Table 3. Zero tea time (volume 2) episode 2 (page 24-32) manga panel dialogues.

Character	Dialogue	English Translation	Linguistic Form
Amuro	よく勉強して いらっしゃる ようですね...	You seem to have studied [the subject] very well...	Polite (excessive)
Camel	F B I ... (.....)	FBI... (.....)	Non-polite
Camel	...食事も 頼めるかな...	...Can I order food too? The macaroni gratin...	Non-polite
	マカロニ グラタンを...		
Amuro	用意するのに かなり時間が かかりますが...	It will take quite a long time to prepare, though...	Polite
Camel	かかるって どれくらい...	When you say it takes time, how long...	Non-polite
Amuro	すぐにできる ものは...	The things that can be made quickly are... (thinking)	Polite
Amuro	そーですねえ...	Let me see... (Well then...)	Polite
Amuro	強いて言うなら...	If I had to say... (If forced to say...)	Polite
Eating Scene	(サンドイッチを食べ ています)	(Camel is eating sandwich)	-
Camel	これも実にうまい!	This is also truly delicious!	Non-Polite
Camel	シンプルな材料がソー スによって見事に調和 している...	The simple ingredients are harmonizing beautifully thanks to the sauce...	Non-polite
Camel	ピネガーが効いたマヨ ネーズに...	In this vinegar-infused mayonnaise... Is there some kind of secret ingredient?	Non-polite
	何か隠し味が?		
Amuro	いつもの女性はどうし たんですか?	What happened to the usual lady (Camel's work partner)?	Polite
Camel	さあね...	Who knows... She is on another matter, maybe?	Non-polite
	別件で動いているのか ?		
Amuro	早く合流したほうがい いんじゃないですか?	Shouldn't you go and rejoin [them] quickly?	Polite
Camel	君には関係ない!	That's none of your business!	Non-polite
SFX	ガツッ	Clack/Thump	
Amuro	いいご身分ですねえ...	Must be nice to be in your position...	Polite (Excessive)
Amuro	観光だかなんだか知り ませんが...	I don't know if it's for sightseeing or what...	Polite
Amuro	こんな時間にコーヒー ブレイクとは...	but taking a coffee break at this hour...	Non-Polite [Speech-level shift (formal to plain)]
Amuro	まったく欧米人はのん きでうらやましい...	Honestly, Westerners are so carefree, I'm jealous...	Non-Polite [Speech-level shift (formal to plain)]
Amuro	人生の半分がティータ イムのような...	It's as if half of your life is just tea time...	Non-polite [Speech-level shift (formal to plain)]
SFX	ズキッ (Zuki)	Sting/Sharp pain	
Camel (Monolog)	ジョディさんからのメ ールだ...	It's an email from Jodie-san...	Non-polite
Camel	ああ、わかったわかつ た!	Yeah, I get it, I get it!	Non-polite
Camel	もう行くから!	I'm leaving now!	Non-polite
Camel	ご馳走になったよ...	Thanks for the meal...	Non-polite
Amuro	どうも...	Thank you...	Polite

Camel (Monolog)	最高の空間... 最高のコーヒー、そして料理に...	The best atmosphere... the best coffee, and the food...	Non-polite
Camel (Monolog)	最低の店員だった——	[But] he was the worst waiter——	Non-polite

The interaction between the customer (Camel) and the two servers (Azusa and Amuro) provides a rich case study for Usami (2002) Discourse Politeness (DP) theory. While both scenes take place in the same physical space (Café Poirot), the sociolinguistic outcomes are diametrically opposed due to the intentionality behind their speech levels.

Excerpt 1: Azusa and Amuro Encounters: Unmarked Politeness (De = 0)

In the previous chapter, customer's interaction with Azusa was described as unmarked. He used the non-polite (plain) form (Azusa-chan, aisu hitotsu ne), and Azusa responded with standard polite form (-desu/-masu). According to Usami (2024), politeness is not just about honorifics but about maintaining the "expected" social distance. Since it is socially acceptable in Japan for an older customer to use plain form with a younger server, the discrepancy value (De) remains at 0. No one feels offended because everyone is playing their expected role. It is the same case with Amuro's speech level shift from polite to non-polite with Azusa in showing friendliness and agreement with Azusa's statement of the weather.

Excerpt 2: The Amuro and Camel Encounter

Polite-Excessive: Marked "Cold" (De > 0)

In contrast, Amuro's interaction with Camel is marked and highly manipulative. Amuro uses extremely high-level honorifics (De > 0) (e.g., "irassharu", and "gojibun"), which technically should result in a positive behavior (B) value. The cold politeness paradox can be seen as Amuro uses inappropriate honorifics. By using high-level politeness to deliver insults (e.g., "Must be nice to be so carefree"), he creates a psychological wall. Usami (2024) argues that if the intention is to exclude or intimidate, the behavior is marked. While the linguistic form is polite (B is high), the discourse impact is functionally impolite because the shift is marked and deviates from the expected unmarked hospitality of the situation. Amuro uses high hierarchy of politeness as a weapon to push the customer away to finally using non-polite, thus violating the cooperative principle of discourse. While Amuro's use of high honorifics is technically 'polite' at the sentence level, it produces a marked behavior that functions as strategic impoliteness. The impoliteness felt by Camel is not a result of 'rude' language, but of the marked shift away from the expected unmarked hospitality.

Non-polite shift: Marked "Insult" (De < 0)

The Amuro-Camel encounter is a sophisticated example of oscillating markedness. Amuro first employs positive discrepancy (De > 0) through excessive honorifics to alienate the customer, then abruptly shifts to a negative discrepancy (De < 0) by using plain forms to deliver sharp critiques. This 'double-marked' behavior violates the spirit of wakimae (discernment) in two different directions, leading to Camel's visceral 'Zuki' (sting) SFX reaction and his final evaluation of Amuro as the 'worst waiter' despite the high quality of the coffee. This proves the shift is not driven by social hierarchy (Camel

is the customer and should be higher) but by Amuro's situational intent to psychologically unsettle Camel as a tool for exclusion and dominance (*Table 4*).

Table 4. *Discourse politeness summarisation on excerpt 1 and 2.*

Feature	Amuro to Azusa (Friendly)	Amuro to Camel (Cynical)
Linguistic Form	Polite-Non-polite	Polite- Excessive Politeness -Non-Polite
Pragmatic Goal	Agreement/ Friendliness	Intimidation/ Exclusion
Psychological Distance	Close/ Comfortable	Distant/ Hostile
Behaviour Value (B)	0 (Unmarked)	1/ -1 (Marked)
Impact	Harmonious interaction	Psychological wall (pushed away)
Semiotic cue from the hearer	-♪ (Azusa is singing)	- ズキ Zuki (Sting/ Sharp pain onomatopoea)

In summary, the distinction lies in the functional application of politeness strategies. Amuro's dialogue with Azusa demonstrates wakimae (discernment), adhering to social norms to foster a harmonious environment. Conversely, his interaction with Camel utilizes strategic impoliteness. Amuro maintains the grammatical structures of honorifics, he deliberately violates the spirit of politeness to assert dominance. Viewed through Usami (2024) perspective, although Amuro's utterances employ high honorific forms (sonkeigo) on paper, his discourse is functionally less polite because it deviates from expected unmarked hospitality, resulting in a negative shift in the relational balance. This is confirmed by Camel's concluding monologue: while the product (the coffee) was 'the best,' the discourse behavior (the waiter) was 'the worst.' Unlike real-world spoken data, where the interpersonal impact is often obscured by face-saving maneuvers, this manga excerpt allows for a transparent observation of the sociolinguistic impact on the narrative progression.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the factors contributing to speech-level shifts in manga dialogue through the lens of Usami (2002, 2024) Discourse Politeness Theory (DPT). Historically, research into politeness strategies which was pioneered by Brown and Levinson (1987) and expanded by Ide (1992) concept of wakimae has often focused on the static, grammatical application of honorifics as a reflection of social hierarchy. However, the findings of this research demonstrate that politeness is a dynamic, functional tool that operates beyond mere sentence-level grammar. By analyzing the interactions of the character Amuro Toru in Zero's Tea Time, this study successfully addressed the primary research question which is identifying that situational intent and relational goals are the primary drivers of speech-level shifts, rather than social status alone. The results provide a definitive answer to the research question regarding the production of marked and unmarked behaviors. In the interaction with Azusa, the speech-level shifts remained unmarked, adhering to the expected norms of wakimae to maintain a harmonious, professional atmosphere. In stark contrast, the interaction with Camel utilized marked politeness behavior. Here, Amuro's shifts into high honorific forms (sonkeigo) did not serve to show respect, but rather functioned as strategic impoliteness. By strictly following grammatical rules while violating the cooperative spirit of discourse, Amuro exerted dominance and psychological distance. This confirms that a shift to a "higher" linguistic level can, paradoxically, result in a "lower" level of discourse politeness.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the evolving understanding of politeness where the focus moves from what speakers should say to how speakers use

language to negotiate power. By using manga as a data source, this study overcomes a common limitation in sociolinguistic research with the "face-saving" barrier. In natural spoken data, the negative impact of marked politeness is often hidden by social etiquette. However, the narrative structure of manga, specifically Camel's final monologue provides transparent evidence of the discourse's impact. Camel's distinction between the "best" product (the coffee) and the "worst" behavior (the discourse) serves as a clear empirical metric for the success or failure of politeness strategies. Ultimately, this study reinforces the necessity of DPT in modern linguistics. It proves that honorifics are not merely a social lubricant for harmony, but can be weaponized to create conflict. This research opens the door for further studies into how multimodal media can be used to decode the complexities of human interaction, providing a clearer view of the relational shifts that define Japanese social world.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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