Speech Style Shifting as an Interactional Strategy in Japanese Native and Non-native Talks

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Japanese is well-known for having various styles of speech, and switches between them within the same conversation is referred as style shifting (SS). Studies (Cook 2008; Geyer 2008; Ikuta 2008) have examined diverse aspects of SS between desu/masu and plain forms in conversation. This study explores the functions of SS in the actual conversation focusing on how SS is employed toward natives versus non-native recipients.

Findings are a) SS is associated with several distinct functions, and b) Japanese natives employ SS rather differently when talking with natives versus non-natives. For instance, in (1), R (native) asks A (non-native) if she is taking a three-hundred level Japanese even though she is still a second year student:

(1) 1 R: e ninensee de san maru ichi totteru n desu ka. (desu/masu)
  2 A: hai demo= watashi no a kookoo no toki ni= takusan no nihongo no kurasu o torimashita=.
  3 R: a=,
  4 A: a== ichi zero ichi to ichi zero ni o toru koto ga deki= nai a==,
  5 R: a [dekinakatta]. (plain)
  6 A: [tottemasen] hai.

R’s switch to a plain form in 5 is produced right after A’s trouble in completing her utterance as shown in the lengthening and hesitation in 4. Interestingly, though R uses a plain form in 5, the overall politeness level does not seem to change, probably because this utterance does not directly belong to the currently unfolding talk about Japanese language courses but instead is produced as a candidate wording for a completion of A’s utterance in 4. That is, SS seems here to be employed in order to mark that the utterance is only intended to be a subordinate part of the conversation, similar to Ikuta’s “subspace” (2008). I have found that this type of SS occurs approximately twice as frequently when the talk is targeted to non-natives than to natives.

This study thus illuminates how SS is skillfully utilized to achieve interaction with native and non-native speakers, which underscores the importance of closely observing actual use in order to fully understand thus be able to teach SS in a successful manner.

References
