

PEOPLE WATCH

In this issue's People Watch, Anne McLellan Howard interviews Dr. Cyndi Dunn about her work in the field of Japanese keigo and business manner training. The first half of the interview will be presented in this issue and the other half will appear in the 2009 spring issue of *Pragmatic Matters*.

An interview with Dr. Cyndi Dunn

by Anne McLellan Howard

Dr. Cyndi Dunn is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Northern Iowa, who was a Visiting Research Fellow at Tsukuba University in the first semester of 2008. She visited Miyazaki at that time, and I met to talk with her about her research on Japanese keigo and business manner training.

Anne Howard: Let's start with what you're working on now.

Cyndi Dunn: Ok, I'm over here for six months at the University of Tsukuba as a visiting foreign research fellow and I'm doing a study of business manner training. These are companies that actually specialize in various kinds of workforce training, they often do leadership training or critical thinking or researching things, but one of the things that they do that I focused on is specifically for *shinyu shain*, those are new company employees, and it's usually one or two days training in self-presentation. So everything from how to bow and how to exchange your *meishi* [business cards] to how to use *keigo* [Japanese respect language] correctly, how to answer the telephone, and things like that. And I've actually either observed and/or participated in classes offered by five different companies. And have gone and sat in on these one or two days of business manner training and I'm particularly interested in the language ideology stuff but really all of it is really fascinating.

AH: Do you want to talk more about the language ideology?

CD: OK. One of the things that got me into it was an interest in keigo and a sense that a lot of college students were very nervous about their ability to use keigo and particularly going to a job interview they were afraid that their ordinary way of speaking might slip out or they might become tongue-tied. And so that was sort of my initial interest, you know, how do they go about teaching keigo to native speakers of Japanese. And, keigo is part of it but one of the things that I've found is that there's also a lot of emphasis on what they call business *yogo* or business expressions and they often had these worksheets where, here's the incorrect form, and then what would be the correct or desirable form. And part of it is changing things into keigo, but a lot of it actually had to do with other sorts of politeness strategies. Things like changing a command form to a question form. So, rather than *Nani nani shite kudasai* [Please do something or other], *Nani nani shite itadakimasen ka* [Could you do something or other for me?]. Or another thing that they talk about is how to avoid negative phrases and part of that again is just a linguistic form thing, changing something like *dekimasen* to *itashikanemasu*, which even though it still means, "I can't do it," is a positive verb form at least. But then also, thinking more strategically, rather than saying, "He isn't here right now," saying,

“We expect him back around three.” So it’s a more positive rather than negative spin. And this was very interesting to me because, so often Japanese people, including me, tend to focus on the keigo. And there’s the work of say Sachiko Ide, who actually makes the argument that politeness is different in Japanese, because it’s all about these forms and it’s about using them correctly whereas in English you have speech strategies, more Brown and Levinson sort of thing. But a lot of what they’re teaching in these classes is the Brown and Levinson speech strategies. But it’s not, they don’t formalize it for the students. So they don’t say, change a command to a question. Instead there’s this list of bad phrases, how do you make them correct. And so with one phrase, you turn it into a question, with the next phrase you’re apologizing before you ask for the information, and so the students are sort of struggling, to figure out, OK what’s wrong with this phrase and how can we make it more correct.

AH: That’s really fascinating. So I wonder if the people who design these courses, are they aware of these things, or are they just pulling them out of a hat?

CD: No, it really is being pulled, and in fact one of the fascinating things is that they seem to be grabbing from everywhere. There’s some, American psychologist, Moravian or something, who years ago apparently did some study on what you base your first impression on when you first meet someone. And all of [the business manner classes] have these little charts showing that it’s X percent visual and X percent non-verbal and, you know, seven percent the actual words. And they’re all using that. And they have no idea what the actual, original study actually said. Because, when they’re talking about non-verbal, they’re also talking about, like, the clothing you’re wearing. Was he looking at that in the study? I suspect not. Then they use actually a lot of English and things that I think are coming from English business manners or something. So it really seems to be a hodgepodge and particularly on the keigo and the business yougo, it’s just sort of, here’s the correct form, they won’t really sit back and strategize with the students about conceptually what’s going on here. It’s more just a kind of rote

AH: Right. Because I’m thinking if there’s no, sort of, underlying approach, it might be really difficult for the students to understand.

CD: Yeah. I think just, part of what they’re learning is just sort of set phrases that they can know this is a safe phrase to use, and part of that, with keigo in particular I think part of it is reviewing stuff that they probably have learned before, but there too they tend to take a sort of work sheet approach. So it’s like here’s *iku* [the verb “to go”], what’s the *sonkeigo* [respectful form], what’s the *kenjogo* [humble form]? And I was realizing, again actually sitting in these classes myself, that particular thing was probably easier for me as a non-native speaker, because of course that’s how I learned. With word lists. But as a native speaker, that’s not how you learn your native language. So they’re being asked to retrieve from memory a word that they may have heard in context, and then put it in this sort of decontextualized pattern, so I was actually thinking it runs counter to what we know about language acquisition. But one of the students afterwards told me that it was very helpful to him to have it spelled out once and for all in black and white which was *kenjogo* and which was *sonkeigo*. In other words, he knows these phrases and he probably does use them, but he’s thinking wait, which is it. So to actually have someone spell out here’s what the rules are, he actually found very helpful. It probably just makes them a little less insecure as well. At least the first time that you’re actually in a real situation handing out your *meishi* to someone you will have walked through it once before.

And it really is interesting on things like answering the telephone, just how awkward they are the first time they try to get through it. And this is not high level, you know, what do you do about the angry complaining customer. This is, “Hello, this is such and such company, may I help you? I’m afraid he’s not in right now, would you like to call back later?” and that’s what they’re practicing. But the first time, they’re tongue-tied, they’re not sure what to say. So I think just having gone through it once or twice, and sort of knowing, OK I can use that phrase, we used that phrase in my business manner class, may help.

AH: But they have keigo in high school, right? Or do they?

CD: I’ve asked and I’ve gotten varied answers but it sounds like they do at least have some previous, similar sort of thing you know here’s the *sonkeigo* for *taberu* [to eat], here’s the *sonkeigo* for this that and the other. When they do the worksheets, there’s a lot of variation in terms of their incoming knowledge. Some of them can just whip right through that worksheet, others are scratching their heads. And the teachers will then call on them and say, you know, what’s this. And they asked one young man “What’s the *kenjogo* for *taberu*?” And he had no idea. Now I know he said *itadakimasu*¹ a million times. So I think again it was just that he hadn’t, he didn’t have it mentally that oh, that’s the *kenjogo* for *taberu*. And there’s some phrases that they’ve probably heard but not used. One of the quote business yougo [lessons has] *wakarimashita* [I understand] as an undesirable phrase. And what do you say instead? And they’re all shaking their heads. And when they hear *kashikomarishita*, it’s like, a, aha! Like, I know that one!

Footnotes

¹ Itadakimasu is the *kenjogo*, or humble form, of the verb *taberu*, to eat. Japanese people ritually say it before eating.

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