

# Learners' pragmatic awareness of softener use

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Japanese EFL learners' fewer varieties and less frequent English softener use than NSs were observed in a previous study conducted by Nogami (2004). This study aims to measure NNSs' awareness and intentions regarding softening messages because it seems to be unknown whether NNSs intentionally or unintentionally use only a few softeners. For example, it is possible that they may not know how to soften their messages. Alternatively, they may not regard softening their utterances as necessary. The main research questions were: (1) Are NNSs aware of modifying their illocutionary force? (2) Do NNSs' utterances correlate with their intentions? Data was collected by open-ended role-play discussion and a retrospective questionnaire. The results indicated that NNSs were generally not aware of softening messages. Their limited use of softeners was seemingly caused by their low levels of pragmatic awareness and lack of linguistic knowledge in spontaneous verbal communication.

日本人英語学習者が英語のsoftenerを英語母語話者よりもより少ない種類を、及びより低頻度使用する、ということが前研究で検証された(Nogami, 2004)。本研究では語用論領域ではまだあまり研究がされていないsoftener使用に関する非英語母語話者の語用論的意識、意図を図ることを目的とした。例えば、彼らがあまり発話を和らげないのは意図的なのか、又は必要性がないと判断しているからなのかという事項は未知のままである。よって本研究課題は以下の二点とする。1) 非英語母語話者は発話内効力を和らげるということに留意しているかどうか。2) 非英語母語話者の発話と意図・意識との間に関連性が見られるかどうか。

研究方法としては回顧的アンケートを用いた。そのアンケート結果により非英語母語話者の語用論的意識は低く、及び彼らのsoftenerの低頻度使用は自然発話においての言語知識の欠如が原因となって起こると結論づけられた。

**A**t the relatively early stage of language learning, nonnative speakers of English (NNSs) focus on making themselves understood in terms of the content of what they want to say. Similarly, their interlocutors would probably not pay much attention to pragmatic aspects of language use when they are trying to understand the message being conveyed. On the other hand, as learners' language proficiency increases, they may be expected to speak more appropriately than lower proficiency learners

when communicating in a target language. Softeners play a role to facilitate the speaker-hearer relationship, including the enhancement of solidarity and the maintenance of social distance (Holmes, 1982, 1984a, 1984b). Therefore, various studies on softening elucidate some of the essential aspects of communication.

Many studies provide evidence that NNSs use fewer softeners than native speakers of English (NSs). For instance, House & Kasper (1981) conducted a cross-cultural comparative observation, and found that German EFL students softened messages less frequently than NSs. As additional examples, LoCastro's (1993) study in the setting of a business meeting; Nogami's (2004) study in open-ended discussions; and Rinnert & Iwai's (2003) three regional (U.S., Japan, and Singapore) cross-cultural questionnaire studies on complaints showed that Japanese speakers of English mitigate their messages less often than NSs. Many interlanguage pragmatics or second language acquisition researchers tend to be occupied with consideration of linguistic politeness matters that arise from cross-cultural norms of language use, the role of pragmatic instruction, input and output. In contrast, it seems that few researchers have devoted themselves to the investigation of nonnative speakers' intentions toward their utterances, especially with respect to their softener usage. For instance, it is not known whether they intentionally or unintentionally use only a few softeners. Similarly, it remains to be determined why they show little use of softeners. For example, it could come from their not knowing how to soften their messages, or it could be that they had learned the particular softeners they wanted to use but could not remember and say them spontaneously.

Alternatively, it could be because they regard that softening their utterances is not necessary. Therefore, I formulated the following two research questions.

- 1) Are NNSs aware of modifying their illocutionary force?
- 2) Do NNSs' utterances correlate with their intentions?

In this study, softeners mean lexical devices to soften messages or propositions asserted, such as *would*, *probably*, *I think*, *I wonder*, *kind of*, *a little*, *like*, *you know*, *as far as I knew from what information I had here*, and *it's nice to think about* (Nogami, 2004). The present study deals with the analysis of a retrospective questionnaire, which was answered by Japanese EFL students to examine the two research questions above. However, it should be noted that this questionnaire survey is the latter stage of a larger investigation. At the earlier stage, I collected open-ended discussion data from Japanese EFLs and NSs, and on the basis of the conversational data, I analyzed softeners quantitatively and found that NNSs softener use was much less than that of NSs in terms of variety and frequency (Nogami, 2004). After this first stage, a retrospective questionnaire was administered. I will explain details of the original discussion data collection and the post-discussion retrospective questionnaire in the following section.

## Methodology

In this section, I will describe background information of the participants and the procedure of the investigation.

The participants in this research were eight Japanese EFL college students majoring in international studies, all female. Their English language proficiencies were high intermediate

to high advanced. Their TOEIC scores ranged from 720 to 965. The length of their experiences staying in English speaking countries ranged from zero to five years (Table 1).

As mentioned above, prior to the questionnaire survey, spoken English data was collected during discussion sessions. The students were divided into four groups, each of which included one native speaker of English, and asked to discuss a given topic related to a contemporary social issue.<sup>1</sup> Each discussion lasted approximately 30 minutes, and all the sessions were video- and tape-recorded and transcribed. Two to three weeks after their discussion sessions, participants answered the retrospective questionnaire survey in Japanese.<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire was given to them with the transcription of their own spoken data. In the transcription, softeners used by their native interlocutors’ were highlighted for the respondents in order to give them some idea of what softeners are like.<sup>3</sup>

The retrospective questionnaire consisted of four questions:

- Question A: The participants were asked to circle one number on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = never being careful to 5 = always being careful in order to measure to what degree they were aware of softening

their messages when they spoke in English.

- Question B: The participants were then asked to identify and highlight softeners that were used by the respondents themselves.
- Question C: Each respondent was asked to judge each of her utterances with respect to softening messages. Judgment criteria were mainly the following seven points:
  - 1) Even though you wanted to soften messages, you changed the way you spoke because you did not know how to express it or because you have forgot expressions.
  - 2) Even though you wanted to soften messages, you omitted or left it out because you did not know or forgot expressions.
  - 3) You consciously softened messages, as you wanted.
  - 4) You softened messages unconsciously.
  - 5) Even though you wanted to soften messages, you did not know appropriate expressions, and still now you do not know how to do it.

Table 1. Japanese participants’ backgrounds

NNSs’ pseudonyms	MOMO	NAZUNA	DAISY	FREESIA	KAEDE	SAKURA	SATSUKI	SUMIRE
TOEIC score	965	855	885	875	750	785	720	745
Stay Experience*	5 yrs	5 yrs	6 mos	1 yrs	3 wks	4wks	3wks	0

\*Stay Experience: the duration of experiences staying in English speaking countries.

- 6) You had no idea about whether you should soften messages or not.
- 7) You did not think that you had to soften messages.

After answering the questions above, for the utterances they judged under criteria 1 and 2, the respondents were asked to recall and write down expressions that they initially had wanted to say or would say in retrospect instead of what they had said.

- Question D: The respondents were asked to evaluate their own utterances overall in terms of the extent to which they thought they softened their utterances. As the evaluation criteria, the five-point Likert scale was provided.

Results and discussion

In this section, I will show the results and discussion related to each question in the same order as they were presented on the questionnaire. First, the result and observations on Question A: Awareness of softening message will be introduced. Question B: retrospective self-judgments and Question C: self-modification will follow this. Lastly the results and discussion on Question D: self-evaluation will be presented.

Question A: Awareness of softening messages

First, participants responded to the question: To what extent are you aware of using softeners when you usually speak in English? (See Table 2.) Only one participant chose level 4 on the five-point scale of awareness, which indicated that she was often careful about softening her messages. This is the only reply showing a clear positive response. The other seven participants showed neutral and negative responses. Three of them rated their awareness as level 3, which could be interpreted as being undecided or as not knowing whether they pay attention to using softeners. The other three NNSs selected level 2, meaning that they are rarely conscious of applying softeners. Lastly, one chose level 1. This implies that she felt she would never be careful about using softeners. Thus, it can be said that most of the participants were reportedly not aware of softening their messages except for one participant (MOMO). However, this may have resulted from the fact that she majored in sociolinguistics as an undergraduate, picking up ideas throughout the course and reading papers on subjects related to pragmatics and second language studies.

Table 2. Awareness of softening messages

NNSs' pseudonyms	MOMO	NAZUNA	DAISY	FREESIA	KAEDE	SAKURA	SATSUKI	SUMIRE
Question A scale	4	2	2	3	3	1	3	2

\*1: Never being careful, 2: Usually not being careful, 3: I don't know, 4: Sometimes being careful, 5: Always being careful

Question B: Retrospective self-judgments

The second question of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to identify softeners within their own utterances, and to look back and judge what they said during the discussion regarding their softener use. The responses to the task were rather diverse because the number of total words spoken, turn-taking, and softeners differed greatly from person to person; thus, due to space limitations, only those findings which seem to give us interesting insights will be introduced.

By observing the responses as a whole, I found three main features: a) Softeners were mostly used unconsciously; b) Places where no softeners were used tended to be evaluated as having no need for softening; c) Softeners were sometimes used consciously. Respondents who have experienced living in U.S. for five years (MOMO & NAZUNA) showed a strong tendency toward findings A and B. Almost all of their softener use was conducted unconsciously. This is probably because they are both near-bilingual NNSs; in essence, they may have enough control when speaking English and their softeners may be automatized in their English language use.

Question C: Self-modifications

As shown in Table 3, four of the participants made modifications and the other four did not.

Next, I will describe the modifications made by the four participants who made them (DAISY, FREESIA, KAEDE, SATSUKI) below (Table 4).<sup>4</sup> In the *Original* column, the participants’ original spoken discourse samples are listed. Underlined words and phrases in the Original column are those parts deleted after participants’ modifications. Single caret marks indicate points where participants inserted words. The *After modification* column shows the results of modifications made by the respondents. The words and phrases in capital and highlighted letters in the After modifications column are those added as modifications by the participants themselves. Softeners that were identified at the original stage of the study (Nogami, 2004) are shown in italics as references for the readers.

There are 24 modifications in total made by the four participants. All of them are utterances that contained messages that the respondents initially desired to soften while talking. First, we have 3 modification samples made reportedly because the participant did not know how to soften the utterance (Examples 1, 2, & 3 in Table 4). In

Table 3. Self-modification of utterances

NNSs’ pseudonyms	MOMO	NAZUNA	DAISY	FREESIA	KAEDE	SAKURA	SATSUKI	SUMIRE
*Self-modification	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0

\*0: No modifications made, 1: modifications made

Table 4. Lists of modifications made by the participants

Ex	Respondent	Original	After modifications
1	KAEDE	She is staying on the bed long time, <i>I think</i> .	She <b>MAY BE</b> staying on the bed long time, <i>I think</i> .
2	DAISY	<u>I see</u> .*	<b>MIGHT BE</b> .
3	DAISY	<i>I think</i> it's just because it says she collapsed during the trial claiming her innocence.	<i>I think</i> it's just <b>IT WOULD BE JUST</b> because it says she collapsed during the trial claiming her innocence.
4	FREESIA	Yeah, we are putting much the same.	Yeah, we are putting <b>PRETTY</b> much the same.
5	FREESIA	I never faced to this kind of situation.	<b>I THINK</b> I never faced to this kind of situation, <b>HAVE YOU?</b>
6	FREESIA	We put it different place.	We put it <b>PRETTY</b> different place, <b>DIDN'T WE?</b>
7	FREESIA	She is living Virginia or <i>somewhere</i> .	She <b>SEEMS TO BE</b> living Virginia or <i>somewhere</i> .
8	SATSUKI	Yeah the surgery will be easy, more easier than using to B patient B, to patient D or.	Yeah <b>I THINK</b> the surgery will be easy, more easier than using to B patient B, to patient D or.
9	SATSUKI	Because she is she hasn't she didn't do anything but she will be punished, -.	Because she <b>SEEMS TO BE</b> (that) she hasn't she didn't do anything but she will be punished, -.
10	SATSUKI	She is not; she is innocent enough to tell you.	<b>I THINK</b> she is not; she is innocent enough to tell you.
11	SATSUKI	- if the heart transp ahh, transferred to him <i>maybe</i> ahh, <i>maybe</i> , or <i>possibly</i> he <u>will be</u> reject more so.	- if the heart transp ahh, transferred to him <i>maybe</i> ahh, <i>maybe</i> , or <i>possibly</i> he <b>WOULD</b> reject more so.
12	SATSUKI	I, <i>I think</i> (...) kids are really important but not only the numbers but also ages for kids, ages of kids or their parents or one? It is difficult.	I, <i>I think</i> (...) kids are really important but not only the numbers but <b>I THINK</b> also ages for kids, ages of kids or their parents or one? It is difficult.
13	SATSUKI	Very little small kids, babies mmm. than other children who, if the person who has children now <i>maybe</i> their children has no parents <i>maybe</i> adopted (...).	<b>I THINK</b> very little small kids, babies mmm. than other children who, if the person who has children now <i>maybe</i> their children has no parents <i>maybe</i> adopted (...).
14	SATSUKI	<u>No, no no no</u> , ahh, he, his heart problem is ah, congenital one,	No, I <b>DON'T THINK SO, ACTUALLY</b> he, his heart problem is ah, congenital one,

15	SATSUKI	- possibility of his rejecting <u>be</u> one more occurred yes, it can be, so.	- possibility of his rejecting <b>WOULD</b> be one more occurred yes, it can be, so.
16	KAEDE	- so if she die after she die, umm, children <sup>^</sup> have to live alone.	- so if she die after she die, umm, children <b>MAYBE</b> have to live alone.
17	KAEDE	- So, umm, someone <sup>^</sup> say that she is very famous. So, it's valuable, wealthy but it's not problem .	- So, umm, someone <b>MAY</b> say that she is very famous. So, it's valuable, wealthy but it's not problem, <b>I THINK.</b>
18	KAEDE	Because he is young, so <u>he has a future</u> (.), so.	Because he is young, so <b>HE MAY HAVE BRIGHT FUTURE</b> (.), so.
19	KAEDE	- industrial spy case and, umm she <u>can't</u> explain um, why she claiming her innocence	- industrial spy case and, umm she <b>MAY WANT TO</b> explain um, why she claiming her innocence
20	KAEDE	I thought that if she gets the heart and operation was successful, she <u>can</u> get a chance to work and get job.	I thought that if she gets the heart and operation was successful, she <b>COULD</b> get a chance to work and get job.
21	KAEDE	I don't think so, <sup>^</sup> their children, (.) children have to stay in dangerous place.	I don't think so, their children, (.) children <b>MAYBE</b> have to stay in dangerous place.
22	KAEDE	- she <u>should</u> solve this problem, so <i>I thought</i> third person she is.	- she <b>MAY BE ABLE TO</b> solve this problem <b>IF SHE GETS FOR OPERATION</b> , so I thought third person she is.
23	DAISY	She <sup>^</sup> grows up at New York.	She <b>MIGHT</b> grow up at New York.
24	DAISY	- so their age <sup>^</sup> affect our decisions? What do you think?	- so their age <b>WOULDN'T</b> affect our decisions? What do you think?

\*This was not regarded by me as a softener.

other words, for instance, in example 2, the respondent said, "I see." during the discussion, but actually she wanted to say, "Might be." These samples could explain the speakers' intentions to soften messages and their maneuverings to deal with the problematic situations.

From examples 4 to 24 in Table 4, we can see the other 21 modifications the respondents made, in all of which cases in spite of their desire to soften expressions, they failed to do because of limitations in their linguistic knowledge. For

instance, one respondent (example 4: FREESIA) actually said, "Yeah, we are putting much the same"; nevertheless she wanted to mitigate the assertion to some extent by using "pretty."

An interesting alternation can be seen in example 22. Originally the respondent used a booster, i.e., a device that reinforces the message, *should*, even though she wanted to soften the message. In the task, she changed this booster to the softener *may* and in the following context, as well. I



assume that similar cases are quite possibly happening for NNSs, i.e., using boosters that are instantly available when people’s intention does not link to certain words or phrases to soften messages spontaneously. They might choose expressions on the basis of grammatical or syntactic features rather than semantic aspects. This assumption may provide a possible reason for some early research findings that suggest nonnative speakers use boosting devices more frequently than native speakers do (House & Kasper, 1981; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992).

When observing all the examples of self-modification in Table 4, we can see that the participants modified their utterances with several new strategies. That is, they applied new softeners, which were never used by each of them in the actual discussion. Examples of such innovative self-modification can be seen below:

- KAEDE: e.g. 1, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22: *may, could*
- DAISY: e.g. 2, 3, 23, 24: *might, would, wouldn’t*
- FREESIA: e.g. 4, 6, 7: *pretty, seems to be, -, didn’t we?*
- SATSUKI: e.g. 9, 11, 14, 15: *actually, would, seems to be*

Those newly used softeners may have previously been learned by each respondent; if so, that would explain why they were able to apply those familiar terms in this task. In such cases, those terms apparently had not been automatized

enough for them to use these softeners spontaneously. This might be because of the fact that second language (L2) oral production is not immediately connected to what they have acquired (Kasper and Kellerman, 1997).

Another possibility could be that the above four participants learned the new softeners while they were working on the task by looking through their NS interlocutors’ softener usage in the transcripts. In that case, it is anticipated that they learned softeners implicitly when they worked through the sequence of tasks.

Overall, the results seem, consistent with these examples, to provide some evidence that NNSs do sometimes have the desire to soften messages; that is, they are aware of a need for softening messages. However, in most situations they find it difficult to recall softening devices and/or to deal with strategies to soften messages due to limitations of linguistic knowledge. Therefore, it appears to indicate that NNSs’ infrequent use of softeners can sometimes be caused by lack of availability of softening devices when they verbally produce language spontaneously.

Question D: Self-evaluation

As the last question (See Table 5), respondents were asked to evaluate to what extent they positively evaluated

Table 5. Self-evaluation of softener uses

NNSs’ pseudonyms	MOMO	NAZUNA	DAISY	FREESIA	KAEDE	SAKURA	SATSUKI	SUMIRE
Question D scale	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	2

\*1: Not using sufficiently, 2:somewhat insufficiently, 3: I don’t know, 4:Somewhat satisfactory, 5: Using softeners satisfactorily



their softener use on the 5-point Likert-scale. Only one (SATSUKI) out of the eight participants responded as being neutral (rating 3); alternatively, this neutral response could indicate her uncertainty toward this question. The remaining seven participants valued their use of softeners as not quite sufficient (rating 2), as they were basically not satisfied with their softener use.

One participant (MOMO) provided the following comment on her response:

In spite of the fact that I always try to mitigate my messages, especially when I speak to older and higher status people, when I compared my own softener usage with that of the native speaker in discussion, I realized my use was too few (translated from original Japanese).

Her response lends support to the possibility that NNSs can comprehend how many softeners NSs apply in discourse and become aware of the extent to which NNSs themselves use mitigation devices. However, I cannot be very sure whether the findings mean that NNSs' recognitions led them to try to use more mitigators in their messages. Moreover, the findings indicate how NSs express their doubt and uncertainty in their propositions and convey solidarity and camaraderie through those mitigators. This study did not aim to reveal those points, but it could be fruitful to investigate them in future investigations.

## Conclusion

I investigated NNS participants' self-reported behavior and attitudes in terms of measuring Japanese speakers' awareness

and intentions regarding English softener use. Many did not appear to have been aware of softening their messages when they were speaking in English. Only one NNS showed a positive response, which can indicate she was aware of either softening her utterances or the need to soften her utterances to some extent. However, it is not clear which of these two states of awareness she held. In contrast, the other seven NNSs only showed neutral or negative responses.

Additionally, the analysis revealed the following aspects of NNSs intentions toward using softeners. First, the results regarding this aim of the study appeared to vary individually. The responses of the participants who have lived in U.S. for five years seem to indicate that they use softeners without conscious recognition of doing so. As well as these two participants, the other six participants also indicated that they softened messages unintentionally to some extent. Second, the four participants who modified their utterances in the retrospective task offered additional evidence regarding their situations related to softening messages. Taking their responses into consideration, NNSs sometimes cannot use softeners even though they want to, which is possibly related to their lack of linguistic knowledge that makes them unable to mitigate messages. Because of time limitations, the present study applied a retrospective multiple-choice questionnaire to understand nonnative speakers' awareness toward softening. However, such a written questionnaire could not reach beyond the most obvious participants' intentions. Therefore, a retrospective protocol interview could have been more productive to collect data to approach the more core components of participants' thoughts, as well as to analyze learners' intentions and awareness of mitigating messages.

In conclusion, NNSs' less frequent softener use in comparison with that of native speakers of English found in my previous empirical investigation (Nogami, 2004) could be caused by low pragmatic awareness and limitations of grammatical knowledge with respect to softening messages. It seems that there is a mixture of several factors to explain NNSs' limited usage of softeners. As well as the aspects investigated in the present study, there could be some other factors, such as influence from the NNSs' first language. Softening is one method to decrease the force of utterances both in English and Japanese. However, ways of softening differ syntactically in the two languages (Kanemaru, 1988<sup>5</sup>; Oshima, 1997<sup>6</sup>). Thus, it can be beneficial in the near future, to explore the use of softeners both in Japanese and English by native Japanese speakers and Japanese speakers of English. By doing this, more insightful observations could be made.

### Notes

1) The topic of the debate was "Who gets the heart?" which was composed based on a topic from an ESL discussion practice book (Rooks, 1988, pp. 7-11). The participants were fictive members of a citizens' committee to advise the heart transplant surgery team at a university hospital, and they had to decide which of the five patients was to receive the heart that had become available for transplantation. The participants had several pieces of information about five patients who were all classified as "critically ill."

2) The delay in administering the questionnaire survey was caused by the time it took to transcribe and analyze the recorded discussion data.

3) The retrospective survey was conducted individually in front of me. I confirmed with each respondent that they understood what softeners are.

4) Several expressions were adapted slightly by me when the original expressions were not grammatically correct. However, they were not modified completely since the original utterance was to be respected.

5) Kanemaru (1988) analyzed overlapping functions of hedges in Japanese and English, and identified adjunctive expressions (*more or less, possibly*) that are used in English, and postpositional particles (*~ne*) and auxiliary verbs (*~rashii, ~mitai*) used in Japanese to soften illocutionary force.

6) Oshima (1997) investigated English and Japanese hedges (he called them modal adjuncts) that express probability including *maybe* and *probably*. He says modal adjuncts, modal verbs (*can, might*), interrogatives, and subjunctives are mainly used to soften messages in English; on the other hand, in Japanese, verbs (*~hazuda*), postpositional particles (*~kamo*), or adverbs (*~darou*) play major roles as softeners.

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