RESEARCH

Strategi Kesantunan Mengkritik dalam Dunia Kerja di Jepang: Kajian Pragmatik

Politeness Strategies for Criticizing in The Japanese Workplace: A Pragmatic Study

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Abstrak

Kritik dalam dunia kerja memiliki peran penting dalam meningkatkan kinerja individu dan tim, serta memperbaiki kekurangan yang ada dalam proses kerja. Namun, cara penyampaian kritik sangat menentukan bagaimana pesan tersebut diterima. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji strategi kesantunan dalam mengkritik di lingkungan kerja Jepang, dengan merujuk pada teori kesantunan kritik yang dikonsepkan oleh Nguyen (2005). Menggunakan metode Discourse Completion Test (DCT), penelitian ini melibatkan 25 mahasiswa Program Studi Sastra Jepang Universitas Ngudi Waluyo yang bekerja di Jepang. Hasil analisis mengungkapkan bahwa dalam dunia kerja di Jepang, kritik jarang disampaikan secara langsung karena berpotensi merusak harmoni (wa) dan menimbulkan rasa malu, terutama dalam hubungan sejajar atau formal. Kritik langsung hanya digunakan dalam situasi mendesak atau hubungan hierarkis, ditandai dengan penyampaian tegas dan eksplisit untuk perbaikan segera. Sebaliknya, kritik tidak langsung lebih umum digunakan dengan strategi kebahasaan seperti saran, ajakan, atau pertanyaan untuk menjaga kesopanan dan stabilitas hubungan. Dari perspektif sosiopragmatik, norma budaya, hierarki status, dan konteks sosial memengaruhi pemilihan strategi kritik. Sementara itu, dari perspektif pragmalinguistik, elemen kebahasaan halus dan implisit menjadi sarana efektif untuk menjaga harmoni dan

menghindari konfrontasi. Keberhasilan penyampaian kritik bergantung pada keseimbangan antara efektivitas komunikasi dan menjaga hubungan harmonis.

Kata kunci: Dunia Kerja Jepang, Harmoni (*wa*), Kajian Pragmatik, Kesantunan, Strategi Mengkritik

Abstract

Criticism plays a crucial role in improving individual and team performance and addressing shortcomings in workplace processes. However, the way criticism is delivered significantly impacts how it is received. This study examines politeness strategies in delivering criticism in Japanese workplaces, drawing on Nguyen's (2005) politeness theory. Using the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) method, the study involved 25 students from the Japanese Literature Program at Ngudi Waluyo University who work in Japan. The findings reveal that direct criticism is rarely used in Japanese workplaces as it risks disrupting wa (harmony) and causing embarrassment, particularly in formal or peer relationships. Direct criticism is employed only in urgent situations or within hierarchical relationships, characterized by explicit, firm language aimed at immediate correction. Conversely, indirect criticism is more prevalent, utilizing linguistic strategies such as suggestions, invitations, or questions to maintain politeness and relational stability. From a sociopragmatic perspective, cultural norms, status hierarchies, and social contexts influence the choice of criticism strategies. From a pragmalinguistic perspective, subtle and implicit linguistic elements are effective in preserving harmony and avoiding confrontation. The study concludes that the success of delivering criticism relies on balancing communicative effectiveness with maintaining harmonious workplace relationships.

***Keywords**: Criticism Strategies, Harmony (Wa), Japanese Work Culture, Pragmatic Studies, Politeness*

INTRODUCTION

Within the workplace environment, criticism is an important element that cannot be avoided. Constructive criticism plays a role in improving individual and team performance, as well as correcting mistakes or shortcomings that occur in the work process. However, the way criticism is delivered determines how the message is received. Criticizing is known as a speech act that is prone to embarrassment (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This is understandable because criticism is generally expressed by giving a negative evaluation or bad judgment on the behavior of someone who is the target of criticism (Nguyen, 2005).

Direct criticism is generally perceived as rude and damaging to social relationships. Therefore, strategies for giving criticism often use subtle and non-confrontational means, such as *hinting* (hinting indirectly) or the use of language that reduces the strength of the criticism (Banat, Al-Natour, Almahasees, & Al-Omari, 2024). Criticism can also be delivered while maintaining politeness to protect the recipient's self-esteem or "face".

In Japanese culture, criticism is generally delivered implicitly, through hints or rhetorical questions, to encourage reflection without confrontation. This is based on the

fact that in Japan work culture has characteristics that are strongly influenced by social norms, one of which is the concept of *politeness*. This polis not only a tool to maintain harmony in the work environment, but also to avoid open conflict that is contrary to Japanese cultural principles such as *wa* (harmony) and *tatemae* (outward appearance that maintains social relations). In a culture that prioritizes such harmony, the use of indirect language, hedging, and apologies are key to defusing tensions (Haristiani, Septiana, Nor, & Nagata, 2023). Another strategy is positive politeness, such as balancing criticism with praise or showing empathy (Sönmez & Akbaş, 2023).

The strong social hierarchy in Japanese organizations also affects how criticism is delivered. Criticism from superiors to subordinates, for example, tends to be more acceptable due to differences in social status, whereas criticism from subordinates to superiors must be delivered with great care and politeness. Politeness is not just a matter of form of expression. It also includes various ways to show the speaker's feeling of familiarity with the interlocutor, to increase the feeling of friendship, as well as to confirm such actions so that the interlocutor feels comfortable or unburdened (Koizumi, 2001:127-128).

Many studies on politeness strategies in criticizing have been conducted (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Takahashi, T., et al, 1993; Takahashi S, 2001, Tracy, Van Dusen, & Robinson, 1987; Wajnryb, 1993d). Tracy and Eisenberg (1990) reveal that giving criticism is not just about expressing disagreement or providing feedback. There are many goals to consider, such as maintaining relationships, providing constructive feedback, and avoiding conflicts that could worsen the situation. Critics need to pay attention to the social and communication context. Without considering the context, criticism may actually trigger unwanted reactions, damaging the relationship that has been established.

Jauhari (2018, 2021) in his research on politeness strategies in Surabaya Javanese society found that Javanese people tend to be very careful in giving criticism, especially in formal contexts, such as in the workplace. By using politeness tools in language, they try to reduce *face-threatening*. This research shows how strongly cultural norms influence the way people give criticism, avoiding direct confrontation and preferring more subtle and considerate ways.

Meanwhile, Indrawati (2019) examined how English Department students' pragmatic competence in giving criticism. Through the *Discourse Completion Task* (DCT), Indrawati found that although students tried to adjust their criticism strategies to the existing social context, the appropriateness of their language use was still low. This can be seen from errors in grammar, lexicon, and understanding of social context related to status and social distance. This study highlights the importance of developing pragmatic competence among university students, so that they can provide criticism in a more effective way, in accordance with applicable social norms.

Finally, Mulac et al. (2000) also conducted research on gender differences in the way criticism is given in the professional world. In their study *Female and Male Managers' Criticism Giving*, they found that there are clear differences in the way men and women give criticism. Men are more likely to use direct language, with negative words and questions, while women more often choose a more subtle way, using longer sentences, intensive adverbs, and avoiding direct confrontation. This research shows that gender differences in critique delivery do not always conform to existing stereotypes, and demonstrates how complex the way critique is received can be depending on gender factors.

This study aims to examine politeness strategies in direct and indirect criticism spoken in the Japanese work environment. What distinguishes this study from previous research is that the focus of this study's analysis is on politeness strategies in criticizing specifically in Japanese culture, especially in the context of the Japanese workplace. By understanding how this criticism practice takes place, the author can see how Japanese culture and social values can shape professional communication and how it affects work dynamics in the Japanese workplace, both in the field of offices, services, and so on related to social relationships, such as: superiors and subordinates, coworkers, outsiders and insiders and others.

METHODS

In this study, the *Discourse Completion Test* (DCT) method was used, which is a questionnaire-based elicitation technique to obtain data on how students convey criticism in their work situations (Ogiermann, 2018).

The informants were 25 students of the Japanese Literature Study Program of Ngudi Waluyo University (UNW) who worked in Japan while studying, focusing on those who worked in various service, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors. They were asked to fill out a DCT questionnaire containing criticism scenarios, both direct and indirect, designed based on Nguyen's (2005) theory of criticism politeness. This questionnaire was distributed through the college's *Whatsapp* group, with the aim of exploring how students convey criticism in various situations relevant to their work experience in Japan.

After data collection, the next step is to examine and screen the responses from the informants to identify the politeness strategies used. Irrelevant data will be eliminated, and relevant results will be analyzed using a pragmatic approach. The focus of this analysis is on the difference between direct and indirect criticism and how Japanese cultural factors, such as social hierarchy and the use of honorific language, affect the criticism strategies applied by university students. The results of the analysis are then interpreted and described.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Politeness in Pragmalinguistics and

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies language use in social and situational contexts. The main focus of pragmatics is on how meaning is constructed through the interaction of speaker and hearer, taking into account external factors such as the purpose of communication, social context, culture, as well as the relationship between speaker and interlocutor (Kiefer, 2007; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989; Slotta, 2021).

Sociopragmatics is a subfield within pragmatics that emphasizes the relationship between language use and social factors that influence communication. Sociopragmatics focuses on how social elements, such as social status, roles, relationships between speakers and listeners, and cultural norms, affect the way language is used in communication (Andersen & Aijmer, 2011). Meanwhile, pragmalinguistics is a study within pragmatics that focuses on the use of linguistic elements, such as word choice, sentence structure, and language strategies, to convey meaning and achieve communication goals (Leech, 2014).

Politeness in sociopragmatics focuses more on context-sensitive social or cultural politeness, which is influenced by external factors in communication. Meanwhile, pragmalinguistics focuses more on aspects of the language itself, such as

the selection of appropriate speech forms, communication strategies, and how to convey meaning in the appropriate context. Politeness in pragmalinguistics focuses on the realization of linguistic politeness that is more *context-free*, or free from dependence on social context. For example, politeness in the form of *requests* in English *can* be expressed through the use of question forms, modal auxiliaries (*can/could*), or past tense forms (*could* instead of *can*), which are linguistic elements available to convey politeness in requests (Leech, 2014).

In Japan, society has a vertical social structure, where key relationships between individuals are often bound by hierarchy, such as between seniors and juniors in a group (Matsumoto, 1988). In this culture, in-group relationships (*ie*) are considered more important than out-group relationships (Ochiai, 2007). This creates a dualism: *uchi* (in-group) and *soto* (out-group). In addition, Japanese communication is also influenced by the concepts of *honne* (true feelings or intentions) and *tatemae* (more formal and indirect actions or statements) (Himma et al., 2008). Often, Japanese people hide their personal feelings to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation, as direct expression of feelings or wishes may be considered rude and may hurt the feelings of others.

Although the politeness in criticism discussed in this article is more likely to be pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic aspects also play a role, especially since this study examines communication in the context of Japanese culture, especially in the world of work in Japan. According to Mizuutani (1991), there are seven factors that determine politeness in Japanese speech: 1) *familiarity*; 2) *age*; 3) *social relation*; 4) *social* status; 5) *gender*; 6) *group membership*; and 7) *situation*. If one's language is not in line with these factors, one may be perceived as arrogant, haughty, or impolite, which risks damaging one's social image. Language politeness is therefore an important aspect of social interaction in Japan, where the value of *wa* (social harmony) is highly valued. Maintaining good relationships and harmony with others is a principle that is highly upheld in Japanese culture, both in social interactions and in the workplace.

Critique Strategy

Nguyen (2005: 110) argues that criticism can be interpreted as an illocutionary act whose illocutionary intention is to give a negative assessment of the actions, choices, words, and work of the interlocutor that may be his responsibility. This action is carried out in the hope of influencing the interlocutor's actions in the future to be better for his own benefit according to the speaker's view or to communicate the speaker's dissatisfaction or dislike of what the interlocutor has done but without the implication that the interlocutor's actions have undesirable consequences for the speaker. Meanwhile, Hoang (2007: 136) states that, "criticizing is sometimes performed to vent the speaker's negative feeling or attitude to the hearer or the hearer's work, choice, behavior, etc."

Nguyen's (2005, 2008) strategies of criticism, realizing criticism is of two broad categories, direct strategy and indirect strategy. Direct strategy refers to the strategy of criticism which is realized explicitly and directly pointing out to the problems being criticized. This category includes the strategies of: 1) Negative evaluation (usually expressed via evaluative adjectives with negative meaning or evaluative adjective with positive meaning plus negation), 2) Disapproval (the speaker's attitude towards the hearer's problem), 3) Expression of disagreement (usually realized by means of negation word "No" or "I don't agree" or via arguments against hearer, 4) Statement of the problem (stating errors or problems) Statement of difficulty (usually expressed by

means of such structures as "I find to understand…", It's difficult to understand"). 5) Consequences (giving warning about negative consequences of the conduct).

Meanwhile, Indirect strategies refer to those which are expressed by implying the problems, just to raise the awareness of the inappropriateness. This category includes the strategies of : 1) Correction (fixing errors by asserting specific alternatives), 2) Indicating standard (a rule which the speaker thinks is commonly agreed upon and applied to all), 3) Demand for change (usually expressed via such structures as "you have to", "you must", "it is obligatory   that", or "you are required" or "you need", "it is necessary"), 4) Request for change (usually expressed via such structures as "will you…?", "can you…?", "would you…?" or imperatives, or want-statement), 5) Advice about change (usually expressed via the performative "I advise you…", or structures with "should"), 6) Suggestion for change (usually expressed via the performative "I suggest that …" or such structures as "you can", "you could", "it would be better if" or why don't you" etc.), 7) Expression of uncertainty (to raise the awareness about the inappropriateness), 8) Asking/presupposing (rhetorical questions to raise the awareness about the inappropriateness).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Direct Criticism in the Japanese Workplace
In terms of direct criticism in the world of work in Japan, based on the DCT data that has been filled in by informants/participants in the form of questionnaires, the author obtained data on direct criticism covering the following scope of situations:

1. Bosses and subordinates
Data (1)
この作文はのテーマは良いですが、丁寧に書いた方が良いですよ。
Kono sakubun no teema wa yoi desu ga, teinei ni kaita hou ga yoi desu yo.
The theme of this essay is good, but it should be written with more care.

In data (1) the critiquer, as a superior, starts by giving praise or positive acknowledgment about the essay, namely about the chosen theme. This is often done in Japanese communication to soften the criticism that will follow. Although it starts with praise, the criticism part is clear and straightforward. It emphasizes that there are aspects of the essay that need to be improved, without using overly subtle or convoluted language as is usually done in indirect criticism. The sentence ends with 「良いですよ」 (it's good), which still sounds friendly but still shows clear direction for the writer to improve the essay.

Data (2)
課長さん「あなたの作業ミスが多いので、改善が必要です。
Anata no sagyou misu ga ooi node, kaizen ga hitsuyou desu.
You have too many mistakes in your work, so you need to improve.

In data (2) the speaker (as the boss or supervisor) directly points out that the person being criticized has made many mistakes in the work. This sentence points directly to the problem, without trying to cover or soften it. The criticism is followed by an assertion that improvement is needed. This is a clear and unequivocal command or

suggestion that the person being criticized take action to improve their performance. This communication pattern is commonly used in more closed environments or between people with close working relationships, where clarity takes precedence over keeping the other person's feelings in check.

Data (3)
うちのハクサイ腐れるのです。気をつけて切って詰めましょう。
Uchi no hakusai kusareru no desu. Ki o tsukete kitte tsumemashou.
Our chicory is rotting, be careful in cutting and packing.

In data (3) the speaker (supervisor) directly reveals that the white cabbage (hakusai) they have is starting to rot. This is a direct observation indicating a problem in the way the material was handled or stored. The word 「腐れる」 (*kusareru*, "to rot") implies that there is a malfunction that must be addressed immediately. The speaker is giving direct and firm advice on what needs to be done to address the problem. As a supervisor, it is requested to be more careful when cutting and packing white cabbage to prevent further spoilage. The phrase 「気をつけて」 (*ki o tsukete*, "be careful") indicates the attention that should be increased.

2. Senior and Junior (*Senpai/kouhai*)
Data (4)
ここでタバコのポイ捨てはダメですよ。
Koko de tabako no poi-sute wa dame desu yo.
You can't litter cigarette butts here, right!

In data (4) the sentence begins by highlighting the specific action 「タバコのポイ捨て」 (*tabako no poi-sute*), which means "littering cigarette butts". The word 「ここで」 (*koko de*, "here") emphasizes the location where the action took place, indicating that the speaker as senpai (senior) directly witnessed the violation in that place by his *kouhai* (junior). 「ダメ」 (*dame*) means "shouldn't" or "bad", and forms 「ですよ。」 (*desu yo*) by adding a strong critical tone, such as saying "right?" or "you can't do that!". This sentence is used to reprimand or criticize someone (senior to junior) directly, showing that the act of littering cigarette butts is wrong or not allowed.

Data (5)
もっとちゃんと準備してほしい。
Motto chanto junbi shite hoshii.
I want you to prepare better.

In data (5), the criticism sentence directly reprimands the interlocutor, stating that the preparation is not good enough and needs to be improved. Although there is no harsh tone, the use of 「ほしい」 (*hoshii*) implies a firm desire from the speaker (senpai 'senior') for better action to be taken (spoken to *kouhai* 'junior'). There are no pleasantries or attempts to soften the criticism, making it a direct criticism that conveys the message that the previous action was not enough and needs to be improved. 「準備してほしい」 (*junbi shite hoshii*) means "I want you to prepare." This is a direct

request from the speaker (senior) who wants the interlocutor (junior) to make better preparations. The sentence shows that the previous preparation did not meet the expectations of the speaker (senior).

Data (6)
もっと早く仕事を終わらせなさい。時間を無駄にしているよ。
Motto hayaku shigoto o owarase nasai. Jikan o muda ni shite iru yo.
Finish your work faster. You're wasting time.

In (6), the sentence is very direct and straightforward, explicitly criticizing that the work is not being done fast enough and that the interlocutor is wasting time. The use of the word 無駄」 (waste) and the command form 「終わらせなさい」 (finish it) reinforces this criticism as a direct rebuke, with no attempt to soften the words or spare the other person's feelings. This sentence directly asks the interlocutor (senior/junior) to speed up the completion of their work. The use of the command form 「終わらせなさい」 emphasizes that this is a strict instruction, not just a suggestion. It also emphasizes the urgency to act more quickly and efficiently.

3. Colleagues
Data (7)
ゴルフ場を早く予約した方が良いよ!
Gorufujou o hayaku yoyaku shita hou ga ii yo!
You'd better book a golf course right away!

In data (7), the sentence is a criticism that directly suggests that the interlocutor (coworker) book the golf course faster or earlier instead of delaying. This sentence conveys criticism clearly and directly. The speaker emphasizes that the interlocutor needs to book the golf course immediately, implying that there is negligence or delay that may have already occurred. The criticism also uses the form 「良いよ！」 (it's good) at the end of the sentence, which reinforces the urgency and firmness of the suggestion. There is no attempt to soften this criticism, making it an example of direct criticism that is straightforward and to the point.

Data (8)
ルールをちゃんと守れ!って言ったのにさ、あんたこそルールも全く守らねじゃねの。
Ruuru o chanto mamore! tte itta noni sa, anta koso ruuru mo mattaku mamorane jane no?
I told you to follow the rules well, but you yourself didn't follow the rules at all, right?

In data (8), the sentence clearly shows dissatisfaction and reprimands the interlocutor (coworker) directly for not complying with the rules. The speaker emphasizes that as a co-worker had previously warned, but the interlocutor did not listen and instead did not comply with the rules. The use of phrases such as 「あんたこそ」 (you yourself) and 「全く守らね」 (completely disobey) makes this criticism very frontal and not

wrapped in manners. The tone of the sentence also implies anger or annoyance from the speaker.

4. Insider (*uchi*) and outsider (*soto*)

In the context of uchi (内, in-group) and soto (外, out-group) in the Japanese workplace, differences in communication styles are evident, especially when giving criticism. Direct criticism is usually used in a more intimate environment (*uchi*), while indirect criticism is used to maintain harmony among outsiders (*soto*).

Data (9)
このプレゼンテーションは全然よくない。もっと改善するべきだ。
Kono purezenteshon wa zenzen yokunai. Motto kaizen suru beki da.
This presentation is not good at all. It has to be improved a lot.

In data (9), the sentence is very straightforward and clear in conveying dissatisfaction. The speaker directly states that the presentation is not good and needs to be improved. There is no attempt to soften the criticism or give praise before offering suggestions for improvement. Words such as 「全然」 (at all) and 「べきだ」 (has to be), which are strict command forms, make this criticism sound very strong and demand immediate action.

Data (10)
この報告書は間違いが多いです。もう一度ちゃんと見直してください。
Kono houkokusho wa machigai ga ooi desu. Mou ichido chanto minaoshite kudasai.
This report has many mistakes. Please double-check it properly.

In data (10), The sentence, the speaker conveys a very clear and firm criticism. The speaker directly points out that the report contains many errors and asks for improvements without any attempt to soften the criticism with praise or positive acknowledgment. The instruction 「見直してください」 (*minaoshite kudasai*, please double check) indicates that the speaker expects immediate action to correct the report. Within the Team, this criticism is more firm and direct to ensure improvements are made immediately, as there is a trust that internal relationships are not easily disrupted.

Data (11)
このプロジェクトの進行が遅れている。もっと早く進めてください。
Kono purojekuto no shinkou ga okureteiru. Motto hayaku susumete kudasai.
This project is delayed. Please work faster.

In data (11), the sentence the speaker conveys criticism directly without preamble. The speaker directly states that the project is delayed 「遅れている」 (late) and immediately requests action to accelerate progress. There is no attempt to soften the criticism with praise or appreciation of the work done. The instruction 「もっと早く進めてください」 (Please proceed faster) clearly calls for a change in the way of working, so this criticism sounds firm and urgent. Here, direct criticism is used to speed

up the action, showing urgency without worrying too much about the impact on the speaker and interlocutor relationship.

B. Indirect Criticism in the Japanese Workplace
In terms of indirect criticism in the world of work in Japan, based on the DCT data that has been filled in by informants/participants in the form of questionnaires, the author obtained data on indirect criticism covering the following scope of situations:

1. Bosses and subordinates
Data (12)
この作文のテーマが良いかと思いますが、少し丁寧に作成した方が良くないですか。
Kono sakubun no teema ga yoi ka to omoimasu ga, sukoshi teinei ni sakusei shita hou ga yokunai desu ka.
I think the theme of this article is good, but shouldn't it be made a little more carefully?

In data (12), the sentence the speaker uses a more subtle and non-frontal approach in delivering criticism. First, the speaker starts with praise for the theme of the writing, so that the criticism that follows feels lighter. In addition, the criticism is delivered in the form of a question 「良くないですか」 (Isn't it good?), which indirectly suggests improvements without explicitly stating that the writing is bad or wrong. As such, this sentence is more protective of the other person's feelings and emphasizes caution in giving feedback.

Data (13)
それもいいですけど、別の方法も試してみませんか。
Sore mo ii desu kedo, betsu no houhou mo tameshite mimasen ka.
That's good too, but how about trying another way too?

In data (13), the speaker employs a classic Japanese communication strategy that combines politeness with indirect criticism to maintain harmony while subtly guiding the interlocutor toward improvement. By starting with an acknowledgment 「それもいいです。」 (That's good too), the speaker creates a positive and affirming tone, which helps soften the critique that follows. This approach avoids direct confrontation and instead focuses on constructive suggestions, demonstrating respect for the interlocutor's ideas.

The use of a question 「別の方法も試してみませんか」 (How about trying another way too?) is a pragmatic choice, as it frames the critique as an invitation rather than a demand or outright rejection. This phrasing is less likely to cause embarrassment or defensiveness, as it leaves room for the interlocutor to consider the suggestion without feeling coerced. Additionally, the inclusion of "も" (too) subtly indicates that the suggestion is supplementary rather than dismissive of the original method, preserving the interlocutor's sense of contribution and competence.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, this approach aligns with the Japanese cultural emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships (*wa*) in professional settings. The speaker avoids directly pointing out flaws or shortcomings, which could disrupt social dynamics or hierarchical respect. Instead, by proposing an alternative in a non-

confrontational manner, the speaker ensures that the relationship remains collaborative and respectful.

From a pragmalinguistic standpoint, this criticism employs a positive politeness strategy. By valuing the interlocutor's input and presenting alternatives as opportunities for collective improvement, the speaker fosters a cooperative atmosphere. This method effectively balances the need to critique with the cultural expectation of preserving interpersonal harmony.

Data (14)

最近、仕事の量が少し多くなってきたように感じますね。もしよければ、どこかでタスクの優先順位を見直す時間を取ることができると、効率よく進めらるかもしません。

Saikin, shigoto no ryou ga sukoshi ouku natte kita you ni kanjimasu ne. Moshi yokereba, dokoka de tasuku no yuusen jun'i o minaosu jikan o toru koto ga dekiru to, kouritsu yoku susumerareru kamoshiremasen.

Lately, it feels like the workload has increased a bit. If possible, maybe we can take some time to review the prioritization of tasks, so that we can run more efficiently.

In data (14), the sentence the speaker (supervisor) uses very polite and careful language, avoiding direct confrontation. Criticism is delivered in the form of observations 「ように感じますね」 and suggestions framed as possibilities, not obligations. This is in line with Nguyen's (2005) opinion that one form of indirect criticism is advice. By using the expressions 「もしよければ」 (if you agree) and 「かもしれせん」 (maybe), the speaker conveys criticism about workload management and prioritization without making the interlocutor feel blamed or cornered. Such indirect criticism sentences focus on solutions rather than problems, and maintain a positive and collaborative tone.

2. Senior and Junior (*Senpai/Kouhai*)
Data (15)

タバコのポイ捨ては火災の可能性もありますので絶対にやめてください。くれぐれもマナーをお守りましょう。

Tabako no poisute wa kasai no kanousei mo arimasu node zettai ni yamete kudasai. Kuregure mo manaa o omamori mashou.

Littering cigarette butts can cause fires, so please stop. Let's always maintain ethics.

In data (15), the speaker (senior) reminds that littering cigarette butts 「ポイ捨て」 (littering) can cause fires 「火災の可能性」 (the possibility of fire), so the interlocutor (junior) is asked to stop the action immediately. 「絶対にやめてください」 (please stop completely) means "please stop completely," which is a strict order. However, the explanation of fire risk before this command gives a strong reason without making the criticism sound harsh or directly accusatory.

In this sentence, the speaker also politely urges people to always maintain etiquette or norms of behavior 「マナー」 (etiquette), using 「くれぐれも」 (strongly reminded or please really pay attention) which means "strongly reminded" or "please really pay attention." The phrase 「お守りましょう」 (let's take care) means

"let's take care," which emphasizes a collective call to take responsibility for one's own behavior, without blaming anyone directly.

This indirect criticism does not directly blame the individual, but focuses on the potential impact of littering. Instead of saying "you're wrong for littering," this sentence highlights the risk of fire, which makes the criticism sound more neutral and less judgmental. In addition, the use of 「マナーをお守りましょう」 (let's keep etiquette) is a more subtle mutual invitation than a direct command. Thus, this criticism sounds more like a warning to maintain collective responsibility rather than personal blame.

Data (16)

最近忙しそうだね、時間に余裕がある時に一緒にやろうか。

Saikin isogashisou da ne, jikan ni yoyuu ga aru toki ni issho ni yarou ka.

You seem busy lately, how about we do this when you have more time?

Data (16) reflects one of the main characteristics of communication in Japanese culture, which is the use of subtle and implicit language to convey messages that may be sensitive. In this context, the speaker (senior) does not directly state that the junior is not participating enough or not making time for joint activities. Instead, he or she uses a kinder, non-judgmental approach by showing understanding of the junior's busy schedule while suggesting a solution in the form of collaboration at a more convenient time.

This kind of strategy not only aims to convey criticism but also to maintain harmony (*wa*) in interpersonal relationships. In Japanese work culture, social harmony is considered very important, especially in hierarchical relationships such as between seniors and juniors. Direct criticism is often considered to be at risk of causing tension or embarrassment, so this indirect approach is a wiser choice.

From a pragmalinguistic point of view, this sentence utilizes a positive politeness strategy, where the speaker shows concern for the interlocutor's situation (busyness) and offers a solution that benefits both parties. The use of phrases such as "jikan ni yoyuu ga aru toki 'ni' (when you have more time) shows empathy, while the invitation 'issho ni yarou 'ka' (how about we do it together) reflects a desire to cooperate rather than giving orders or demands.

Sociopragmatically, this data also shows how cultural norms, such as the importance of maintaining hierarchy and collective relationships, influence the choice of communication strategies. In senior-junior relationships, this polite approach not only shows respect for the junior's position but also implicitly teaches social norms. In this way, criticism that would otherwise be potentially confrontational is transformed into an opportunity to strengthen relationships and enhance teamwork.

3. Colleagues
Data (17)

ゴルフ場を予約なかなかできなかったら岡さんの機嫌が悪いそう。

Gorufuba o yoyaku nakanaka dekinakattara, Oka-san no kigen ga warui-sou.

If you can't book a golf course easily, I think Mr. Oka (the chairman) will be upset

Data (17) reflects a typical approach in Japanese communication culture, where criticism is conveyed indirectly through reference to a third party. In this case, the speaker attributes the unfinished task (booking the golf course) to Okasan's (the chairman) emotional reaction, rather than directly pointing to the individual responsible. This strategy allows the speaker to convey criticism without creating embarrassment or conflict directly, maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships.

Such an approach is often associated with Japanese cultural norms that emphasize the importance of maintaining *wa* (harmony) in social relationships, especially in the work environment. By mentioning consequences (Oka-san anger) as the main focus, the speaker shifts attention from the individual who may have failed to complete the task to the broader impact of the failure. This creates a more cooperative communication atmosphere and prevents direct conflict. Pragmalinguistically, this sentence uses an off-record strategy to convey criticism. The speaker does not explicitly state that the task has not been performed or accuse anyone. Instead, they convey criticism through implication, allowing the listener to understand the intent without feeling cornered. Phrases such as "*Oka-san no kigen ga warui-sō*" (Oka-san will probably get angry) emphasize the reactions of others, rather than the actions of the listener, which makes the message easier to receive.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, this criticism also reflects the hierarchical structure typical in the Japanese workplace. By referring to Oka-san, the speaker not only emphasizes the importance of the task but also reinforces existing hierarchical norms. This is a way to instill a sense of responsibility without having to give direct criticism, which can damage working relationships.

Data (18)
ルールを守ると事故の可能性が低くなって、安定なペースとかも守っていただければいと思っておる為、一緒に守りましょうね。
Ruuru o mamoru to jiko no kanousei ga hikuku natte, anteina peesu toka mo mamottete itadakereba ii to omotte oru tame, issho ni mamorimashou ne.
By obeying the rules, the possibility of accidents will be reduced, and I think it would be good if we also kept a steady rhythm, so let's obey together, huh.

In data (18), the sentence indirectly contains subtle criticism. The speaker is trying to remind others that there may be someone who does not follow the rules or works at a less stable rhythm, which can increase the risk of problems or accidents. Instead of directly criticizing, the speaker brings up the benefits of following the rules (reducing accidents and maintaining stability) and emphasizes the importance of doing this together. The use of 「一緒に守りましょうね」 (let's comply together) aims to make the criticism sound more collective and polite, not explicitly blaming others, but inviting everyone to improve their actions together. This form of indirect criticism by coworkers in the Japanese workplace aims to maintain harmony and avoid appearing confrontational, while still conveying the message that something needs to be fixed.

4. Insider (*uchi*) and outsider (*soto*)
In the Japanese workplace, maintaining harmony is very important, especially when interacting with out-groups (soto). Indirect criticism tends to be used more in the *soto* context to maintain respect and avoid conflict.

Example:

Data (19)
この部分について少し考え直したほうがいかもしれません。
Kono bubun ni tsuite sukoshi kangaenaoshita hō ga ii kamo shiremasen.
It might be better if we reconsider this part.

In data (19) the sentence is a polite and subtle form of indirect criticism. The speaker wants to convey that there is something in a certain part (for example, in work, ideas, or plans) that needs to be fixed or rethought. However, instead of saying outright "This is wrong" or "It should be changed," the speaker uses the phrase 「考え直したほうがいいかもしれません」 (perhaps it should be reconsidered) which implies that a change is needed, but leaves room for the impression that it's just a suggestion, not an order or harsh criticism. This form of indirect criticism aims to maintain a harmonious relationship by giving criticism in a softer way, allowing the listener (the interlocutor) to make up their own mind without feeling pressured or directly blamed.

Data (20)
このデザインは素晴らしいと思いますが、もう少し変更すると、さらに良くなると思います。
Kono dezain wa subarashii to omoimasu ga, mou sukoshi henkou suru to, sara ni yoku naru to omoimasu.
I think this design is very good, but if you change it a little, I think it will be even better.

In data (20) the form of criticism is conveyed very subtly, starting with praise to maintain harmony, while suggesting changes indirectly. The sentence is a very subtle form of indirect criticism. The speaker starts with a compliment, saying that the design is "amazing," which makes the criticism that follows feel lighter and less confrontational. However, the gist of the message is that the design could still be improved or changed for the better. The phrase 「もう少し変更すると、さらに良くなると思います」 (if you change it a little, it will be better) suggests that there are aspects of the design that can be changed or improved without devaluing the existing work. This kind of criticism aims to maintain a good relationship by giving positive feedback first, while still offering suggestions for improvement. This reflects a communication style that respects the feelings of others, is encouraging, and doesn't make criticism sound like a complaint or harsh reprimand in the Japanese workplace.

Data (21)
もしよろしければ、こちらのスケジュールに少し調整を加えることを検討いただけないでしょうか。
Moshi yoroshikereba, kochira no sukejuuru ni sukoshi chousei o kuwaeru koto o kentou itadakenaideshou ka.
If possible, could we consider adjusting this schedule slightly?

In data (21) in the criticism, the soto 'outside' uses very careful and polite words, using a subtle form of request to ensure the relationship is maintained. In the uchi context, criticism is more blunt because there is a sense of community and openness. In contrast,

in the soto context, criticism is delivered subtly by maintaining manners so as not to damage the relationship between the parties. The sentence is a very polite and careful form of indirect criticism. The speaker actually wants to convey that the existing schedule may not be appropriate or needs to be changed. However, instead of saying directly that the schedule is not good or should be improved, the speaker uses the phrases 「もしよろしければ」 (if you please) and 「検討いただけないでしょうか」 (would you consider), which makes the criticism sound more like a suggestion or request rather than a demand.

Furthermore, the use of the phrase 「少し調整を加えること」 (make minor adjustments) implies that the requested change is not too big or difficult, making it sound more acceptable. This kind of criticism is very typical in communication that prioritizes politeness and harmony, where speakers try to maintain good relations by conveying criticism subtly and giving the impression that changes are only made if it is possible.

Data (22)
大変申し訳ございませんが、この部分について再検討いただけますか。
Taihen moushiwake gozaimasen ga, kono bubun ni tsuite saikentou itadakemasu ka.
I apologize, but could you please reconsider this part?

The indirect criticism in the sentence 「大変申し訳ございませんが、この部分について再検討いただけますか。」 (I deeply apologize, but could you kindly review this part?) reflects the principle of courtesy in Japanese culture which highly values social harmony (*wa*) and avoids direct confrontation. The intent of the criticism is to convey dissatisfaction or suggestions for improvement in a gentle way that does not offend the other person.

The indirect form of criticism can be clearly seen in the use of apology phrases at the beginning, namely: 「大変申し訳ございませんが」 (I deeply apologize, but...) This sentence shows appreciation to the other person while being humble before delivering the criticism, so the criticism sounds more like a suggestion than a reprimand. The choice of words/diction is subtle, as in the word 「再検討」 (reconsider) which sounds neutral and not blaming. This avoids direct words such as "wrong" or "inappropriate." Furthermore, using keigo forms such as 「いただけますか」 (could you kindly...?) is used to show respect, so the request sounds more like an invitation to cooperate than an order. There are no forms or elements that explicitly mention fault. The sentence simply asks the interlocutor to reconsider something, opening the opportunity for discussion rather than placing blame.

Politeness Strategies in Criticism in the Japanese Workplace from a Sociopragmatic and Pragmalinguistic Perspective
When the results of the analysis of politeness strategies in criticism above are summarized, the comparison of direct and indirect criticism in the Japanese workplace can be described as in the following table:

Table of Comparison Between Direct and Indirect Criticism in the Japanese Workplace

Aspects	Direct Criticism	Indirect Criticism
Nada	Firm, direct, no-nonsense	Subtle, polite, avoid confrontation
Way of Delivery	Pointing out errors directly	Implying mistakes through suggestions or questions
Social Relationships	May cause tension	Maintain harmony and respect
Expected Response	Immediate fix without further discussion	Improvement by giving recipients space to think
Usage Situation	Urgent situations or in clear hierarchical relationships (e.g. superior-subordinate)	Day-to-day work situations, especially with colleagues or superiors

From a sociopragmatic perspective, the above analysis reveals how social factors, such as cultural norms, status hierarchy, and the value of harmony (*wa*) influence the way criticism is delivered in the Japanese workplace. Direct criticism, while firm and effective in urgent situations, tends to be avoided because it can damage social relationships, cause *shame*, or threaten the face of the criticized party. This shows that Japanese cultural norms strongly influence the choice of language forms in communication.

Indirect criticism, on the other hand, is more widely used because it conforms to cultural politeness norms that are oriented towards harmony and respect in interaction. Hierarchical relationships and communication situations are key in choosing criticism strategies. In vertical relationships such as superior-subordinate, subtle and polite criticism is preferred to maintain relationship stability, while in work teams, indirect criticism helps avoid open conflict. Strategies such as agreement or consensus in meetings show the strong influence of social context in maintaining communication harmony and minimizing threats to interpersonal relationships.

From a pragmalinguistic perspective, the focus of the study lies on the linguistic elements used to convey criticism in this context. Direct criticism is characterized by the use of emphatic sentences and straightforward word choices, such as explicit statements of faults. This strategy aims to achieve immediate improvement, but has the potential to violate linguistic politeness in Japanese culture.

In contrast, indirect criticism utilizes linguistic strategies such as the use of suggestions, questions, or invitations to convey meaning implicitly. These strategies show concern for the feelings of the recipient of the criticism and leave room for the recipient to reflect on the error independently. Pragmalinguistic examples of indirect criticism are sentences like: "What if we tried another approach?" or "Maybe there is a better way to accomplish this task?". These linguistic forms reflect a politeness in the delivery of criticism that is in line with the cultural values of harmony in Japan.

The combination of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic approaches allows for a more thorough analysis of the linguistic phenomenon of criticism in Japanese work culture. In terms of sociopragmatics, cultural norms such as *wa* (harmony) and social hierarchy are the basis for choosing indirect criticism. In terms of pragmalinguistics, the linguistic strategies chosen, such as: subtle tones, the use of suggestions, or questions, thus become effective means of conveying polite criticism and avoiding confrontation.

However, this study also found a dilemma between criticism effectiveness and politeness. Indirect criticism that is too subtle risks misunderstanding, while direct criticism may violate politeness norms. To overcome this dilemma, consent or consensus before giving criticism is often applied, such as in team meetings or formal feedback, so that criticism is seen as constructive input rather than a personal attack. Successful delivery of criticism depends on understanding the organizational culture, interpersonal sensitivity, and a balance between individual and group interests.

CONCLUSION

In the Japanese workplace, criticism plays an important role in ensuring work efficiency, quality results, and harmonious social relations. Criticism can be delivered directly or indirectly.

Direct criticism in Japan tends to be rarely used, especially in formal situations or towards colleagues of equal or higher position. However, under certain conditions such as urgent situations or when superiors are giving directions to subordinates, direct criticism may arise. This criticism is characterized by a firm delivery that gets straight to the heart of the matter without mincing words, focuses on specific actions, and is often accompanied by instructions for immediate improvement. Meanwhile, direct criticism also has the potential to cause embarrassment or tension, especially since it does not take the recipient's feelings into consideration.

In contrast, indirect criticism is more commonly used as it is considered more polite and in keeping with Japanese culture which prioritizes harmony and respect. In indirect criticism, mistakes are often conveyed implicitly through suggestions, invitations, or questions, using subtle and polite language. This approach aims to maintain good workplace relations, avoid direct confrontation, and give the recipient space to reflect on the feedback independently.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, cultural norms such as *wa* (harmony), status hierarchy, and social context influence the delivery of criticism in Japan. Direct criticism, although effective, is avoided due to the risk of damaging relationships and causing embarrassment. In contrast, indirect criticism is preferred as it maintains harmony and stability, especially in hierarchical relationships or work teams, with strategies such as consensus to minimize conflict.

From a pragmalinguistic perspective, direct criticism utilizes emphatic and explicit sentences for quick fixes, but has the potential to violate politeness. Meanwhile, indirect criticism utilizes linguistic strategies such as suggestions, questions, or invitations to convey meaning subtly and politely, in accordance with Japanese cultural values of harmony.

The combination of these two approaches suggests that the successful delivery of criticism depends on the sensitivity of the social context and the use of appropriate linguistic strategies. Criticism must strike a balance between communication effectiveness and maintaining harmonious relationships in order to be received as constructive feedback.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest in this article.

ETHICS APPROVAL

This research has been approved by the authors' institutions.

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