

# Proxemics: close or distant

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If you have studied Japanese, I'm sure you have been told about something called *desu/masu* style. If you have never studied Japanese but have been living in Japan for a while, your ears have probably become attuned to hearing *desu* and *masu* at the ends of many Japanese sentences.

While Japanese themselves use the name "*desu/masu* style," some Japanese textbooks call it "formal style," and other textbooks "polite style." I have even seen a textbook from a U.S. university that uses the term "normal style" (which makes me wonder if other styles should be called "abnormal").

What is *desu*? Some of you may have been led to believe that it is equivalent to the verb "to be," because it is found in statements like *watashi wa sensei desu*, meaning "I am a teacher," or *kore oishii desu* for "This is delicious." However, removing the *desu* would not change the meaning of these phrases. This should be sufficient proof that *desu* is not the equivalent of "to be."

If you ask a Japanese friend of yours what is the difference between *wakarimasu* and *wakaru*, or between *oishii desu* and *oishii*, you will likely be told that the former sounds more polite. To a degree, this is true. If you say *wakarimasu* to someone, you are showing a certain degree of politeness toward the person, as compared with when you say *wakaru*. If your Japanese friend speaks English, ask for a translation of each of the alternate forms into proper English. I'm pretty sure that both will end up translated as "I understand."

While *wakarimasu* can be said to sound more polite, it is different from *keigo*, or polite language, which demonstrates respect to your counterpart or a third person. For example, if you wanted to show respect to someone who understands something, as in "the professor (honorably) understands Greek," then you might choose *owakari ni narimasu* or *owakari ni naru* as your verb.

Here again, you see the *masu* ending in the former, but not in the latter. Interestingly, even if you use the latter form (the one without *masu*), you are still showing your respect for the professor to the same degree.

This leads us to the reasonable conclusion that *masu* is not related to the person in question, i.e. the professor. So then, what function does *masu* have? And is it related to *desu*?

Imagine you are having a conversation. This implies you are (a) speaking to someone and (b) this person is listening to you. Now think about how far you and your counterpart stand or sit apart from each other. If you are with someone to whom you have just been introduced, you will probably maintain some physical distance from the person. On the other hand, if you are with a close friend or significant other, the same distance might feel annoying or frustrating and make you want to move closer to him or her.

The physical distance people keep when in conversation seems to be culturally dependent. It is said, for instance, that the Spanish tend to talk closer to each other than do other Europeans. Of course, we must also account for personality differences: Some may or may not be more comfortable being physically close to others.

Because language is spoken between people, it has developed some socially useful tools, including those that convey the distance between people in an interaction. Different languages, and therefore cultures, employ different tools and have different ideas about how much space is appropriate.

What are these tools like? As an example, many languages have two words for "you": *vous* and *tu* in French, *usted* and *tu* in Spanish and *Sie* and *du* in German. Virtually all European languages, except English, have two words for "you." Even non-European languages share this idea: for example, the Chinese words for "you" are *nin* and *ni*.

Why do these languages have two ways of saying "you"?

Most people will explain that one is more polite than the other. However, if we were to go a step further, we could say that the two words exist to illustrate one speaker's psychological distance from—or familiarity with—another.

English, as you well know, has just "you." This means that whether you speak to your son, dog, or the president of the United States, you use the same word to address him. The mechanism of two words for "you" to show one's familiarity with the other does not exist in English. Nevertheless, psychologically all people want to be able to demonstrate this; it is an important aspect of participation in society. In English, familiarity can be illustrated through calling people by their first or last name: "I understand, John" demonstrates more familiarity with the speaker than does "I understand, Mr Robinson."

You may be surprised to know that Japanese does not have any particular word for "you."

Perhaps you may have thought that *anata* was the Japanese word for "you." But *anata* is simply one term among many to identify the addressee. In conversations where it is understood who is speaking to whom, there is no need to use such terms at all. *Anata* is used when you regard your counterpart to be your peer or subordinate. It is also used when the counterpart is anonymous, such as in questionnaires, exams and the like. It is in no way equivalent to the English "you." The best way to address someone, if the need arises, is to use his or her name with *-san*. So the tool most common to European languages does not exist here, either.

The use of names is also different in Japanese. If you address someone by name alone, without a polite suffix like *san*, or, if appropriate, an affectionate suffix like *chan*, you can come off quite rude. Unlike in English, names are not tools for demonstrating intimacy or respect.

By now you can probably see where we are headed: the Japanese tool for illustrating a psychological distance from the person you are addressing is the *desu/masu* style, or more appropriately the "distal style." Learning when you don't have to use the distal style is a very interesting cultural subject worthy of another article.