



## Book Review

**Saeko Fukushima.** 2020. *Metapragmatics of attentiveness: A study in interpersonal and cross-cultural pragmatics*, 230 pp. Sheffield: Equinox. Hardback ISBN 9781781797242. Price Hb GBP 75.00.

Reviewed by **Bingyun Li**, School of European Languages and Cultures, Zhejiang International Studies University, Hangzhou, China; and **Chaoqun Xie**, School of English Studies & Institute of Discourse Pragmatics, Zhejiang International Studies University, Hangzhou, China,  
E-mail: xiechaoqun@hotmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2537-4311>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/pr-2025-0034>  
Published online December 30, 2025

Over the past two decades, Professor Saeko Fukushima has devoted herself to the rigorous investigation of attentiveness, seeking a more nuanced alternative to the conventional notion of politeness – a concept that has become central to multiple academic disciplines. The monograph under review constitutes the culmination of Fukushima's extensive scholarship on attentiveness. It offers a metapragmatic account from both interpersonal and cross-cultural perspectives, advancing a persuasive argument for recognizing attentiveness as a distinct and indispensable dimension of interpersonal communication. Through its comprehensive analysis, the volume delivers thought-provoking insights into the nature of attentiveness – and, by extension, what constitutes genuine politeness.

This book is organized into five chapters. In the introductory chapter, Fukushima defines attentiveness as “the demonstrator’s pre-emptive response to the recipient’s verbal and non-verbal cues or situations surrounding the recipient and demonstrator, which takes the form of offering” (p. 1), emphasizing that “one of the major characteristics of attentiveness is the nature of pre-empting” (p. 5). This definition foregrounds the anticipatory, embodied, and relationally situated character of attentiveness, thereby distinguishing it from conventional speech acts and from the primarily reactive strategies that dominate existing politeness research. The introductory chapter also positions attentiveness within a broader theoretical landscape by comparing it to related constructs such as mindfulness and social support, underscoring its interdisciplinary relevance. Moreover, it offers a comprehensive overview of the data and methods employed in the study, including questionnaires, focus groups, metapragmatic interviews, and field notes, thus establishing a solid empirical foundation for the analysis. Through this theoretical and methodological framing, the chapter effectively advances attentiveness as a pivotal concept bridging linguistic pragmatics, intercultural communication studies,

and psychological research on prosocial behavior, thereby laying the groundwork for the chapters that follow.

One of the monograph's most significant contributions lies in the typology of attentiveness developed in Chapter 2. Drawing on field notes and focus-group data, Fukushima systematically addresses a range of issues associated with attentiveness, including its relation to im/politeness, morality and moral order, *ki* ('spirit'), linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions, social skills, reputation, and interpersonal relationships. The chapter also examines the relational dynamics between the demonstrator and the recipient of attentiveness, as well as the intentionality attributed to a potential recipient.

Building on these discussions, Fukushima differentiates among genuine attentiveness (directed toward the recipient's well-being), reflexive attentiveness (oriented toward the demonstrator's own well-being), and business-oriented attentiveness. This tripartite classification provides a nuanced analytic framework that challenges monolithic conceptions of prosocial communication. Particularly noteworthy is the process model outlining the stages involved in the demonstration and evaluation of attentiveness (p. 45), which offers a valuable account of how attentiveness unfolds in real-time interaction.

Fukushima's attempt to distinguish attentiveness from related psychological constructs such as empathy and altruism is, on the whole, persuasive, though at certain moments the conceptual boundaries appear somewhat artificially sustained. For instance, the portrayal of "genuine attentiveness" as exclusively other-oriented might be strengthened through engagement with Batson's (2011) empathy-altruism hypothesis, which posits that even ostensibly selfless acts may serve to alleviate the helper's own distress. Likewise, the discussion of *ki* as a culturally specific Japanese construct underpinning attentiveness is insightful, but would benefit from further connection to broader theoretical debates on culturally mediated cognition and perception.

The empirical core of the monograph (Chapters 3–4) offers a groundbreaking cross-cultural and cross-generational analysis of attentiveness that challenges long-standing assumptions in politeness research. Chapter 3, which compares British and Japanese participants as well as Japanese and American participants, stands out as one of the book's most compelling empirical contributions. By examining both the demonstration and evaluation of attentiveness across cultural and generational groups, Fukushima provides a sophisticated account of how attentiveness operates in diverse sociocultural contexts.

One particularly noteworthy finding is that British and Japanese participants show comparable evaluations of attentiveness in high-imposition scenarios, a result that suggests the need to move beyond overly reductive East–West dichotomies in the politeness literature. Equally intriguing is the generational pattern emerging

from the Japanese data: younger participants tend to rate attentiveness more positively than older participants, offering a counter-narrative to common claims about the erosion of traditional interpersonal norms.

Methodologically, this chapter demonstrates the value of integrating quantitative (Likert-scale questionnaires) and qualitative (metapragmatic interviews) approaches. At the same time, the findings are primarily based on self-report data, which places some constraints on their ecological validity. To strengthen the evidence, future research could usefully incorporate naturalistic observation or experimental paradigms. This would allow for triangulation between self-reported perceptions and actual interactional behavior. Furthermore, while the Japanese–British–American comparison offers valuable insights, extending the cultural scope to include additional high-context (e.g., Korean) and low-context cultures could enhance the generalizability of the conclusions.

Chapter 4 turns to attentiveness within Japanese sociocultural contexts. The emic analysis of attentiveness in Japanese relational networks offers rich insights into culturally specific conceptions of interpersonal communication. The discussion of *omoiyari* ('altruistic sensitivity') as a cultural schema informing attentive behavior is especially illuminating. Notably, Fukushima's observation that Japanese participants frequently cite non-linguistic behaviors – such as demeanor and gesture – as markers of politeness, provides a welcome corrective to the verbocentric bias pervasive in much politeness scholarship.

That said, the chapter leaves room for further exploration of how power dynamics might shape attentiveness. In a society where vertical relationships remain salient, the expression and interpretation of attentiveness could vary meaningfully depending on factors such as relative status, gender, and age. For instance, how might attentiveness function differently when directed upward (toward superiors) compared with downward (toward subordinates)? Engaging with these questions in future work could deepen the analysis. Additionally, connecting the discussion to contemporary multimodal communication research could help clarify how verbal and non-verbal channels work together to construct attentive behavior.

In the concluding chapter, Fukushima brings together the book's central findings and articulates a series of productive directions for future inquiry. She calls for closer interdisciplinary collaboration to investigate attentiveness in relation to morality, identity construction, and power dynamics. Her proposal to examine attentiveness in digitally mediated environments is especially timely, given the rapid expansion of technologically mediated communication (see e.g., Fukushima 2024a, 2024b). In this regard, it would also be intriguing to explore how AI-mediated interaction – for instance, chatbots capable of anticipating users' needs – might reshape emerging norms of attentiveness. Such systems may not only recalibrate expectations of timely and empathetic responses, but also subtly redefine what

counts as “appropriate” engagement in digital communication. As users grow accustomed to AI agents that monitor cues and pre-emptively offer support, human interlocutors may begin to feel pressured to emulate similar levels of responsiveness. This, in turn, could generate new tensions around authenticity, responsibility, and the emotional labor required to maintain conversational presence in technologically saturated environments.

Fukushima further points to several promising avenues for future research, including the relationship between attentiveness and emotional labor in service industries, cross-generational shifts in attentiveness norms outside the Japanese context, the neurological substrates of attentive behavior, and potential applications in clinical and therapeutic settings. These areas present exciting opportunities for deeper engagement with research in psychology, neuroscience, and applied communication studies.

Overall, this monograph represents a substantial advancement in politeness research and cross-cultural pragmatics, enriching our understanding of im/politeness by foregrounding attentiveness as a core analytical lens. First, Fukushima’s conceptualization of attentiveness as a distinct communicative phenomenon fills a notable gap in existing scholarship, and her empirical findings challenge entrenched cultural stereotypes. Second, by shifting the analytic focus from reactive to anticipatory forms of politeness, she expands prevailing models of politeness and underscores the need for theories that more fully account for pre-emptive, other-oriented behavior. Third, the cross-cultural comparisons provide compelling evidence against reductive dichotomies – such as individualist versus collectivist cultures – demonstrating the coexistence of universal tendencies and culturally specific manifestations of attentiveness. Fourth, the mixed-methods design, which integrates surveys, interviews, and field notes, offers a methodological model for the study of complex pragmatic phenomena. The inclusion of generational comparisons within the Japanese context adds further nuance to the analysis. Fifth, the findings have clear implications for intercultural training, workplace communication, and service industries, particularly in settings where anticipatory forms of care and service are institutionally valorized, such as hospitality and healthcare.

Fukushima’s volume marks a significant contribution to im/politeness research and opens fertile avenues for future scholarly exploration. This volume is particularly timely in light of the growing academic interest in non-verbal and non-linguistic dimensions of communication, as well as increased recognition of culturally variable politeness norms. Fukushima succeeds in convincingly establishing attentiveness as a crucial, yet previously underexamined, dimension of interpersonal communication that merits sustained theoretical and empirical attention.

The book’s rigorous methodological design, culturally sensitive analysis, and conceptual innovation collectively set a high benchmark for subsequent research in

this domain. It will undoubtedly become an essential point of reference not only for scholars working on Japanese im/politeness, but also for those engaged in broader inquiries across pragmatics, intercultural communication, and Japanese studies. More broadly, the monograph invites renewed reflection on how individuals across cultures anticipate, interpret, and respond to one another's needs, thus enriching ongoing discussions about the relational foundations of human communication.

While *Metapragmatics of Attentiveness* offers a rich and compelling account of attentiveness, it is understandable that a single monograph cannot fully address the breadth of issues in this field. One area that may warrant further attention is the role of power in shaping the production and interpretation of attentiveness in social interaction. Future research could usefully examine how individuals occupying positions of institutional or interactional authority – such as managers, teachers, or elders – display attentiveness differently from those in subordinate roles.

Such work could help clarify whether power asymmetries encourage more performative or strategic enactments of attentiveness, and how these displays are evaluated by interlocutors. For instance, is attentiveness from a superior perceived as “considerate”, whereas similar behavior from a subordinate is construed as “expected” or even “obligatory”? These questions suggest that attentiveness is deeply intertwined with broader ideological structures, and with the social distribution of authority.

Another promising direction arises from the recent “moral turn” in im/politeness scholarship (e.g., Haugh 2024; Sinkeviciute 2018; Xie 2025). Attentiveness, by virtue of being concerned with others' needs and vulnerabilities, carries implicit moral implications, indexing care, respect, and ethical attunement. Investigating how attentiveness – or its absence – can function as face-enhancing or face-threatening, would provide valuable insight into how moral orders are enacted, negotiated, and disrupted through interaction. Such work could further refine our understanding of how moral expectations attach to communicative practices across cultural contexts.

These issues also take on new significance in digitally mediated environments, where forms of attentiveness – such as prompt replies, “liking”, sharing, or algorithmically prompted engagement – are influenced by platform affordances as well as interpersonal norms. Examining how digital contexts recalibrate the moral expectations of attentiveness, and how perceived inattentiveness may lead to accusations of disrespect or moral impropriety, may constitute an important extension of Fukushima's framework. Integrating a multimodal analytical perspective in future studies could also shed light on how verbal, visual, and embodied cues collectively contribute to the enactment and evaluation of attentiveness in both online and offline settings.

**Research funding:** This work was supported by the Major Humanities and Social Sciences Research Projects in Zhejiang Higher Education Institutions (No. 2023GH069) and the Boda Youth Fund (Key Project, No. 2024QNZD3) at Zhejiang International Studies University.

## References

- Batson, Charles Daniel. 2011. *Altruism in humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fukushima, Saeko. 2024a. Japanese politeness revisited: From the perspective of attentiveness on Twitter. *Journal of Politeness Research* 20(2). 563–589.
- Fukushima, Saeko. 2024b. *Japanese politeness on social media. Keynote speech delivered at the 3rd international conference on discourse pragmatics*, 11–13 October 2024. Hangzhou (virtual): Zhejiang International Studies University.
- Haugh, Michael. 2024. Online public denunciation as recursive social practice. *Internet Pragmatics* 7(1). 161–191.
- Sinkeviciute, Valeria. 2018. “Ya bloody drongo!!!”: Impoliteness as situated moral judgement on Facebook. *Internet Pragmatics* 1(2). 271–302.
- Xie, Chaoqun. 2025. Whose morality is out of order? A case study of deviance and respectability in teacher-student relations in online chats in China. In Michael Haugh & Rosina Márquez-Reiter (eds.), *Morality in discourse*, 256–274. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.