

# Honorifics and Politeness in Japanese

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**Abstract**— The objective of the present study is to find the meanings and functions of Japanese honorifics and the expressions for expressing politeness in communication. The findings of the present study are as follows: 1) Teichoogo (courteous language) in Japanese honorifics is semantically different from Kenjoogo (humble language) in that it does not have affects toward the listeners. And it is different from Teineigo (polite language) because it implies the meaning of humbleness. 2) Japanese Honorifics hold two linguistic meanings and functions; they express respectful meaning and they differentiate ranks at work. 3) The explanation of the meanings and usages of honorifics in Japanese must be given in a discourse level. 4) Politeness can be expressed by the selections of words. Thus, the knowledge of honorifics and the linguistic performance in expressing politeness are the extremely crucial. 5) Japanese honorifics and the appropriate Japanese expressions for 'politeness' are significant elements in communication.

**Keywords**— honorifics, Sonkeigo, Kenjoogo, Teichoogo, Teineigo, politeness, communication

## I. Introduction

In everyday conversation of any societies, especially in business communication, people try to communicate effectively by taking into consideration the use of appropriate expressions. For example, in English, instead of using 'Pass me the salt', the speaker may use 'Could you please pass me the salt?' In Japanese society, people are comparatively conscious in being polite when communicating with others. For example, the word 'Arigatoo gozaimashita' which means 'Thank you.' may not be proper to be used in some situations. For example when speaking to the listener who is a superior at work, or to a teacher, for example. In this situation, the Japanese speaker may select another phrase such as 'Sumimasen' or 'Osore irimasu' which means 'I'm sorry' or 'I'm sorry to trouble you' in order to show respect or to be polite.

The purpose of the present study is to propose a comprehensive framework that explains how important roles the Japanese honorifics and the polite expressions play in communication with others. Sentences using particles such as 'ka', 'ne' and 'yo' will be raised for the analysis. In this study, modality of honorifics will be considered and the investigation will be made in the discourse level. The analysis will be made under the framework of speech act and pragmatics.

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1 Honorifics

Honorifics are used to show respect and they are used in many social situations such as a situation in business setting. Honorifics are basically used to mark social disparity in rank or to emphasize similarity in rank.

Honorifics in Japanese are generally divided into three main categories, they are:

#### 1) Sonkeigo (respectful language)

Sonkeigo is usually a special form used when talking to superiors (including teachers) and customers. Respectful language can express by substitute verbs with the following forms:

- ① Type 1: The basic form of verbs is O + Verb (-masu) + ni naru.

*For example: kakeru (sit) ⇒ Okake ni naru ⇒ Doozo, okake ni natte kudasai. (Please have a seat)*

- ② Type 2: Verbs in passive form: This form of verbs also show respect to a superior but not as high in rank or as senior as a superior in Type 1

*For example: iku ⇒ ikareru ⇒ Tanaka-san wa kinoo Tookyoo e ikaremashita. (Mr. Tanaka went to Tokyo yesterday)*

- ③ Other special verbs are: taberu ⇒ meshiagaru, iku, kuru, iru ⇒ irassharu oide ni naru, suru ⇒ nasaru, iu ⇒ ossharu, miru ⇒ goran ni naru

- ④ Prefixes such as 'go' and 'o' for objects which belong to the listener.

*For example: o-nimotsu (your luggage), go-ryooshin (your parents)*

#### 2) Kenjoogo (Humble Language)

Humble language is usually used to describe one's actions or the actions of a group member in a humble way in order to show respect to the listener indirectly. Humble language can express by substitute verbs with the following forms:

- ① Type 1: The basic form of verbs is O + Verb (-masu) + suru. ⇒ The basic form of verbs is O + Verb (-masu) + itasu (more humble)

- ② Type 2: Other special verbs are: Suru (do) ⇒ itasu, morau (receive) ⇒ itadaku, the phrase 'itadakimasu' is said before eating or drinking.

It should be noted that Teichoogo (courteous language) is a polite language similar to Kenjoogo in term of expressing humble nuance, such as 'de gozaru' (to be). However, this is included in Kenjoogo by many linguists.

### 3) Teineigo (Polite language)

Teineigo expresses politeness which is neutral; it is neither respectful language Nor humble language. There are two types of changing forms:

- ① Type 1: By using 'desu' at the end of a sentence and using '~masu' form for a verb.

For *example*: *Kore wa oishii + desu. ⇒ Kore wa oishiidesu. (This is tasty)*

*Taberu? ⇒ Tabemasu ka?(Will you eat?)*

- ② Type 2: Add prefixes O and Go to a noun: Okane (money), Ocha (tea)

In fact, these words have become common nouns in Japanese language. There are some other words such as 'Gonenpai no kata' (the elderly), 'Otenki' (weather).

Another category included in Teineigo is Bikago (word beautification) which is used to make the word sound beautiful such as 'oryori' (food)

The following table shows some irregular forms of Sonkeigo, Kenjoogo and Teineigo:

Meaning	Plain	Sonkeigo (respectful)	Kenjoogo/Teichoogo (humble/courteous)	Teineigo (polite)
have	aru	-	gozaimasu <sup>1</sup>	arimasu
be	irassharu	irassharu	oru	imasu
come	kuru	Irassharu/oide ni naru	mairu	kimasu
go	iku	Irassharu/oide ni naru	mairu	ikimasu
meet	au	o-ai ni naru	o-me ni kakaru	aimasu
eat/drink	taberu/nomu	meshi-agaru	itadaku	tabemasu
receive	morau	-	itadaku	moraimasu
give	ageru/kureru	kudasaru	sashi-ageru	agermasu
say	iu	ossharu	mooshiageru	iimasu
do	suru	nasaru	itasu	shimasu
know	shiru	go-zonji	zonjiru/zonji ageru	shitete imasu
ask	kiku		ukagau	kikimasu/tazunemasu
visit	tazuneru		ukagau	tazunemasu
look	miru	go-ran ni naru	haiken suru	mimasu

### 2.2 Kusanagi (Kusanagi Y., 2006)

Miyaji Y (Miyaji Y., 1971) was the first linguist who proposed the category of Teichoogo (Courteous language). Like Miyaji, Kusanagi (Kusanagi Y., 2006) separates Teichoogo (Courteous language) from Teineigo (Polite language) and Kenjoogo (Humble language) though in the same group of Kenjoogo.

#### 1) Three levels of Honorifics

Kusanagi divides Keigo into three levels by giving the following examples:

Level 1 (using plain form of verbs):

- (1) a. Kachoo wa kyoo, Tookyoo ni iku yo. (Today the manager is going to Tokyo.)  
b. Are wa Shin tookyoo hoteru da. (That over there is Shin Tokyo Hotel.)

Kusanagi does not give detailed explanation concerning this level. However, it is quite common in Japanese language that a plain form is used in a sentence when talking to a friend, a family member for example.

Level 2 (using Polite language): Kusanagi explains that by changing the plain form of verbs such as 'iku' (go) to a ~masu form becoming 'ikimasu' (go) will raise the level of the speech into a 'Polite language' level. For example:

- (2) a. Kachoo wa kyoo, Tookyoo ni ikimasu. (Today the manager is going to Tokyo.)  
b. Are wa Shin tookyoo hoteru desu.a (That over there is Shin Tokyo Hotel.)

Level 3 (using special word of Respectful language): By using Sonkeigo or Teichoogo the level of speech will become even more formal and higher in level which shows respect to the listener who is a superior. Sentences in (3) are the examples:

- (3) a. Kachoo wa kyoo, Tookyoo ni irasshaimasu. (Today the manager is going to Tokyo.)  
b. Are wa Shin tookyoo hoteru de gozaimasu. (That over there is Shin Tokyo Hotel.)

#### 2) Teichoogo (Courteous language)

Kusanagi emphasizes the necessity in differentiating Teichoogo (Courteous language) from both Teineigo (polite language) and Kenjoogo (humble language) by giving the following examples:

- (4) Otaku ni ukagaimasu. I will pay a visit to your house.  
(5) Tookyoo ni mairimasu. I will go to Tokyo.

Kusanagi explains that in (4), the verb 'ukagau' (pay a visit or come and see) is used because the listener will be directly affected by the speaker's activity. Thus, the speaker must choose a word of humble language to show respect to the listener who is a superior. However, in (5), the activity of going to Tokyo does not have effects on any one, the speaker then selects the word 'mairu' (go), which expresses polite and yet humble meaning. Kusanagi points out that 'desu' or 'masu' which belong to the group of Teineigo (polite language) can be used by speakers or any listeners to merely show politeness. Therefore the two categories should not be categorized in the same group as divided by many other linguists. Kusanagi explains that since Teichoogo (courteous language) implies the meaning of being humble, it should be categorized as one subcategory next to level of Kenjoogo (humble language). From the examples (4) and (5), the significant difference between Kenjoogo (humble language) and Teijoogo (courteous language) is the affect by the action towards the listener. If it does not give any affects to the listener, the Teichoogo (courteous language) is used. This is the difference takes place in deep structure or the semantic level which should be taken in account. The present study therefore agrees with Kusanagi's classification in Japanese honorifics (Keigo)

The following tree diagram (fig.1) is proposed by Kusanagi (Kusanagi Y. 2006)

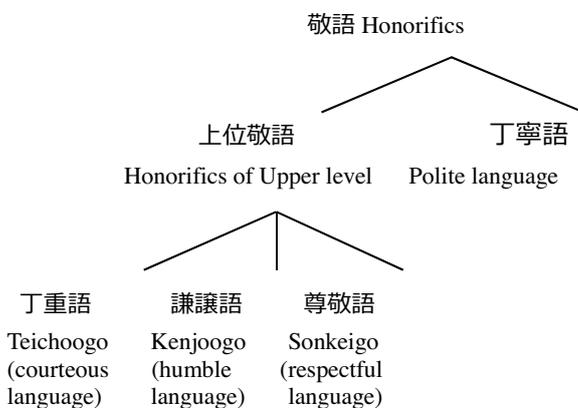


Fig. 1 Classification of Honorifics

### 3) Uchi-Soto (in groups and out groups)

Kusanagi points out that in honorifics, the concept of 'Uchi/ Soto' (in groups and out groups) plays a crucial role in the speaker's selections of words to be used in honorifics. That is, when using respectful forms or humble forms, the point of view of the speaker is shared by the speaker's in group (Uchi), therefore in-group referents do not take honorifics. For example, members of one's own company are referred to with humble forms when speaking with an external person. This applies to family members of the speaker when speaking to guests.

Kusanagi emphasizes that in using honorifics, the speaker must be careful in considering first whether the referents (third persons) in the conversation belong to Uchi or Soto. (6) and (7) are the examples of the two groups 'Uchi' and 'Soto'

- (6) O-joosama ga irasshaimashita. (Your daughter has come.)
- (7) Musume ga mairimashita. (My daughter has come.)

Kusanagi explains that, in (6) the daughter is the in group of the speaker's superior, therefore it is regarded as the speaker's superior as well. The noun for 'daughter' is represented by 'o-joosama' On the other hand, the daughter in (7) is in-group of the speaker, therefore the word 'musume' which is a common noun for daughter is used, and the verb 'come' is expressed by a Teichoogo 'mairu' which expresses politeness and humbleness.

2.3 Politeness In the linguistic theories, there have been many linguists who propose hypotheses to explain meanings and usages of words pragmatically as well as linguistic behaviors in communication. In this study, some concepts of Grice's general principles (Grice H.P, 1975) and some concepts of Politeness (Brown P. & Levinson S.C., &1978) will be introduced for the analysis of the problems in chapter 3.

1) Cooperative Principle Grice proposes a general principle which he calls 'Cooperative principle and the Maxims of Conversation'. The four Maxims are:

(1) Maxim of Quality: Information, (2) Maxim of Quality: Truth, (3) Maxim of Relation: Relevance and (4) Maxim or Manner: Clarity.

### 2) Politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987)

Brown & Levinson has developed the principles for effective communication by adopting the concepts of Ervin Goffman (1922) on face, they are (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p.13):

(1) Negative face: the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions, (2) Positive face: the desire (in some respects) to be approved of.

Brown & Levinson's theory is claimed to be universal though some linguists do not entirely agree. However, the present study agrees with Brown & Levinson that any human races have self-esteem which can easily reflect in many the linguistic expressions.

## III. The important roles of Honorific Speech and Politeness in Japanese

### 3.1 Problems in the Usages of Honorifics

Look at the following example of conversation between a CEO and one of his subordinates:

- (8) A: Shachoo, nanji ni kuukoo ni irasshaimasu ka. (President, what time do you plan to go to the airport?)
- B: Maa, ni jikan mae da na. (Well, two hours before the departure time, I guess.)

In (8A), the subordinate uses 'irasshaimasu' which is an honorific denoting respect instead of using the ordinary verb 'iku (go). However, in (8B), the president does not use an honorific speech, instead, he uses 'da' which is a plain form of auxiliary verb in the end of the sentence. In Japanese, a plain form such as 'da

(equivalent to 'be' in English)' is used to show intimacy to close friends, members of family and subordinates. This indicates that honorifics in Japanese do not denote merely politeness, but also differentiate the relation of two people of different ranks.

More examples of Sonkeigo:

Example (9) is a conversation between a flight attendant and the passenger:

- (9) Flight Attendant A1: *Okyaku-sama, shinbun o oyomini narimasu ka.* (Sir, would you like to read a newspaper?)  
 Passenger B: *Asahi Shinbun ga arimasu ka.* (Do you have Asahi Newspaper?)  
 Attendant A2: *Hai, gozaimasu.* (Yes, we do.)

In (9A1), the flight attendant uses the expression of Sonkeigo 'oyomini narimasu ka' (would you like to read) to the passenger who is her customer. The customer then uses an ordinary polite form of verb 'arimasu' (have) in (9B). However, the flight attendant replies by using 'gozaimasu' (have) instead of 'arimasu' in (9A2) and this 'gozaimasu' (have) is in the subcategory of Teichoogo (courteous language)

Look at the following conversation on the phone in Japanese business in (10):

- (10) A1: *Hai, Ai wa Seisakusho desu.* (Aiwa Seisakusho. May I help you?)  
 B: *Yoshino to mooshimasu ga, Yamada-san o onegai shimasu.* (This is Yoshino speaking. Can I speak to Mr. Yamada, please?)  
 A2: *Yamada (-san) desu ne. Shoo shoo omachi kudasai.* ((Mr.) Yamada, right? Hold on a minute, please.)

When talking with an external person such as the conversation in business setting in (10), the operator in (10A2) will drop the honorific suffix *-san* (Mr.) since Yamada is regarded as a member of the company which is in group and an honorific expression is not necessary. Besides, in (10A2), the particle 'ne' (isn't it) is used after the name Yamada-san. This is because the name Yamada-san here is the information to be confirmed and not a question. In this situation, if the particle 'ka' (to mark a question) is used, it will be rude in the sense that 'I did not hear what you had said' and the conversation would not be successful due to the problem of 'negative face' in the principle of politeness.

### *3.2 Problems in Using Appropriate Japanese Expressions in Communication*

One can see that business communications are not limited in a work place. And not only honorifics, but also appropriate words play important roles in communication. Look at another conversation between the teacher and a student in a Japanese language classroom in (11):

- (11) Teacher A: *Ja, mina-san, kyoo wa kono hen de owarimasu.* (Well, everybody, that's all for today.)  
 Student B: *Sensei, otsukaresamadeshita. Jugyoo wa yoku wakarimashita yo.* (Professor, you must have been exhausted. Thanks so much for your hard work. I understand the lecture very well, indeed.)

The '~masu' of the verb 'owarimasu' in (11A) shows a polite language which is used in lectures. However, in (11B), the expression 'otsukaresamadeshita' (you must have been exhausted.) is usually used to encourage someone in the group after he or she has finished doing an activity but not to the teacher after having finished the lecture. In addition, the student uses the particle 'yo' (attached to the final part of a phrase to emphasize the content.) which unfortunately gives an unpleasant impression to the teacher that the student is evaluating the teacher's teaching; this is in fact considered as being impolite to the teacher; this can be solved by the knowledge of 'negative face'

More examples of Sonkeigo:

Example (12) is a conversation between a flight attendant and the passenger:

- (12) Flight Attendant A1: *Okyaku-sama, shinbun o oyomini narimasu ka.* (Sir, would you like to read a newspaper?)  
 Passenger B: *Asahi Shinbun ga arimasu ka.* (Do you have Asahi Newspaper?)  
 Attendant A2: *Hai, gozaimasu.* (Yes, we do.)

In (12A1), the flight attendant uses the expression of Sonkeigo 'oyomini narimasu ka' (would you like to read) to the passenger who is her customer. The customer then uses an ordinary polite form of verb 'arimasu' (have) in (12B). However, the flight attendant replies by using 'gozaimasu' (have) instead of 'arimasu' in (12A2) and this 'gozaimasu' (have) is in the subcategory of Teichoogo (courteous language)

Look at the following conversation on the phone in Japanese business in (13):

- (13) A1: *Hai, Ai wa Seisakusho desu.* (Aiwa Seisakusho. (May I help you?)  
 B: *Yoshino to mooshimasu ga, Yamada-san o onegai shimasu.* (This is Yoshino speaking. Can I speak to Mr. Yamada, please?)  
 A2: *Yamada (-san) desu ne. Shoo shoo omachi kudasai.* ((Mr.) Yamada, right? Hold on a minute, please.)

When talking with an external person such as the conversation in business setting in (13), the operator in (13A2) will drop the honorific suffix *-san* (Mr.) since Yamada is regarded as a member of the company which is in group and an honorific expression is not necessary.

Besides, in (13A2), the particle 'ne' (isn't it) is used after the name Yamada-san. This is because the name Yamada-san here is the information to be confirmed and not a question. In this situation, if the particle 'ka' (a particle marking a question) is used, it will be rude in implying the nuance that 'I did not hear what you had said' and the conversation would not be successful due to the problem of 'negative face' in the principle of politeness.

### 3.3 Competency of Honorifics and Expressions of Politeness in Japanese

From the study, it can be said that the knowledge or the so called 'the competence' of the Japanese honorifics and the Japanese words expressing politeness in appropriate situations are crucial for making effective communications.

## IV. Conclusion

### Honorifics and Politeness in Japanese for Communication

The present study gives the results as follows:

1) Teichoogo (courteous language) in Japanese honorifics is semantically different from Kenjoogo (humble language) in that it does not have affects toward the listeners. And it is different from Teineigo (polite language) because, unlike Teineigo (polite language), it implies the meaning of humbleness.

2) Japanese Honorifics hold two linguistic meanings and functions; they express respectful meaning and they hold the function of differentiating ranks at work or the social relationship of the two persons in a conversation.

3) The explanation of the meanings and usages of honorifics in Japanese must be given in a discourse level.

4) Apart from using honorifics, politeness can be expressed by the selections of words that are appropriate to the listeners and the situations of the conversations. Thus, the knowledge of honorifics and the linguistic performance in selecting appropriate expressions in various situations are extremely crucial for communication.

5) Japanese honorifics and the appropriate Japanese expressions for 'politeness' are significant elements in communication

*Note: In the present study, 'gozaimasu' is treated as a member in the category of 'Teichoogo (courteous language)'.*

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