

Addressee-Oriented Nature of Referent Honorifics in Japanese Conversation

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This study investigates Japanese referent honorifics in reference to socially distant third parties. Thirteen conversations between native speakers reveal that such honorifics are rarely used. Additionally, the addressee-oriented nature of Japanese honorifics is proposed, based on a correlation between addressee honorifics and referent honorifics, suggesting interdependent nature of these honorifics. Another observation made in this study is that style-mixing between referent honorifics and non-honorific forms in reference to an individual might be triggered by changes in the speaker's attitudes toward the referent.

1. Introduction

The honorific system of the Japanese language is often divided into addressee-controlled honorification and referent-controlled honorification (e.g., Kuno 1973:20; Shibatani 1990:375), which are commonly regarded as markers of social distance between speakers and addressees, and between speakers and referents, respectively. Addressee honorification, also known as *teinei-go* "polite language," is used to show the speaker's deference toward the addressee and is characterized by the predicate endings—*des/-mas*. Referent honorification is further divided into *sonkei-go* "respect language" and *kenjo-*

go "humbling language," both expressing the speaker's deference toward the referent. *Sonkei-go* is used to discuss socially distant (i.e., superior) persons' or their in-group members' actions or events and is characterized by such grammatical constructions as *o-Verb-ni naru*, *o-Verb-da*, and *Verb-(r)areru* (e.g., *okaerininaru*; *okaerida*; *kaerareru* "will return"). *Kenjo-go* is generally used when speakers humbly discuss their own or their in-group members' actions or events that are related to the superior person and is characterized by *o-Verb-suru* (e.g., *oyobisuru* "summon someone"). Besides these grammatically derived referent honorifics, there are lexical substitutes (Niyekawa 1991) for some verbs.

Example (1) illustrates how one English sentence can be expressed in four different ways in Japanese depending on how deferential the speaker wants to be toward the addressee or the referent, in this case, a teacher (Shibatani 1990:376):

- (1) a. *sensei ga Taro o tasuketa*. (plain)
 b. *sensei ga Taro o otasuke ni natta*. (*sonkei-go*)
 c. *sensei ga Taro o tasukemashita*. (addressee honorific)
 d. *sensei ga Taro o otasuke ni narimashita*. (*sonkei-go*+addressee honorific)
 "The teacher assisted Taro."

(1)a is the plainest form with no honorifics. (1)b involves a referent honorific, more specifically, *sonkei-go*, but lacks an addressee honorific. Such a sentence is said to be used among intimate in-group members, such as friends and family. (1)c involves only an addressee honorific, whereas (1)d includes both addressee and referent honorifics. Shibatani (1994:1603) suggests that, since addressee honorifics and referent honorifics can appear separately, as exemplified by (1)b and (1)c, they are two independent systems. This proposition, as well as the observations reported above regarding the use of honorifics, however, are based on constructed data and may not necessarily reflect the actual usage of honorifics by Japanese speakers. The present study is an attempt to gain further understanding of Japanese honorifics, examining actual honorific instances observed in conversational data of native speakers of Japanese.

Recent studies of honorifics in conversation suggest that what is described above does not necessarily reflect actual usage by native

speakers of Japanese. A number of studies examining addressee honorifics in conversation reveal that social distance alone cannot explain actual usage of such honorifics (e.g., Cook 1999, 1996; Ikuta 1983; Maynard 1993, 1991; Miller 1996; Okamoto 1998). For instance, Ikuta (1983) examined speech level shifts between addressee honorifics and non-honorific forms and claims that such shifts signal attitudinal distance as well as changes in discourse structure. She argues that shifts to non-honorific forms represent speakers' attitudinal closeness (i.e., empathy) to their interlocutor whereas those to addressee honorifics denote their attitudinal distance from the interlocutor. She also asserts that a shift to addressee honorifics tends to occur in an utterance contextually separate from preceding utterances. Maynard (1993) also examined such speech level shifts and concludes that non-honorific forms tend to appear when speakers' awareness of the addressee is low, or when utterances are not deliberately addressed to the addressee, such as when giving self-addressed subordinate background information. Similarly, Cook (1999, 1996) proposes that addressee honorifics index intrapersonal distance (i.e., the distance between the speaker's innate self and his/her social role/persona), and observes that speakers tend to use addressee honorifics to show the cultivated side of their persona.

In contrast to the numerous studies on addressee honorifics, few studies have discussed referent honorifics in conversation (Matsumoto 1999; Okamoto 1998, 1996). In these studies, referent honorifics is not the main focus, and analyses are based mainly on women's speech, providing no or limited quantitative information. Nevertheless, they all seem to agree that social distance between speakers and referents alone cannot explain the use of referent honorifics; speakers do not necessarily use referent honorifics for socially distant third parties. What, then, accounts for the use or non-use of referent honorifics? Okamoto (1996:293) suggests that age might affect the frequency of use. She found that younger women (college students) used referent honorifics less often than older women (middle-aged women). Yet, the most relevant claims to the present study come from her 1998 study in which she claims that the use or non-use of referent honorifics in reference to an absent higher-status person may index other social meanings than social distance, such as the speaker's relationship with the addressee and the nature of the conversational setting (Okamoto 1998:154). Thus, she explains, when a speaker has a close relationship

with the addressee, he/she may avoid using referent honorifics for socially distant third parties because they might be interpreted as indexing formality/distance toward the addressee. Her claim is important in that it sheds light on the role of the addressee in influencing the frequency of referent honorifics. She further argues that style-mixing of honorific and non-honorific forms is "a speaker's strategy to express the desired degree of formality in a situation in which using either honorific or non-honorific forms consistently is thought to sound too formal or too informal" (154). However, she does not discuss what may determine which form to use at a given point in a conversation.

The present study is designed to follow up on Okamoto's (1998) claims regarding referent honorifics using conversational data. First, based on her claim that the relationship between the speaker and the addressee might affect the frequency of referent honorifics in reference to socially distant third parties, I will quantitatively investigate any correlation between the use of addressee honorifics and that of referent honorifics. If her claim is accurate, we should find a correlation between them; the more addressee honorifics are used, the more referent honorifics will be used. In order to examine gender issues that were not touched upon by the previous studies mentioned above, I will include both women's and men's speech in the data and report gender differences in the use of referent honorifics, if any. Second, even though Okamoto acknowledged the existence of style-mixing between honorific and non-honorific forms, she did not discuss in detail what triggers the shift. In order to investigate this issue further, I will examine style-mixing instances closely and suggest what might motivate such instances. More specifically, I will argue that changes in the speaker's attitudes toward the referent may cause the speaker to switch between the two forms.

2. Data

The data for this study consists of 13 informal conversations between two to four native speakers of Japanese, totaling approximately 9.5 hours of data¹. The speakers are mostly in their 20s and 30s

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and use the standard dialect of Japanese. There are three female single-sex conversations, three male single-sex conversations, and seven mixed-sex conversations in the data. I have included both single-sex and mixed-sex conversations to examine possible gender differences, since a number of studies suggest that these two types of conversations should be treated separately (e.g., Abe 1990; Coates 1988; Uchida 1992). In order to investigate a possible correlation between addressee honorifics and referent honorifics, I have also included three types of conversations classified by the degree of addressee honorifics usage: NAH (no addressee honorifics), AH/NAH (some addressee honorifics), and AH (addressee honorifics) conversations. Six NAH transcripts (*Takeda, Friends, Hamada, Bukatsu, Linguistics, Ph.D.*) are all between two friends and/or classmates and are most casual, involving no addressee honorifics. Five AH/NAH conversations (*Dinner, Graduate Studies, Kamachi, Boss, Computer*) are also casual conversations between or among classmates but are slightly more formal than the NAH conversations in that addressee honorifics are observed along with non-honorific forms. In these transcripts, some speakers use addressee honorifics to their interlocutor due to age and/or status difference but not vice versa. The two AH conversations (*School, Professors*) are more formal than the others in that all interlocutors use addressee honorifics predominantly, if not all the time. *School* is a conversation of the first encounter between two students. *Professors* involves two married couples of different ages.

3. Methodology

I will count all the predicates used in reference to socially distant third parties (i.e., people toward whom, according to standard grammar of Japanese (e.g., Kuno 1973; Shibatani 1990), referent honorifics should be directed, such as teachers, superiors at work, superiors' in-group members, etc.) and divide the predicates into four categories: [+ *sonkei*], [+ *kenjo*], [- *sonkei*], and [- *kenjo*]. The first two mean that *sonkei-go* "respect language" and *kenjo-go* "humbling language" are used, while the last two mean that they are not used. Let us look at some examples for each case. In the examples below, underlined segments are referent honorifics, while italics indicate the non-use of such honorifics. Additionally, as it is well known, Japanese allows zero-anaphors, but their referents are provided in parentheses in English translations. See the following example for [+ *sonkei*]:

(2) Professors: Talking about a professor's husband

- > 01 C: dannasan wa, .. ano, sh- .. shoku= o omochi de nai
 _no kana?
 02 F: .. un.
 03 E: .. hee=
 —> 04 F: dannasan mo ano, gengogaku de, ..piieichidii
 omochi na n desu.

 —> 01 C: (I) wonder if (her) husband does not have a job.
 02 F: No.
 03 E: Really?
 —> 04 F: (Her) husband also has a Ph.D. in linguistics.

In talking about their professor's husband, C and F use *sonkei-go*, *omochi de nai* "not have" and *omochi na* "have", respectively. Both derive from the *o*-verb-*da* form (*o-mochi-da*). Cases as these are classified as [+ *sonkei*].

Excerpt (3) includes an example of *kenjo-go*:

(3) School: Talking about Professor T

- > 01 S: watashi wa mada, ..ichido dake=, oaishita
 koto aru n desu kedo,
 02 W: ee ee.
 03 S: jugyoo wa, .. mada totta koto nai n desu yo.

 —> 01 S: I have met (her) only once, but
 02 W: Yes yes
 03 S: (I) have never taken (her) class before.

In explaining that she has met Professor T only once, S uses a *kenjo-go*, *oaishita* "met" (the past tense of *o*-verb-*suru*). Such *kenjo-go* is classified as [+ *kenjo*].

Excerpt (4) includes instances of the non-use of *sonkei-go* or *kenjo-go*:

(4) Ph. D.: Talking about Professor K

- > 01 M: K-sensei ga .. minna ni iimeeru de tabun
 mawashitekureta to
 02 [omou] n da kedo,

- 03 T: [n=],
 04 M: sono shi- shichigatsu toka rokugatsu gurai no
 [dankai] ka na,
 05 T: [n=]
 06 M: e=, nita kurasu o totteru hito wa,
 07 T: n,
 08 M: weibaa suru koto mo kanoo tte [yuu] fuu ni ..
 iwareta kara,
 09 T: [n]
 —> 10 M: jibun wa koo yuu no totteru n da kedo doo ka tte
 ittara,
 —> 01 M: Professor K *circulated* a message to everyone via
 email,
 02 (I) think, but,
 03 T: yeah,
 04 M: (I) think it was in July or June,
 05 T: uh-huh
 06 M: um, those who have taken a similar class before,
 07 T: yeah,
 08 M: um, (we) were told that it is possible to waive (that
 course),
 09 T: yeah
 —> 10 M: (I) *asked* (her) what to do as I have taken a similar
 class, then,

In turn 01, M talks about Professor K's action, and the verb describing this professor's act in such case must be in *sonkei-go* according to the standard grammar of Japanese. Nevertheless, M uses a non-honorific form *mawashitekureta* (*mawashite* "circulate" + *kureta* "did a favor" = "circulated (for us)") instead of its lexical honorific version *mawashitekudasatta* (*mawashite* "circulate" + *kudasatta* "did a favor (lexical honorific)"). Cases such as these are classified as [-*sonkei*]; non-honorific forms are used where the standard grammar of Japanese 'requires' *sonkei-go*. Similarly, in turn 10, M uses a non-honorific verb *itta* "said" in explaining what he had told Professor K. The standard grammar of Japanese 'requires' *kenjo-go*, namely *mooshi-ageta* (lexical honorific form of *itta*), in this case, since M is talking about what he told a socially distant person, Professor K. Speaker M, however, does not use such *kenjo-go* here. Cases such as these are

classified as [-*kenjo*]; non-honorific forms are used where the standard grammar of Japanese 'requires' *kenjo-go*.

After classifying all the relevant predicates into the [\pm *sonkei*] or [\pm *kenjo*] categories, I will report the quantitative analysis of the overall use of referent honorifics as well as any effects of gender and speech style on such use. I will then examine style-mixing between the use and non-use of referent honorifics found in the data.

4. Results & Discussions

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

Overall, 380 predicates involved in reference to socially distant third persons were found in the data. Table (5) provides the results of the classification of these instances into [\pm *sonkei* (respect language)] and [\pm *kenjo* (humbling language)]:

(5) Use and non-use of *sonkei-go* and *kenjo-go*

Honorific Type	Non-Use (-)	Use (+)	Total
<i>Sonkei-go</i>	299 (91%)	28 (9%)	327 (100%)
<i>Kenjo-go</i>	48 (91%)	5 (9%)	53 (100%)
Total	347 (91%)	33 (9%)	380 (100%)

Table (5) indicates that 28 *sonkei-go* were found in 327 possible cases (9%), while 5 *kenjo-go* were found in 53 possible cases (9%). In other words, the rate of the use of *sonkei-go* and that of *kenjo-go* are similar. Overall, referent honorifics were used in 33 out of 380 references to socially distant third parties, which is only 9% of the time, and this reveals that referent honorifics were rarely used in the current data. This finding is consistent with the claims made by Okamoto (1998, 1996) and Matsumoto (1999) that referent honorifics are rarely used for an absent third party. Even though the relative frequency of the use of the two types of referent honorifics requires further investigation, since this study found similar rates of use, *sonkei-go* and *kenjo-go* will be treated together as referent honorifics in the rest of the quantitative analysis of this study.

The thirteen total conversations are composed of three conversations between females, three conversations between males, and seven mixed-sex conversations composing the thirteen total conversations.

Table (6) shows the use and non-use of referent honorifics according to gender:

(6) Use and non-use of referent honorifics according to gender

Gender (min.)	Non-Use	Use	Total
single-sex M (85)	29 (100%)	0	29 (100%)
single-sex F (140)	92 (100%)	0	92 (100%)
mixed-sex M (172)	164 (93%)	13 (7%)	177 (100%)
mixed-sex F (172)	62 (76%)	20 (24%)	82 (100%)
Total	347 (91%)	33 (9%)	380 (100%)

In single-sex conversations, no referent honorifics were observed in 29 references to socially distant third parties by male speakers or in 92 such references by female speakers. In short, no referent honorifics were employed in single-sex conversations by either gender. However, all the referent honorific instances, 13 by male speakers and 20 by female speakers, were found in mixed-sex conversations. Lastly, female speakers used referent honorifics more frequently than male speakers in these conversations (24% vs. 7%). Although it is possible that gender composition affects the use of referent honorifics, more data and a more sophisticated statistical analysis are necessary to determine whether this is a factor. A close examination of the results of this study, however, suggests that speech style seems more relevant to the frequency of referent honorifics than does gender.

In order to examine the effects of speech style on the use of referent honorifics, the 13 conversations have been divided into three types. These types are based upon the speech style(s) used in them: NAH conversations in which none of the interlocutors used addressee honorifics; AH/NAH conversations in which not all the interlocutors used addressee honorifics; and AH conversations in which all the interlocutors used addressee honorifics. There are six NAH, five AH/NAH, and two AH conversations in the data. Table (7) shows the frequency of the use and non-use of referent honorifics according to these three types of conversations:

(7) Use and non-use of referent honorifics according to speech style

Speech Style	Non-Use	Use	Total
NAH	80 (100%)	0	80 (100%)
AH/NAH	164 (100%)	0	164 (100%)
AH	103 (76%)	33 (24%)	136 (100%)
Total	347 (91%)	33 (9%)	380 (100%)

In the NAH conversations, there were 80 possible instances in which referent honorifics could have been used, but in actuality, none was observed. In the AH/NAH conversations, there were 164 possible instances of referent honorifics, but no referent honorific was used. Out of the 164 instances, 70 were found in speeches of the people using addressee honorifics. All the 33 referent honorifics were observed in the AH conversations, the most formal conversations, in which all parties involved used addressee honorifics. From these observations, we may hypothesize that the more formal the conversation is, or the more the speaker uses addressee honorifics to their addressee, the more referent honorifics are observed. In other words, this study found a correlation between the frequency of addressee honorifics and that of referent honorifics, which supports Okamoto's (1998) claim of the addressee affecting the speaker's use of referent honorifics. This role of the addressee affecting the frequency of referent honorifics may imply addressee-oriented nature of Japanese honorifics. In addition, the correlation between addressee honorifics and referent honorifics found in the study suggests the interdependent nature of these two types of honorifics, unlike Shibatani's (1994:1603) proposition that they are two independent systems since they can be used separately (see example (1)).

We have so far looked at an overall picture of the use and non-use of referent honorifics. Our findings include: 1) referent honorifics are rarely used in reference to socially distant third parties and 2) there seems to be a correlation between addressee honorifics and referent honorifics. In the next section, we will examine style-mixing between the use and non-use of referent honorifics found in the data and discuss how changes in speakers' attitudes toward the referent might lead to such style-mixing.

4.2. Style-Mixing

One interesting phenomenon noted in the data is that speakers alternate between referent honorifics and their non-honorific counterparts

when referring to the same person within one stretch of conversation. The existence of such style-mixing was reported by Okamoto (1998), but possible motivations for choosing one form over the other were not explicitly discussed in her paper. In this paper, I would like to suggest that such style-mixing appears to be motivated by changes in the speakers' attitudes toward the referent at the time of speech. This suggestion is very similar to Ikuta's (1983) observation regarding addressee honorifics that attitudinal closeness or attitudinal distance trigger style shift between addressee honorifics and non-honorific forms.

Let us examine some examples. In (8), S, a Ph.D. student, talks about another Ph.D. student, Y, who is more advanced in his studies than she is but is in the same sociolinguistics class with her. She uses one *sonkei-go* 'respect language' and one *kenjo-go* 'humbling language' in talking about him, as underlined:

(8) School: Talking about another Ph.D. student Y

- 01 S: Y-san no wa LRC desu yo ne?
 02 W: ee hai hai.
 —> 03 S: ima disateeshon kaiteirasharu no kashira? .. *kare* mo imaa, ..
 —> 04 Japanese sociolinguistics no kurasu], *totteru* n desu kedo.
 05 W: [a soo desu ka].
 06 Hai.
 07 S: de, .. sengakki datta ka na? .. iya kyonen desu nee. .. ano,
 —> 08 O-sensei no seminaa o issho ni torashite itadaita n desu kedo.
 09 W: hai.

 01 S: Y-san's (major) is LRC, right?
 02 W: Yes, yes.
 —> 03 S: I wonder if (he) is writing his dissertation now. *He* is also now
 —> 04 *taking* Japanese Sociolinguistics class, but,
 05 W: Oh, really?
 06 Yes.
 07 S: And, was (it) last semester? No, it was last year.
 —> 08 (I) took Dr. O's seminar with (him), but,
 09 W: Yes.

S uses a *sonkei-go*, *kaiteirasharu* "is writing" (*kaite* "write" + *irassharu* "is (lexical honorific)"), in turn 3, wondering if Y is writing

his dissertation. On the other hand, in turn 4, she explains that Y is also taking a Japanese sociolinguistics class without using a referent honorific; she uses a non-honorific verb *totteru* "is taking" instead. Moreover, as seen in turn 3, she uses *kare* "he" with this predicate in reference to Y. This pronoun is normally reserved for a social equal or a lower-status person and is considered impolite to be used to a higher-status person (e.g., Shibatani 1990:372; Tohsaku 1995:78). In turn 8, however, she uses a *kenjo-go*, *torashite itadaita* "took" (lit. "let me take"), which is composed of *torashite* "let take" and *itadaita* "received a favor". In other words, turn 8 literally means that Y let her take Dr. O's seminar with him². Such *kenjo-go* seems very polite compared to the pronoun *kare* and the non-honorific verb in turns 3 and 4. It could be speculated that the base form in reference to Y is referent honorifics and that the non-honorific form in line 4 coincides with S's perception of Y as a classmate rather than a superior due to the fact that they are in the same class right now. In other words, her perception of Y as someone close rather than someone distant might have motivated the non-use of referent honorific in line 4.

Example (9) is another style-mixing instance from the same transcript. In this excerpt, S discusses how the class that was originally scheduled to meet at 8 a.m. three days a week was changed to meet at 7:40 a.m. twice a week:

(9) School: Talking about Professor K

- 01 S: de, .. shuu futsuka ni shiyoo ka toka tte, ..
 —> 02 sensei ga osshatta n desu, [K]-sensei ga osshatte,
 03 W: [ee hai].
 04 S: de, .. demo, .. shuu futsuka ni suru n dattara, ..
 —> 05 asa no shichi-ji yonjuppun kara, hajimenakya [ike]nai tte *itte*,

² Another possible interpretation suggested by a few speakers is that the referent honorific in turn 8 was employed in reference to Dr. O rather than Y. I asked several native speakers including Speaker S whether they thought that the referent for the referent honorific in turn 8 was Y or Dr. O. They unanimously answered that Y was the referent and, therefore, my discussion here follows this view.

This utterance is interesting in that the *kenjo-go* is used even though Y, the referent, is merely an oblique. If we were to supply the subject and Y in the utterance, it would be: *watashi wa Y-san ni O-sensei no seminaa o issho ni torashite itadaita*.

Kenjo-go is often referred to as object honorifics in Japanese linguistics (e.g., Shibatani 1990), but this terminology is problematic when the reference is not the object of the clause, as seen in this case.

- 06 W: [aa],
 07 S: demo hotondo no hito ga, te= ageta n desu,
 08 shuu nikai no hoo ga ii tte,
- 01 S: "Shall we make it two days a week?"
 —> 02 the professor said, Professor K said, and,
 03 W: Yes.
 04 S: And, but "If (we) are going to meet two days a week,
 —> 05 (we) must start (class) from 7:40 in the morning," (she) *said*,
 06 W: Oh,
 07 S: But most people raised (their) hand,
 08 saying that (they) would prefer meeting twice a week,

In Example (9), it is interesting to note that while S uses the lexical referent honorific of the verb "say" in turn 2, she uses its non-honorific counterpart in turn 5. Both forms appear after a quotation of Professor K's speech. Speaker S has informed me that she preferred having the class twice a week but was unhappy about having to come to class at 7:40 a.m. It appears that her negative reaction to the professor's proposition about the starting time coincides with the non-use of referent honorific in turn 5.

As seen by my suggestions regarding why style-mixing between referent honorifics and non-honorific forms occur in Examples (8) and (9), such style-mixing might be influenced by changes in the speaker's attitude toward the referent. For instance, in Example (8), S's perception of Y as her classmate, or attitudinal closeness that she may have felt toward the referent, could have motivated the non-use of a referent honorific. On the other hand, in Example (9), S's perception of Professor K as someone suggesting something unpleasant to her, or her rebellious attitude toward the referent, could have caused her to avoid its use. It appears that when referent honorifics are the base form, attitudinal closeness or distance that the speaker feels toward the referent lead to the non-use of referent honorifics.

5. Conclusions

This study is an important addition to the previous studies of Japanese honorifics claiming that the Japanese honorific system cannot be explained based solely on social distance (e.g., Cook 1999, 1996; Ikuta 1983; Maynard 1993; Okamoto 1998). It has demonstrated that the Japanese speakers rarely used referent honorifics for socially distant third parties. In addition, a correlation between addressee honorifics and referent honorifics was found, and the important role of

the addressee in affecting the frequency of referent honorifics was suggested. Based on this observation, an addressee-oriented nature of Japanese honorifics was proposed. This proposition is important in that it observes the two types of Japanese honorifics, namely, addressee honorifics and referent honorifics, as interdependent of each other rather than as independent of each other, as Shibatani (1994:1603) suggests. Another observation made in this study is that style-mixing between referent honorifics and non-honorific forms in reference to one socially distant individual might be brought about by changes in the speaker's attitude toward the referent; attitudinal closeness or distance might cause the speaker to switch between the two forms. This discovery is very similar to the phenomenon reported by Ikuta (1983) regarding addressee honorifics, in which changes in the speaker's attitude toward the addressee may have prompted the speaker to switch between the use and non-use of addressee honorifics.

To my knowledge, this is the first study that examines referent honorifics in conversation in detail. I hope to further investigate this issue in order to raise awareness of the reality of native speakers' speech regarding referent honorifics and Japanese honorifics in general.

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