

## **Japanese Honorific Use as Indexical of the Speaker's Situational Stance: Towards a New Model<sup>1</sup>**

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Japanese has long been known for its elaborate system of honorifics, grammatical forms which index deference to the addressee and/or referent of an utterance. Traditional analyses of Japanese honorifics present honorific use as determined by various factors in the speech situation including situational formality and the social status of the addressee or referent. Grammatical analyses have presented referent honorific use as determined by the presence of someone “socially superior” to the speaker as the subject or argument of the verb, while the use of addressee honorifics (distal forms) is governed by situational factors including the addressee (e.g. Harada, 1976; Neustupny, 1978). Even more pragmatically oriented accounts have sometimes presented honorific use as an obligatory, rule-governed response to specific contextual features such as the social identity of the addressee or referent and the overall formality of the speech situation (e.g. Ide, 1982; Matsumoto, 1989). Ide (1989), for example, argues that honorific use is a matter of “discernment” or accommodation to social convention in contrast to “volitional” politeness which involves the speaker’s active selection from a variety of verbal strategies.

In this paper, I demonstrate that traditional models of honorific use as rule-governed and obligatory cannot adequately account for the variation found in actual honorific use. Empirical evidence shows that speakers are not always consistent in their use of honorifics, even when talking about the same person in the same speech situation. Rather, speakers shift honorific levels in order to index shifts in their situational stance and presentation of self. Such data challenge us to create a model of honorific use which can account for the interaction of sociolinguistic norms with speaker agency and volition rather than dichotomizing them.

In the following sections, I first give a general description of the Japanese honorific system and then provide an analysis of the use of humble verbs in speeches at Japanese wedding receptions. Rather than consistently using humble verbs for self-reference throughout the entire speech, speakers shifted between humble and non-humble forms to

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index shifts in their stance towards the speech situation. Humble forms were associated with the enactment of a formal, public role as “wedding speaker”, while shifts to non-humble verbs occurred when speakers momentarily stepped out of the wedding speaker role in order to comment on their own performance. The speeches provide evidence of both sociolinguistic norms and speakers' ability to manipulate those norms to convey their stance towards the speech situation and social roles they enacted.

### 1. The Japanese Honorific System

Japanese honorifics may be broadly divided into two main categories: addressee honorifics and referent honorifics. In the addressee category, any predicate involves a choice between the *direct* form and the *distal* form (Jordan and Noda, 1987; see Figure 1, below). Direct forms are generally used among family members, friends, and in other informal situations involving relatively open and spontaneous self-expression. Distal forms index a more disciplined and “public” expression of self and are frequently used in more formal situations involving out-group members or the expression of hierarchical deference (Cook, 1996; Dunn, 1999). By contrast, referent honorifics are directly related to the person *about whom* one is speaking and are grammatically tied to the sentence subject. Referent honorifics involve a three-way choice between no use of honorifics, subject honorifics, and humble forms. Subject honorifics are used to show deference to the person who is the grammatical subject of the sentence. Humble forms are used to refer to the speaker or a member of the speaker's in-group and place them in the lower status position as a way of showing deference to someone else. Figure 1 illustrates these contrasts for the verb ‘to say’. The subject honorific forms would be used when speaking about someone to whom the speaker wishes to show deference. Conversely, the speaker could use the humble verbs *moosu* or *mooshiageru* to refer to him/herself as a way of showing deference to either the addressee or an absent third party. (Both *moosu* and *mooshiageru* are humble forms, with *mooshiageru* being somewhat more polite or deferential than *moosu*.)

#### (1) Forms of the verb ‘to say’

	No Referent Honorific	Subject Honorific (for others)	Humble (for self)
Direct (no addressee honorific)	iu	ossharu	moosu, mooshiageru
Distal (with addressee honorific)	ii-masu	osshai-masu	mooshi-masu, mooshiage-masu

Although the use of addressee honorifics is sensitive to various situational factors, research on the use of addressee honorifics in actual discourse has demonstrated that speakers often shift between distal and direct speech styles even in the course of a single speech situation. Such shifts between distal and direct have been found to index shifting degrees of empathy or social distance (Ikuta, 1983), varying degrees of awareness of the addressee (Maynard, 1993), and shifts between a more public vs. spontaneous presentation of self (Cook, 1996; Dunn, 1999). Thus the use of addressee honorifics is not simply determined by the status of the addressee or other situational factors; nor is it simply a matter of the speaker identifying and following social norms for that speech situation. Rather, speakers shift between distal and direct to communicate subtle shifts in the speaker's presentation of self and stance towards the addressee.

There have been considerably fewer empirical studies of referent honorific use, but here too the evidence suggests that speakers are not always consistent in their use of honorifics, even when speaking about the same person in the same speech situation. Yamaji (2000) provides examples in which shifts between the use and non-use of subject honorifics index shifts in speaker attitude toward the referent, while Okamoto (1999) suggests that speakers mix honorific and non-honorific forms as a way of creating an appropriate level of deference or formality. While the studies by Yamaji and Okamoto have demonstrated variation in the use of subject honorifics, I focus here on the use of humble forms for self-reference. Drawing on data from speeches at Japanese wedding receptions, I demonstrate that speakers do not consistently use humble forms for self reference even in ceremonial speech situations where such use is normatively expected. Rather, speakers shift between humble and non-humble forms in ways that index shifts in the speaker's social role or persona.

## **2. Ethnographic Context and Data**

My analysis focuses on wedding speeches as an example of a formal, ceremonial speech genre in which high levels of honorific use are socially expected. Much of the form and content of these speeches is relatively formulaic and there are etiquette books which give advice for giving speeches and provide sample speeches appropriate for different categories of guests. If honorific use is in fact a matter of following social norms, then one would expect those norms to be particularly salient in this context.

The majority of wedding receptions in Japan follow a very standardized format including a series of speeches by specific categories of wedding guests (Edwards, 1989). The reception opens with a speech by a ceremonial Go-Between (usually a workplace superior or former professor of the groom) who announces the marriage, introduces the couple to the guests, and provides a lengthy biography of each. This is followed by a speech by an "Honored Guest" of first the groom and then the bride (usually again either workplace superiors or university professors). The speeches by the two honored guests are generally followed by a toast which also signals the beginning of the meal. The eating and drinking continue to be interrupted by additional speeches as well as breaks for the groom and bride to appear in different costumes. After workplace superiors and former professors have spoken, there are speeches by same-age colleagues and college or high school friends. Finally, the reception concludes with thank you speeches by the groom and his father.

The data analyzed here consist of transcripts of eighteen speeches given at five wedding receptions held in the Tokyo area between 1990 and 1994. Videotapes of the wedding receptions were collected from a convenience sample of recently married friends and acquaintances and are not statistically representative of any particular population. The couples' ages ranged from twenty-three to thirty for the brides and twenty-six to thirty-five for the grooms. The grooms and brides were all college educated, and the speakers generally held white-collar occupations. The speakers include the categories of Go-Between, Honored Guest, and same-age Friends of the couple. Twelve of the speakers were male and six were female.

The speeches were generally very conventionalized in form and content. After introducing themselves and congratulating the couple, speakers talked about their personal experiences with the groom or bride, praising their work and character, and telling anecdotes to illustrate their personality. The Go-Betweens in particular described the

family, educational, and employment backgrounds of the groom and bride and explained how they met. The Go-Betweens and some of the older, married guests also talked about their own marital experience and/or offered advice to the new couple. The speeches generally closed with good wishes and advice for the couple, often phrased as requests. All of the speeches were characterized by a very formal speech style including high frequencies of distal use (ranging from 70-100% of all predicates). There was also frequent use of the *degozaimasu* form of the copula which is even more formal and deferential than the usual distal form. Speakers frequently used subject honorifics to refer to the groom or bride. This included speakers such as professors and workplace superiors who outside of the wedding context would normally be considered of higher status than the couple and would not use honorifics to refer to them. Speakers also frequently used humble forms to refer to themselves and their own actions in relationship to the audience. Despite the overall level of formality, however, there was no speaker who was completely consistent in the use of humble forms for self-reference. Examples of shifts between humble and non-humble forms will be given in the following sections.

### 3. Style Shifting in the Use of Metalinguistic Verbs

Due to space constraints, this analysis will focus on speakers' self-references using metalinguistic verbs. Metalinguistic verbs are those which describe speech acts such as *say, promise, explain, request, joke, or advise*. Japanese wedding speeches are rich in metalinguistic verbs because speakers often announce, describe, or comment on the speech act in which they are engaged. These self-descriptions require speakers to select either humble or non-humble verb forms to describe their speech acts. In what follows, I will show that humble forms were associated with the description of speech acts that are part of the conventionalized role of wedding speaker. By contrast, shifts from humble to non-humble forms marked a momentary stepping outside of the role of wedding speaker and the interjection of the speaker's more "everyday" voice or persona from outside the wedding context.

#### 3.1 *Speech Acts Involving the Use of Humble Verbs for Self-Reference*

In giving a speech at a wedding, speakers adopt a social persona of "Wedding Speaker" and speak in ways that are appropriate to that role. The use of a formal speech style, including the use of humble forms for self-reference, is part of how a person enacts the role of Wedding Speaker. For example, after introducing themselves and congratulating the couple, speakers generally announced and/or requested permission to say a few words of congratulation, introduce the couple, or share a few memories with the audience. These metalinguistic announcements were almost always performed using humble verbs. In the examples below, humble verbs and other referent honorifics are underlined (e.g., subject honorifics, honorific nouns) while non-humble verbs are in italics.<sup>2</sup>

- (2)      Ee senetsu          nagara hito koto  
                 presumptuous while one word

<sup>2</sup> Transcription conventions: Following Maynard 1989, / marks a pause-bounded phrasal unit. Punctuation is used to show intonation. Initials are used in place of full names. Glossing: COP copula; DIST distal form; DO direct object; GEN genitive; H- humble form; H+ subject honorific; HP honorific prefix; NOM nominalizer; PL plural; QT quotative; TI title; TOP topic marker.

go-aisatsu sase-te itadaki-masu.  
HP-greetings permit-and receive(H-)-DIST

"Ah although it is presumptuous, permit me to say a few words (H-). "

- (3) Ee sore de wa,/ aa shikirei ni,/ yori-mashi-te,  
that COP TOP customary to according-DIST-and

futari no: oo ryaku-reki o,/ oo  
two-people GEN personal-history DO

go-shookai,/ mooshiage-masu./  
HP-describe say(H-) -DIST

"Ah then according to custom I will describe (H-) the couple's personal history."

- (4) Kyoo wa,/ kono yoo ni,/ miryoku afureru M san  
Today TOP this manner in charm overflow M TI

no,/ kawai-rashii episoodo o,/ hitotsu/  
GEN cute -seeming episode DO one

go-shookai sase-te itadaki-tai to *omoi-masu./*  
HP-description permit-and receive(H-)-want QT think-DIST

"Today in this way I *think* I would like to be permitted to describe(H-) one amusing episode about charming M."

Speakers also used metalinguistic verbs to describe speech acts as they were in the process of engaging in them. In the following two examples, the speakers used humble forms of the phrases 'say congratulations' and 'pray' to simultaneously describe and perform a speech act:

- (5) Mata,/ go-ryoo-ke no mina-sama-gata ni,  
also HP-both-families GEN everyone-TI-PL to

kokoro kara o-iwai mooshiage-masu. /  
heart from HP-congratulations say(H-) -DIST

"Also I say congratulations (H-) from the heart to everyone in both families."

- (6) kagayakashii/ shoorai o kizui-te  
bright future DO build-and

ik-are-masu koto,/ o-inori itashi-mashi-te./  
go-H+-DIST thing HP-pray do(H-)-DIST-and

"I pray (H-) that [the couple] will build (H+) a bright future."

Similarly, wedding guests often ended their speeches by making requests of the couple and/or the audience. Here humble forms of the verb 'request' were used to simultaneously describe and perform the speech act of making a request:

- (7) sue-nagaku tanoshii,/ go-katei o kizui-te  
 future-long fun HP-family DO build-and  
  
itadaki-masu yoo,/ o-negai  
 receive(H-)-DIST manner HP-request  
  
itashi-mashi-te,/  
 do(H-)-DIST-and  
  
 "I request (H-) that they build a long-lasting and happy family,"
- (8) kore kara mo, yori issoo no go-shidoo to  
 this from also more much-more GEN HP-guidance and  
  
go-bentatsu no hodo o, N-ke, I-ke,  
 HP-encouragement GEN extent DO N family I family  
  
 kawari-mashi-te, o-negai mooshiage-masu.  
 replace-DIST-and HP-request say(H-) -DIST  
  
 "On behalf on the N and I families I request (H-) more than ever your  
guidance and encouragement [for the couple] from now on."

It should be noted that all of the speech acts in these examples are extremely conventional parts of wedding speeches. While not every speaker necessarily performed each speech act, congratulating the couple, describing their biographies and personalities, praying for their happiness, and requesting the support of the audience are all a typical part of wedding speeches. Speakers thus used humble forms to describe the speech acts they performed in their conventionalized roles as wedding speakers.

### 3.2 *Speech Acts Involving the Use of Non-Humble Verbs for Self-Reference*

As noted above, no speaker was completely consistent in using humble forms for self-reference throughout an entire speech. Although humble forms were used to describe the conventionalized speech acts of a wedding guest, the speakers shifted to non-humble forms to momentarily step out of the role of Wedding Speaker and comment on their own performance.

In the following example, a professor had just finished describing and praising the bride's university education. Such praise could also be interpreted as self-praise of her own institution which is not appropriately modest behavior. Following her description of the bride's education, the speaker shifted to non-humble forms to say that it might sound as if she was offering propaganda for her university and that she is very passionate about her school. Non-humble verbs were used to reveal a personal and emotional perspective through which the speaker commented on and perhaps apologized for her performance in the "wedding speaker" role. (The use of italics indicates non-humble verbs.)

- (9) De sono yoo na ano:/ maa,/ naka de,/ n konna  
 and that type um well within at this-way
- seki de made watakushi, jibun no daigaku no,/   
 seat at up-to I oneself GEN university GEN
- senden shi-te -ru-nde,/*   
 propaganda do -and-be-since

"Within this well um even in this position [as wedding speaker] *I'm spreading propaganda* for my university,"

ano: ware-nagara ai-koo seishin ni  
 um myself-while love-school spirit as

*moe-te-iru to omou-n desu kedo,/*   
 burn-and-be QT think-NOM COP(DIST) but

"um *I think I am very passionate* about my school if I do say so myself but,"<sup>3</sup>

As this example shows, speakers often shifted to non-humble verb forms when commenting on their own speech and revealing a more personal or backstage aspect of the self. In contrast to the type of "metalinguistic announcements" of speech acts described above, the metalinguistic comments described here involved a distancing of the speaker from the "wedding speaker" role in order to comment on the expectations of that role and their own performance of it. Metalinguistic announcements of speech acts that are a conventionalized part of the wedding speaker role were performed using humble forms in 87% of all cases. By contrast, sections where the speaker commented on his/her own performance were humble only 40% of the time.

Such metalinguistic commentary is strong evidence of speakers' awareness of sociolinguistic conventions for wedding speeches. Rather than blindly obeying such conventions, speakers were self-reflective about them. Shifts to non-humble forms sometimes signaled an ironic distancing from the wedding speaker role even as the speaker performed it. In the following example, a workplace superior of the groom momentarily shifted into a more informal style to comment on the social expectations placed upon him as a speaker and then shifted back into his speech-making "voice" with the humble form of the verb 'to say' (*mooshiagetai*).

- (10) nani ka,/ senpai rashii koto o  
 something QM senior appear thing DO
- iwa-na-kya ikan (deshoo) kara.*  
 say-not-if forbidden (perhaps) because

"since I probably *have to say* something that sounds like a senior."

<sup>3</sup> The last line of this example does not actually contain any metalinguistic verbs and *moeteiru* 'burning' would not normally appear in humble form in this syntactic position. The phrase 'I think' can take the humble form, but generally does not do so in my data.

mooshiage-tai to *omou-n* desu (kedo/ga).  
say(H-) -want QT think-NOM COP(DIST) but and

"I *think* I'd like to say(H-) something but."

Here the style shift is marked, not only by the use of non-humble forms, but also by the use of contractions (*iwanakya ikan* rather than *iwanakereba ikenai*). This shift to a more informal style signals a momentary stepping out of the "wedding speaker" role to present a more "everyday" voice or social persona from outside of the wedding context.

The next example requires some explanation of the use of titles in Japanese. Japanese has a number of titles that can be added as suffixes to someone's name. The title *-san* is a respectful term that can be used for people of any gender and marital status; *-sama* is even more deferential. By contrast, the title *-kun* is usually restricted to men, and is generally used for people of equal or junior status to the speaker. In example 11, the Go-Between, a workplace superior of the groom, was talking about "Mr. Y," the groom. Partway through his speech, the Go-Between commented that he kept wanting to refer to the groom as *Y-kun*, the more informal form which is probably the form of address he typically used for the groom in the workplace. The speaker evidently saw this form as inappropriate in a speech style in which he was using high levels of subject honorifics to refer to the groom. Indeed he used the modifying verb *shimau* which has the meaning of doing something inadvertently. In drawing attention to his own use, he both evoked a different speech context (in which the use of *-kun* would be normal) and momentarily stepped out of the "Go-Between" persona to comment on his own usage in a more informal style:

- (11) Mazu,/ ((clears throat))/ shinroo no oo,/ Y,/ uu kun  
first groom GEN Y TI  
  
to iu fuu ni *yon-de shimau-n* desu ga,/   
QT say style as call-and end-up-NOM COP(DIST) but

"First ((clears throat)) the groom Y uh kun I *keep calling* him but,"

The examples provided here were not highly marked or unusual violations of sociolinguistic norms for this speech context. All of the eighteen wedding speakers engaged in shifts between humble and non-humble at least once during their speech. Rather than violating sociolinguistic norms, speakers used the conventionalized meanings of humble and non-humble forms to index shifts in stance and speaker persona.

Although speakers frequently shifted to non-humble forms to comment on their own linguistic performances, this should not be understood as a "rule" that requires speakers to shift levels. It is in fact quite possible for speakers to engage in metalinguistic commentary while remaining in a formal speech mode. In contrast to the style shift in example 11, the same speaker later in his speech once again apologized for calling the groom Y-kun, but this time he did so using humble forms:

- (12) De ee,/ Y,/ kun to mo-- mooshiage-sashi-te  
and Y TI QT say(H-) -permit-and



itadaki-masu ga./  
receive(H-)-DIST but

"And uh Y--, kun if I may be permitted to call (H-) him that,"

Thus it is not the case that speaker asides or metalinguistic commentary never appear in humble form. However, the use of non-humble verb forms does appear to index a speaking voice or persona from "outside" the wedding context, and this more everyday voice was particularly likely to appear when speakers momentarily stepped outside of and commented on their performance as wedding speakers.

#### 4. Conclusions

Traditional models of Japanese honorifics have presented honorific use as determined by a combination of situational factors and the social status of the referent. According to these models, speakers would be expected to consistently use humble forms when referring to their own actions with regard to a respected addressee. Yet the current analysis has demonstrated that speakers do not consistently use a particular honorific level for self-reference throughout an entire speech event. Although there is clearly a sociolinguistic norm regarding the appropriateness of honorific forms in wedding speeches, there was no speaker in this corpus who consistently used humble forms throughout the entire speech. Rather, speakers shifted between humble and non-humble forms in ways that indexed shifts in their stance towards the speech situation and the social persona they enacted. Speech acts that are an expected and conventionalized part of the "wedding speaker" role were almost exclusively performed in honorific form. These included congratulations, prayers, requests of the couple, and metalinguistic announcements of what the speaker planned to discuss. By contrast, speakers shifted to non-humble forms in order to momentarily step out of their "wedding speaker" role and interject a more personal perspective. Speakers were particularly likely to use non-humble verbs to make asides or comment on their own performance as wedding speakers.

These data suggest that the use of humble forms indexes not only deference to the audience but the enactment of a formal and public social role, in this case that of a wedding speaker. In this context, shifts to non-humble verb forms occur when the speaker shifts out of the wedding speaker role to comment on the role from a different, more personal and informal perspective. Previous analysis of the use of addressee honorifics (distal forms) have shown that speakers shift between distal forms and direct forms to index shifts in the presentation of self. The use of distal forms indexes a more "public" and socially governed self-presentation, while direct forms index a more intimate and spontaneous side of the self (Cook, 1996; Dunn, 1999). The present analysis demonstrates that the use of humble verb forms follows much the same pattern. Speakers are expected to use these forms when speaking on ceremonial occasions such as weddings or other celebrations, but they can also shift to non-humble to allow a more personal side of the self to appear even in these ceremonial contexts.

This paper contributes to a growing body of evidence showing that the empirical patterns of honorific use cannot be accounted for by a model that treats honorific use as mechanistically determined by the social status of the addressee and/or referent of the utterance. Rather, any realistic model of honorific use must simultaneously take into account grammatical constraints, sociolinguistic norms, and speaker agency. Sociolinguistic norms do not determine speaker's choices, but they do constrain the

possible meanings and interpretations of those choices (Scotton, 1988). Both honorific and non-honorific forms take indexical meaning from their typical situations of use and from social expectations regarding their use. It is precisely the fact that humble and non-humble forms have different social and indexical meanings which allows speakers to use these forms creatively to index shifts in their social presentation of self.

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