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An emerging role-identity and honorifics: A longitudinal study of email exchanges in a Japanese community



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ABSTRACT

The study presents a longitudinal, qualitative and ethnographic investigation of language use and change within an informal Japanese alumni network. It utilises the author's corpus of past email correspondence among a social network of Japanese men between 2006 and 2009, and a subsequent interview in 2012. The study illuminates a struggle over the interpretation of the use of honorifics as a semiotic tool which could affect interpersonal relationships. More specifically, it illustrates the increasing use of honorifics by a member in enacting a social event organiser (幹事 *Kanji*) role in this community and its multiple interpretations by other members reflecting various vantage points. Theoretically, it aims to demonstrate the multiple indexical meanings of Japanese honorifics by exploring the use of honorifics indexing neither deference nor social distance (the traditional interpretations of honorific use) but rather the functional enactment of a recognized social role and its associated register. This use of honorific language as 'functional rather than relational' has not been previously emphasised in the literature on Japanese honorific use. It also demonstrates the fundamental indeterminacy of indexical meanings in relation to various interpretive vantage points and evaluative moments.

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1. Introduction

This study analyses emails circulated amongst a group of men who were members of a junior high school soccer team in the late 1970s. It looks into how they re-establish their social relations through online communication and renegotiate individuals' identities and roles within the group. Specifically, it focuses on a marked linguistic phenomenon – the emergence of honorifics in relation to the enactment of a particular social role, the social event organiser (*kanji*: 幹事 in Japanese), within the community. *Kanji* is a person who is assigned a role of organising and coordinating social events such as parties of many kinds for an office, club or group. Such social gatherings include *shinnenkai* (new year's party), *hanami* (flower-viewing party) and *bōnenkai* (end of year party).¹ Usually the most junior member is expected to volunteer for this role. Or, sometimes, the role is rotated among staff members. The task usually involves contacting members to determine the most suitable date and venue for a given social event. There are many websites from which a newly appointed *Kanji* can seek advice. These websites

Symbols and abbreviations: AP, apology formula; COP, copula; CAU, causative; D/M, *desu/masu* forms; Hum, humble form; IMP, imperative; IP, interactional particles; LC, locative; LK, linker; Mas, masculine language; NEG, negative; NOM, nominalizer; UC, unconventional; O, object marker; Pote, potential form; Quo, quotative; Res, respectful form; S, subject marker; , double vowel; –, Japanese conventional prolongation of vowel in written; ::, prolongation of a sound [the interview data only].

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¹ *Bōnenkai* (忘年会) literally means a party to forget the year's troubles.

feature manuals including how to notify people of events in writing, how to find suitable venues for various occasions, how to make everybody happy, and the 'do's and don'ts' for those who are new to the *Kanji* role. The proliferation of these websites indicates the significance of the *Kanji* role in Japanese society.²

The study attempts to explicate how honorifics as linguistic indices, which are new to the community, are interpreted. The group represents a community with weak social ties, where members rarely meet except for a year-end party (*bōnenkai*), friendly soccer matches and occasional social gatherings which are organised when those who reside overseas return to Japan temporarily. Emails are only exchanged to notify and organise these events; exceptions include occasional funeral notices of the members' parents and news about newly born children.

In more specific terms, this longitudinal study investigates how the role-identity is reflected in the language use and how community norms are negotiated and challenged by the participants over the period of three years. Drawing on the notion of 'relational work' (Locher and Watts, 2008; Locher and Graham, 2010; Locher, 2013), (im)politeness, social role and identity formation, the study attempts to present various interpretations of email correspondence of the community, in particular the use of honorifics, from multiple vantage points and interpretive moments. It also highlights the multi-indexicality of honorifics beyond conventional meanings.

2. Relational work and (im)politeness

According to Locher and Watts (2008), 'relational work' is defined as "all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice" (p.96). In their notional construct of relational work, any researchers' predetermined definitions of (im)politeness are rejected and instead, four-way categorisation of judgements, 'impolite', 'non-polite', 'polite' and 'over-polite' (Locher and Watts, 2005; Locher, 2006) are used to explain relational work. The much cited visual representation of relational work which appears in Watts (2005:xliv) illustrates that 'impolite'/'rude' and 'over-polite' are 'negatively marked behaviour, and that 'polite' is 'positively marked behaviour'. Unmarked behaviour is described as 'non-polite'. As Haugh (2007) aptly points out, it is not clear whether such terminology is intended for participants' use (hearer evaluation) or as an analytical tool for researchers. He also suggests that negative vs positive evaluations in the model of relational work are problematic.

'over-politeness' is defined as 'negatively marked', experience from inter-cultural situations indicates that being overly polite is not necessarily always regarded as problematic. Is it really the case that over-politeness is always received negatively by participants?

(Haugh, 2007:301)

In the relational work, norms (to be discussed further in Section 5) function as a baseline which divides marked and unmarked phenomena. It is therefore important to determine what are considered to be the norms in a given context. The normative aspect of politeness phenomena has been discussed by many researchers. The default level of linguistic politeness can also be referred to as 'anticipated politeness' (Fraser, 1999; Haugh, 2003) and it derives from the perceived 'norms' of a community. A similar concept is described in relation to the Japanese concept of *wakimae* (translated as 'discernment') (Hill et al., 1986; Ide, 1989), which is regarded as unmarked politeness phenomena, leading Watts (1989, 2003) to categorise it as appropriate behaviour and to distinguish it from marked (im)polite behaviour. Phenomena falling into this category are often unnoticed and unquestioned, and they are related to common patterns of communication and behaviour at a social level (Kádár and Bax, 2013). Such common patterns and their negotiable and relational aspects at a micro-cultural level are referred to as 'in-group ritual' by Kádár and Bax who defined it as "ritual practices formed by small social units (relational networks)" (2013:73) and this is also relevant to this study.

3. Multiple vantage points and evaluative moments

This study captures linguistic changes in the emails exchanged in the aforementioned local community from emic and etic understandings in conjunction with first-order and second-order perspectives. I follow Kádár and Haugh's (2013) understanding of the first-order and second-order distinction which is based on particular evaluative moments of situated meaning, rather than following the conventional distinction, between participant and analyst in the study of (im)politeness. First-order only involves participants, and they engage in social practice where they evaluate emerging meaning 'here and now' or perhaps simply participate in the meaning making. Second-order involves an observer's vantage points, from which s/he evaluates phenomena 'there and then'. Specifically, Kádár and Haugh (2013:85) argue that "[w]hile the first-order/second-order distinction has generally been held to be between participant and analyst understandings of politeness, we suggest that this neglects a further two loci of understanding" (Ibid.:85). They go on to assert the importance of the distinction between insiders and outsiders as well as that between lay observers and analysts; both loci exhibit different understandings of a social practice that the conventional first-order/second-order distinction fails to explain. This study takes into account such

² Upon searching with 幹事の心得 (*Kanji no kokoroe*: Guide to *Kanji*), I had 7,969,000 hits on the 21st of September 2012. Some examples are Guide to *Kanji* <http://subdomain.se-tai.net/>, 30 Essential Rules for *Kanji* <http://www.happy lifestyle.com/9927>. See also Bardsley and Miller (2011), a collection of papers illustrating many examples of instructions and manuals for certain expected behaviours in Japan.

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