

## Interactional effects of self-respectful forms in Japanese

“Category: discourse/pragmatics/sociolinguistics”

In Modern Japanese, regardless of their status, it is considered inappropriate to apply respectful forms of honorifics to oneself. However, participants engaged in Japanese social interaction sometimes purposefully use self-respectful forms (including honorific prefixes) against the pragmatic conventions. As the pragmatic inappropriateness of such usage is recognized, speakers' use of self-respectful forms creates contextual cues (Gumperz 1984) and brings indexical meanings into focus. Based on tape-recorded conversations, I analyze examples in which participants use respectful forms of honorifics to themselves. My examples show that the pragmatic inappropriateness of self-respectful forms can be suspended by fulfilling more immediate goals in interaction than conforming to the conventions of Japanese honorific usage. The purposes of this research are twofold: (1) To demonstrate that respectful forms could convey meanings that are beyond or even opposite to the referential value of deference such as playfulness, sarcasm, and depreciating honorific values of linguistic forms; (2) To suggest that the meaning and effects are not inherent to linguistic forms but derive from a momentary social relationship among participants in the interactional context. This study also discusses that the use of self-respectful forms serves to create a new frame (Goffman 1986) in their social relationship and can bring participants to a higher level of friendship when they are interpreted as a humorous act.

I first analyze examples in which participants apply honorific prefixes to themselves in dyadic greetings. In (1), speaker Yumi uses the honorific prefix *-o* to herself, in order to maintain a playful footing that her interlocutor sets previously. However, in (2), the honorific prefix is used onto the speaker himself, in order to depreciate the honorific value that the prefix conventionally carries. Here, the honorific prefix conveys a sense of irony in a non-insulting manner and functions to reduce the referential value of deference in the linguistic form. These examples show that the same linguistic form could convey totally different meanings, depending on the immediate interactional context.

I also analyze cases in which self-respectful forms are used among relatively new acquaintances from the same generation. My examples will show that interpreting speakers' use of self-respectful forms as a misuse results in an uncoordinated communication while understanding it as an attempt to provide some meaningful effects to interaction leads to a successful communication. In (3), speaker Hiro, who is perplexed by his interlocutor's use of self-respectful forms, abruptly finishes the conversation after hearing an instance of them. On the contrary, in dealing with embarrassment at the excessive amount of deference expressed by her interlocutor, Mika in (4) uses self-respectful forms as a humorous metamessage to let her interlocutors use fewer respectful forms to her. As other participants joke about the unconventional use of the linguistic forms, the self-respectful forms can serve to strengthen social bonds between participants. These examples suggest that interactional effects of using self-respectful forms which can vary according to social relationships among participants also frame and reframe interactions and social relationships among participants.

Based on the analysis of self-respectful forms in Japanese social interaction, this paper will suggest that special meanings and effects of self-respectful forms in Japanese arise at the intersection of widely acknowledged pragmatic conventions and the local interactional context.

## References

Goffman, Erving. 1986. *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Northeastern University Press.

Gumperz, John. 1984. *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge University Press.

**Data: (1)** This is an opening in a conversation between two female friends in their late 20s.

1 Rika: *Yumi-chan, o-genki?*  
Yumi-DIM HONP-fine?  
'Yumi, (are you) fine?'

2 Yumi: *un o-genki*  
yeah HONP-fine  
'Yeah, (I'm) fine.'

3 Rika: *atashi mo*  
'Me, too.'

**(2)** Yasuo, a professor in his mid-40s, and Yoko, a graduate student in her late 20s, talk on the phone.

1 Yasuo: *moshimoshi?*  
'Hello?'

2 Yoko: *moshimoshi sasaki desu*  
'Hello, (this) is Sasaki.'

3 Yasuo: *a konbanwa*  
'Good evening.'

4 Yoko: *konbanwa*  
'Good evening.'

5 *sensei o-genki desu ka?*  
teacher HONP-fine COP.POL Q  
'Professor, how are (you)?'

6 Yasuo: *o-genki desu yo*  
HONP-fine COP.POL SFP  
'(I'm) fine.'

7 *sasaki-san wa?*  
'(How about you), Ms. Sasaki?'

8 Yoko: *hai o-kage-sama de*  
'yes, (fine), thank (you).'

9 Yasuo: *yamete yo sore*  
'Stop (doing) that.'

**(3)** At a drinking party, Daiki and Shōta met through their mutual friends several hours before their conversation was recorded. Daiki talked about several reasons why he doesn't drink.

1 Daiki: *dakara mou nomanai kedo yoku nomu yone*  
'So, (I) don't drink anymore, but (you) drink quite a lot, right?'

2 Shōta: *un o-nomini narimasse*  
yeah HONP-drink become.COP.POL.SFP  
'Yeah, I drink a lot.'

3 Daiki: (4.0-silence) *a sorosoro chotto*  
'Well, (I'm) taking off now.'

**(4)** Fumiko and Mika met through Fumiko's boyfriend, Sakio, two days before this conversation was recorded. Although no one used respectful forms in the previous context, Fumiko invariably used polite forms to Mika and often to Sakio, while Mika and Sakio used plain forms.

1 Fumiko: *Tanabe-san yoku go-ryokō toka nasaru n desu ka?*  
Miss Tanabe often HONP-trip sort do:RESPNOM COP:POL Q  
'Miss Tanabe, do (you) often do honorable-traveling?'

2 Mika: ((smiling)) *nasai masen*  
do:RESP POL:NEG  
'(I) honorably do not.'

3 Sakio: *ima no hāmonī?* ((Everyone bursts into laughter.)  
'(Was that) a harmony?'

4 Mika: *datte go-ryokō nasaru nante chōteineini iu n damon*  
cause HONP-trip do:RESP like verypolitely say NOM COP.SFP  
'Because (Fumiko) was too polite and said "honorable-traveling."'