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## **The actual use and status of honorifics in the perception of young Japanese native speakers**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyses honorifics use among young Japanese native speakers with reference to their attitude and knowledge towards its current state. The outcomes of the analysis reference two pragmatic changes that are recently observed within this category: simplification and equalization.

The paper is divided into two parts: theoretical and analytic. In the theoretical part such honorific oppositions as: “vertical/ horizontal”, “standard/non-standard”, “public/private” will be discussed with examples. The analytic part contains the analysis of the survey research supported with a post-survey discussion conducted in 2022–2023 at Japanese universities with 276 respondents. The aim of the analysis is to verify the impact of factors including: age, gender, status, relation with the listener, and sphere of communication on the use of honorific markers. It also evaluates young people’s awareness of vertical/horizontal honorifics and their significance, and discusses their attitude towards the relevant changes. The conclusion suggests that it is conflict avoidance and the concern for good relationships with receivers that determines young people’s language choice.

**KEYWORDS:** Japanese language, honorifics, language change, language register, language attitude

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## Introduction

Japanese honorifics (*keigo*) is a grammatical category of Japanese language, which due to its long linguistic tradition and wide spectrum of cultural and sociological references, is an important component of Japanese linguistic heritage. Today, as a situationally-based (formal, public) and relation-based (vertical, horizontal) language register, the use of honorifics is considered a significant pragmatic phenomenon (Jabłoński 2021: 323).

Over the time, certain significant shifts in the character and scope of the function of honorific expressions have been observed reflecting transformations occurring within Japanese society, economy, international relations and language policy, but moreover responding to the current language users' needs (Fukushima 2013, Ozaki 2017)<sup>2</sup>. The major difference is that while formerly Japanese honorifics served to indicate the status difference between the superior (*meue*) and inferior (*meshita*), today it serves to demonstrate the psychological distance between interlocutors (Inoue 2017a: 17).

Although the Japanese honorific system was modified and noticeably simplified in post-war Japan as a means of adjusting to the new conditions of a democratizing and modernizing country, its traditional hierarchy-based character was preserved (Carroll 2013: 90–91). Still, certain pragmatic processes are believed to be intensifying recently, and consequently, the changes occurring within the honorific system has become the topic of many linguistic debates and studies (Ozaki 2017, Inoue 2017a, Tanabe and Koike 2020). The examples of these processes include the simplification and equalization of honorifics which are predominantly associated with the recent trend of skipping vertically-based deferential and humble forms (*sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo*) and leaning towards horizontally-based polite forms (*teineigo*) or structurally more synthetic, innovative “intermediate” forms.

The commonization of honorifics leads to more and more intensified individualization within its use, also within the public sphere. Consequently, the current state of honorifics is criticized by older Japanese native speakers who tend to blame younger generation for their individualistic and careless speech, and for their inappropriate or incorrect use of honorifics. A similar

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<sup>2</sup> The mentioned changes refer primarily to the internalization and commonization of various spheres of life, which were influenced, among others, by contacts with foreign patterns of living, studying, working and trading. As a result of consumerism, public access and partner-oriented business, honorifics has spread among regular people and was modified (e.g. the spread of loanwords, the promulgation of *manyuaru keigo* ‘honorifics in manuals used for customer service’, etc.). Another factor influencing mentioned changes was the transformation of family model in Japan from a multi-generational model to a nuclear family model, which limited the use of honorifics in the households.

tendency is also exhibited in public media language represented by young announcers and celebrities. On this ground, the notion of the disintegration of honorifics (*keigo-no midare*) is frequently emphasized (Carroll 2013), although Japanese researchers prefer to associate these processes with “changes” (*henka*) or “development” (*hattatsu*), considering the word “disintegration” (*midare*) unjustified (Fukushima 2013: 192, Inoue 2017a). As a side note, it is worth mentioning that research on the current status of honorifics and users’ attitudes (positive, negative, neutral) towards its contemporary use are regularly conducted by the Bunkachō (Agency for Cultural Affairs) as a part of the surveys entitled *Kokugo-ni kan suru yoron chōsa* ‘Opinion poll on national language’. Analysis of these surveys reveals some interesting results regarding various aspects of recent honorific application and often indicates a generally positive attitude of young Japanese people towards the use of honorifics in a “traditional”, rather than simplified way<sup>3</sup>.

Taking the above into account, it seems essential to relate the discussion about the pragmatic changes occurring within the honorific category with certain conflicting opinions and attitudes among the language users towards it. For this purpose, this paper analyses the use of honorifics as one of language registers among young Japanese native speakers determined by such factors as: age, gender, status, relation to the listener, and the sphere of communication (private or public), and it simultaneously examines their knowledge and attitude towards the honorific system’s current condition and future prospects.

This paper is divided into theoretical and analytical parts. In the first theoretical part, oppositions reflected in honorific use such as: “vertical” and “horizontal”, “standard” and “non-standard”, “public” and “private” will be discussed with examples. The second analytical part contains an analysis of the survey research supported with the post-survey discussion.

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<sup>3</sup> According to one of the surveys, more than 64% of the respondents claimed that honorifics should be cherished in their traditional way as a part of beautiful Japanese, while only 26% admitted that it should be simplified and adjusted to modern times. Additionally, almost 75% of junior high and high school students underlined that honorifics should be used in communication with teachers and only 9% considered it unnecessary (Bunkachō 2005).

Another survey analysis indicates that almost 74% of language users admit to not feeling any negative impact when using honorifics, while 25% claimed to feel negative impact. The latter selected “difficulty with reducing the distance to the listener” and “tendency to be overpolite while avoiding being rude” as the most frequent indications of negative impact (Bunkachō 2006).

Although the above data briefly illustrates the varying attitudes of Japanese speakers towards the current status of honorific language, they also reveal a rather positive association with this phenomenon, even among young native speakers.

The survey was conducted in 2022–2023 at selected universities located in different regions of Japan among 276 young<sup>4</sup> native speakers of Japanese. The respondents were requested to indicate the use of suggested variants of honorifics and select them among other language registers. They were also asked to evaluate their individual competences in honorific application regarding spoken and written communication, as well as refer to the subject of pragmatic changes and the notion of honorifics disintegration.

The characteristics of the survey research are introduced in the methodological parts (Sections 3.1 and 3.2). All the data presented in the tables included in the analytic section (Tables 1–4) are based on the outcomes of the mentioned research. All translations from Polish and Japanese were prepared by the author of this paper.

### **1. Binary character of Japanese honorifics: vertical/horizontal, standard/non-standard, public/private**

The term “honorifics” (*keigo*) refers to a grammatical and word-forming/lexical category of Japanese language, which Huszcza et al. describe as the most pragmatically and culturally conditioned category (2003: 493). As a pragmatic phenomenon honorifics fulfil not only a communicative function, but also an informative function as it “informs about the social relations between the sender and the addressee, the sender and the listener who is not an addressee and the sender and the subject of the utterance” (ibid.). On the grounds of the above-mentioned relations, generally three sub-categories of honorifics are distinguished: polite forms (*teineigo*), humble forms (*kenjōgo*) and deferential forms (*sonkeigo*), which Jabłoński presents on the axes of horizontal and vertical honorific oppositions (2021: 325).

In the proposed scheme, Jabłoński distinguishes three types of markings: neutral, positive and negative. On the vertical axis: HON+ pertains to a positive meaning (elevating↑/lowering↓) and HON- pertains to a negative meaning (self-elevating↑/degrading↓), while on horizontal axis: ADR+ refers to positive (polite) meaning, and ADR- to negative (plain) meaning (ibid.). On this basis, previously mentioned deferential and humble forms reflect vertical oppositions with self-deferential (self-elevating) and depreciative (degrading) forms, while polite forms reflect horizontal oppositions with plain forms.

The scheme is a general presentation of honorific oppositions and does not include the location of potential non-standard variants. However, as a

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<sup>4</sup> In the year the survey was conducted, the youngest respondents were 19 years old (born 2004) and the oldest respondent was 33 years old (born 1990).

relevant aspect of the present research the distinction between standard and non-standard honorifics will be also taken into account.

The term *standard honorifics* refers to honorific expressions (*keigo*, *keigo hyōgen*) that are officially accepted in the Japanese language norm called standard language (*hyōjungo*). This was constituted in Japan during the Meiji era (1868–1912) and functions as a public, normative language (often equated or juxtaposed with so-called “common language”). Standard honorifics, along with other language units such as Japanese pronouns, were simplified during post-war times. Nowadays it is required in both public and private communication (Carroll 2013: 90–91). The term *non-standard honorifics* refers to the variants of honorifics that are determined by certain factors, such as specific region of use (e.g. *haru-keigo* ‘-haru-honorifics’ in Kansai region<sup>5</sup>) or specific group of users (e.g. intermediate -ss(h)- form among young Japanese men)<sup>6</sup>, etc.

Another binary opposition that refers to the recent use of honorifics is the opposition between private and public communicative spheres. Private (conversational, interpersonal) communication is more individualized and, under certain conditions, allows the bending of linguistic etiquette and the reduction of honorific marking. In this case, standard honorifics will be usually accepted, but non-standard honorifics will be also acceptable. However, public (official, mass) communication requires the use of standard language that is regarded as common and comprehensive for all users (although, obviously, certain exceptions may occur as it is observed in media or marketing language due to its persuasive function). In the case of public communication, standard honorifics will be mostly required.

## 2. Pragmatic processes observed within the honorific category: simplification and equalization

The social and professional transformations that are observed in modern Japan, accompanied by commonization of language, result in pragmatic and structural changes occurring within the honorific category. Among others, two processes – simplification and equalization – seem to be widely discussed among Japanese linguists. This section briefly examines examples of these processes.

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, the use of *tabeharu* as an equivalent of standard deferential *meshiagaru* ‘to eat’, *shiharu* as an equivalent *nasaru* ‘to do’, *kiharu* as an equivalent of *irassharu* ‘to come’, etc.

<sup>6</sup> The examples of non-standard honorifics will be analyzed later in this paper (see Chapter 2 and Section 3.4.1).

## 2.1. Simplification

The process of honorific simplification is widely discussed in papers by, among others, Ozaki – who refers to it as *keigo-no tanjunka* (2017: 24) and Tanabe and Koike – who describe it as *keigo-no kansoka* (2020: 114).

As an example, Tanabe and Koike analyze the frequency of the application of two honorific variants of the verb *iku* ‘to go’: standard deferential suppletive form *irassharu* and derivative *ikareru*, and observe that although *irassharu* is usually applied in Japanese textbooks, *ikareru* exceeds its usage in communication (2020: 114). Another example is the tendency to use the non-standard intermediate form *-ss(h)-*<sup>7</sup> among young Japanese speakers who tend to use it in place of the standard polite forms *de-s(h)-/-mas(h)-*. Although *-ss(h)-* form used to be a feature of young male speech directed to their senior students or senior colleagues (*sempai*), recently it is sporadically observed in female speech, as well as in media language as one of the so-called role languages (*yakuwarigo*) – language stylizations, which Nakamura associates with its casual and less rigid character that standard honorifics (2020: 93, 183–185). Takeda (2017: 86) notices the trend to use intermediate forms among female students in their messages, e-mails and statements directed to familiar superiors, classmates or older members of family, while, in contrast, the predominant use of the standard polite forms remains during conversations with unacquainted elderly people and teachers.

In both mentioned cases, the simplification is reflected in the use of structurally less complex forms that, although honorifically-marked, associate more casual and less standardized features and consequently, balance the obligation to show deference with a demonstration of closeness.

## 2.2. Equalization

Yanagimura links such processes as *keigo-no minshuka*, lit. ‘democratization of honorifics’<sup>8</sup>, and *keigo-no byōdōka* ‘equalization of honorifics’ with social transformations occurring in modern Japan and

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<sup>7</sup> *-ss(h)-* form is introduced here as a so-called “intermediate” form between plain (casual) forms and polite (horizontal) *de-s(h)-/-mas(h)-* forms, which, with reference to vertical and horizontal axes of honorific oppositions (Jabłoński 2021: 325), is suggested to be placed slightly under the horizontal axis. The mentioned form, originally written as つす, is suggested to be transliterated as *-ss(h)-*, not *-ssu*, according to the nonsyllabic description of Japanese grammar. Read more in Duc-Harada (2023).

<sup>8</sup> Yanagimura introduces the mentioned pragmatic changes as demonstrations of *minshuka* lit. ‘democratization’ of honorifics. However, due to the straightly political connotations of the term “democratization”, in this paper these changes are intended to be explained as indications of “equalization”.

defines them as “the changes that result from the transfer of honorifics usage standards from the socially-based relations to the psychological distance-based relations” (2017: 105–106). Since the hierarchy between interlocutors is not of a predominant value, and modern communication is believed to be based primarily on the familiarity and psychological distance, the impact of such attributes as gender or profession on the use of honorifics is reduced and the sense of vertical relations is fading away (*ibid.*, 106–107). Consequently, under certain conditions, language users prefer to use horizontal polite forms only rather than vertical deferential and humble forms when addressing a person in order to reduce the distance. This tendency is also increasingly observed in public language (announcements, posters, TV commercials) in the case of which the good feeling of the receiver (customer, viewer) as well as the atmosphere of “common equality” outweigh the demonstration of distance.

The recent trend to use causative-autobenefactive form *-(s)asete itadaku* ‘I will be humbly allowed to...’ in place of standard humble *o/go-(noun/ verb stem) suru/ itasu* ‘I humbly do...’<sup>9</sup> is often associated with the mentioned changes as it is considered to imply a gradual decrease of deference (*keii zengen*) (Shiina 2022: 62, 219) and the increase of the speaker’s position who demonstrates his polite attitude (*jibun-no teineisa*). This structure is believed to fill the gap in the existing honorific paradigm since it promotes the agentivity of the beneficiary (speaker) simplifying, at the same time, participants relations (Nishina 2008: 300). Hence, although the honorific meaning is implied in the use of humble benefactive *-te itadaku*, the sense of horizontal distance (*kyorikan*), rather than vertical relations (*jōge kankei*) is manifested here (*ibid.*, 123)<sup>10</sup>.

### 3. The use and actual state of honorifics in the opinions of young Japanese native speakers

#### 3.1. Aim and description of the research

The research entitled “The usage of and awareness towards honorifics by contemporary young Japanese” (original title *Gendai Nihonjin Wakamano-no Keigo-no Shiyō-to Keigo-ni Kan Suru Ishiki*) was conducted in Japan

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<sup>9</sup> Huszcsa et al. (2003: 495–497) classify both forms to *honorificity due to the sender*. The former is explained as a *benefactivity combined with causative form* and refers to activities that the addressee has accepted or agreed to (*ibid.*, 496, 585). The latter communicates activities that are performed on behalf of/ for the addressee (*ibid.*, 497).

<sup>10</sup> The recent common use of causative-autobenefactive form arouses certain controversy. Although its application is justified in situations when the speaker is able to receive the receiver’s consent or his/her action requires consent, it is also occasionally applied inappropriately in situations when the consent is unrequired (e.g. *kekkon sasete itadakimasu* ‘I will be humbly allowed to get married’).

from November 2022 to February 2023. Its main purpose was to investigate the use of Japanese honorifics as well as its actual state in the opinions of young adult native speakers of the Japanese language. The secondary purpose was to study young speakers' attitude towards a notion of *keigo* 'honorifics', as well as their knowledge and insight into recent changes that are believed to occur within this category. The characteristics of the research is presented in the Table 1.

<b>Number of respondents</b>	276			
<b>Gender</b>	male – 93; 34%	female – 183; 66%	other – 0; 0%	
<b>Region of university</b>	Hokkaidō – 2; 0.8%	Kantō – 68; 25%	Chūbu – 26; 9.1%	
	Kansai – 157; 57%		Okinawa – 23; 8.1%	
<b>Profile of studies</b>	humanities – 232; 84%		non-humanities – 44; 16%	
<b>Degree of studies</b>	undergraduate – 275; 99.6%		graduate – 1; 0.4%	
<b>Age</b>	19-21 – 193; 69.9%	22-24 – 75; 27.2%	25-27 – 6; 2.2%	28 and more – 2; 0.7%
<b>Working experience</b>	yes – 263; 95%		no – 16; 5%	

Table 1. The number of the respondents according to their gender, region, profile and degree of studies, age and working experience.

The number of the respondents was 276 and two-thirds of them identified as female (66%) which, to a certain extent, may be linked to prominence of the humanities as respondents' area of study (indicated by 84% of the respondents). The respondents were affiliated with one of eight Japanese universities located in five different regions of Japan: Hokkaidō, Kantō, Chūbu, Kansai and Okinawa. The location is regarded as a significant factor due to the impact of regiolects on the every-day speech of young users. Accordingly, two general groups of the respondents are distinguished:

A. students affiliated with universities located in regions where the impact of regiolect use has been observed (*chiiki hōgen*): Osaka in Kansai (157), Nagoya in Chūbu (26), Nago in Okinawa (23), in total: 206 respondents; 75.0%;



B. students affiliated with universities located in regions where standard language (*hyōjungo*) is observed to be predominantly spoken: Yokohama in Kantō (12), Tokyo in Kantō (46), Utsunomiya in Kantō (10), Sapporo in Hokkaidō (2), in total: 70 respondents; 25.0%<sup>11</sup>.

The respondents of the survey are classified into the category of “young people” due to their age (97.1% of them stated they were 19–24 years old), which corresponds to their affiliation with the undergraduate degree of studies. Regarding their working experience, 95.0% claimed to have experience, while only 5.0% claimed not to have any. In the commentary section, respondents underlined that during their studies, they usually perform part-time jobs in customer service (as waiters/ waitress or cashiers in family restaurants, bars or *kombini* ‘convenience stores’) or as teachers in *juku* ‘fee-paying schools preparing students for school/university entrance exams’. This factor is of significance, as working experience is believed to positively influence the practical competences of honorifics usage. School and university education in Japan are generally said to provide only basic knowledge of honorifics and textbooks are thought to present inconsistent models of honorific language (Carroll 2013: 95). Hence, young people who have an opportunity to work (especially in customer service), may develop their knowledge of honorifics during special trainings and then, put it into practice, which unarguably influences their orientation and attitude.

### 3.2. Methodology

The method of the research was an anonymous questionnaire which consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions with possibility to leave comments afterwards. The respondents were also encouraged to participate in the post-survey discussion on the analyzed topics. Both the survey and the discussion were conducted in the Japanese language. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: 1. personal information (questions regarding age, gender, origin, affiliation and working experience; see Table 1.); 2. the use of honorifics; 3. the awareness of and attitude towards honorifics.

The analysis presented in this chapter is based exclusively on the results of three investigations that are regarded as relevant to the topic of this paper: the selection of honorifics as language register (3.4.1), the selection of

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<sup>11</sup> The proposed division is based on the author’s private sociolinguistic observations recently carried out in the Japanese environment, as well as on information derived from comments and post-research discussions with respondents.

honorific humble forms (3.4.2), and the evaluation by and attitude of young native speakers towards modern honorifics (3.4.3).

### **3.3. Research limitations**

One of the present research limitations is grounded in the discrepancy between the place of birth and the place of affiliation of some of the respondents. In the comments section, some students gave an affiliation with universities located in cities that are considered to be deeply influenced by regiolects. However, they indicated different places of birth and said they did not use any regional speech in their daily conversation. On the contrary, although some students were affiliated with universities located in the areas with a predominance of standard language, they also admitted to using regiolects (among others, Kansai dialects, Kyushu dialects) due to their place of origin.

Another limitation is determined by the profile of the studies. As illustrated in the Table 1, 84.0% of the students were specializing in the humanities (above all, in language education, literature and international communication), which to certain extent impacts their knowledge and insight into linguistic topics and the use of honorifics. It may be assumed that if similar research was conducted among students of non-humanistic studies, different results and opinions could be expected.

Due to the publication's volume constraint, these aspects were decided to be excluded from the present analysis. However they are intended to be elaborately studied in the separate paper.

### **3.4. Survey results analysis**

#### **3.4.1. The selection of honorifics as language register**

As presented in Table 2, respondents were asked to select the most adequate language register (A~F) according to the suggested listener type (receiver) of the message (1~12). The listeners were selected based on three factors that are believed to influence speaker's choice: age (older/younger), relation (family member, school member, acquainted/unacquainted person) and status (classmate/senior/junior, student/teacher). The gender of the speaker (M/F) was also taken into account.

All suggested categories represent honorific modifications. Four of them are honorifically marked: A – horizontal honorifics (polite forms), B – vertical honorifics (deferential and humble forms), D – intermediate *-ss(h)-* form and F – regional honorifics. Among them, A and B represent standard honorifics, while D and F refer to non-standard honorifics. C and E categories exemplify honorifically neutral, casual speech. The percentages recorded in the table

refer to the rates of all male respondents (white cells) and the rates of all female respondents (gray cells).

	<b>A Polite</b>		<b>B Deferential/ Humble</b>		<b>C Colloquial</b>		<b>D -ss(h)- form</b>		<b>E Regiolect</b>		<b>F Regional honorifics</b>	
	<b>M/F</b>		<b>M/F</b>		<b>M/F</b>		<b>M/F</b>		<b>M/F</b>		<b>M/F</b>	
<b>1 Parent</b>	4; 4.3%	10; 5.4%	2; 2.1%	4; 2.1%	44; 47.3 %	89; 48.6 %	0; 0%	2; 1 %	56; 60.2 %	121; 66.1 %	0; 0%	4; 2.1%
<b>2 Grandparent</b>	7; 7.5%	12; 6.5%	8; 8.6%	4; 2.1%	40; 43%	85; 46.4 %	0; 0%	0; 0 %	53; 56.9 %	111; 60.6 %	2; 2.1%	5; 2.7%
<b>3 Older sibling</b>	2; 2.1%	1; 0.5%	4; 4.3%	0; 0%	32; 34.4 %	65; 35.5 %	0; 0%	0; 0 %	41; 44%	89; 48.6 %	1; 1%	1; 0.5%
<b>4 Younger sibling</b>	1; 1%	0; 0%	2; 2.1%	0; 0%	35; 37.6 %	71; 38.7 %	0; 0%	2; 1 %	46; 49.4 %	103; 56.2 %	1; 1%	2; 1%
<b>5 Classmate</b>	6; 6.4%	9; 4.9%	4; 4.3%	3; 1.6%	44; 47.3 %	106; 57.9 %	5; 5.3%	3; 1.6 %	56; 60.2 %	114; 62.2 %	1; 1%	2; 1%
<b>6 Junior student</b>	14; 15%	36; 19.6 %	10; 10.7 %	6; 3.2%	46; 49.4 %	116; 63.3 %	4; 4.3%	1; 0.5 %	51; 53.1 %	102; 55.7 %	4; 4.3%	14; 7.6%
<b>7 Close friend</b>	4; 4.3%	1; 0.5%	3; 3.2%	0; 0%	45; 48.3 %	105; 57.3 %	2; 2.1%	4; 2.1 %	53; 56.9 %	119; 65%	2; 2.1%	5; 2.7%
<b>8 Senior student</b>	47; 50.5 %	108; 59%	31; 33%	46; 25.1 %	6; 6.4%	9; 4.9%	43; 46.2 %	5; 2.7 %	12; 12.9 %	12; 6.5%	18; 19.3 %	42; 22.9 %
<b>9 Lecturer/ teacher</b>	70; 75.2 %	124; 67.7 %	58; 62.3 %	127; 69.3 %	3; 3.2%	2; 1%	6; 6.4%	3; 1.6 %	1; 1%	5; 2.7%	19; 20.4 %	32; 17.4 %
<b>10 Newly met person</b>	73; 78.4 %	156; 85.2 %	43; 46.2 %	79; 43.1 %	6; 6.4%	11; 6%	6; 6.4%	2; 1 %	4; 4.3%	7; 3.8%	15; 16.1 %	25; 13.6 %
<b>11 Elder unacquainted</b>	72; 77.4 %	143; 78.1 %	49; 52.6 %	107; 58.4 %	2; 2.1%	3; 1.6%	4; 4.3%	1; 0.5 %	2; 2.1%	4; 2.1%	19; 20.4 %	25; 13.6 %
<b>12 Younger unacquainted</b>	62; 66.6 %	138; 75.4 %	39; 41.9 %	58; 31.6 %	12; 12.9 %	32; 17.4 %	10; 10.7 %	1; 0.5 %	15; 16.1 %	25; 13.6 %	15; 16.1 %	27; 14.7 %

Table 2. The selection of language register [A~F] in conversation with particular type of listeners [1~12] among young male [M] and female [F] Japanese native speakers.

According to the data presented in Table 2, the most determinant factors that influenced the selection of the particular register was the status of the listener

and the mutual relation with the speaker. Taking these two aspects into account, two general types of listeners are distinguished: *close* addressees (family members, friends, classmates and junior students), with whom a lesser degree of distance and reverence in communication is expected [see 1~7]), and *distant* addressees (senior students, teachers, newly met people and unacquainted people), with whom the communication is more distance and deference-based [8~12]). In the former case, respondents suggested colloquial forms and regional forms as the most suitable choices (1C~7C, 1E~7E), while in the latter case, they indicated both, horizontal and vertical honorific forms as the most appropriate (8A~12A, 8B~12B).

Although the age of the listeners (younger/older/same age as the speaker) has a certain impact on the register's selection, the status of participants and the type of relationship seem more influential. According to the collected data, noticeable number of the respondents selected colloquial forms and regiolects as appropriate when speaking with their siblings regardless of their age (3C, 4C, 3E, 4E), and analogically, large number of students selected vertical and horizontal honorific forms as suitable in conversation with younger but unacquainted people (12A, 12B).

Additionally, almost half of the male respondents evaluated the intermediate *-ss(h)-* form as appropriate in conversation with senior students (*sempai*) (8D), while in the analogical situation 23% of the female respondents prefer to use regional honorifics (8F) (as they also do in communication with teachers and lecturers [9F]).

The data presented above indicates that not only standard vertical and horizontal honorific forms, but also non-standard markers (intermediate form, regional honorifics) are, depending on certain factors, considered an appropriate language register. During discussion, students said that the use of non-standard honorifics is usually restricted to private, unofficial conversations with listeners of the higher status (teacher, lecturer, *sempai*, older person). As they stated, standard variants are required in the public sphere (classroom, speeches, public announcements, etc.), while non-standard variants will be accepted only in private sphere (every-day talks, after-school meetings, lunches, etc.)<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, the selection of casual speech and regiolects as the most frequent language register in conversations with grandparents demonstrates that

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<sup>12</sup> From the notes taken during the post-survey discussion on 15 February 2023 with students of Osaka Kyōiku University: “*Puraibēto*”-to “*paburikku*”-*tte kubetsu-ga arimasu. Haru-keigo nado-no keigo-wa puraibēto-na bamen-de tsukai, keigo-wa paburikku-na bamen-de tsukaimasu.* ‘There is distinction between “private” and “public”. We use *-har-u-*honorifics and so on in private situations and [author’s note: standard] honorifics in public situations’ (male student’s opinion).

today familiarity supersedes the impact of status on young people's choices (2C, 2E). This trend can be linked to the narrowing of the gap (distance) between different generations, which may result from less rigorous and more intimate family relationships in contemporary Japan, as well as the willingness to demonstrate familiarity in accordance with the language accommodation theory (Ishiguro 2013: 105–106).

The last thing to mention is the influence of the gender on the respondents' opinions. The presented data indicates that the most noticeable difference caused by the gender is the selection of the intermediate *-ss(h)-* form. In communication with senior students *-ss(h)-* was selected by female respondents only in 2.7% cases, which confirms the general masculine image of this form (Nakamura 2020: 17–18). What is worth-mentioning is the slight discrepancy between male and female responses dictated by the familiarity and status of the listeners. Male respondents claim to use deferential/humble forms towards listeners they feel familiar with (siblings, classmates, friends, senior students) more often than females (2B~8B). On the other hand, female respondents perceive honorific forms in a more “traditional way” – using it toward unfamiliar people or people of the higher status (teachers, elder unacquainted people) slightly more often than men (9B, 11B). These trends indicate that young men “are practicing” showing distance even in close circles, perhaps because it can be helpful to them in their future professional life. The aforementioned results may also be, to some extent, related to the speakers' attitudes towards the external (*soto*) and internal (*uchi*) spheres of communication. Young men seem to care about maintaining vertical relationships even in the internal environment (home or school), while women consider it more valuable to show respect in the external world.

To conclude, young Japanese native speakers generally do not ignore the use of honorifics in their daily communication and, respecting all the analyzed extralinguistic factors (status, relation, age, communicative sphere), tend to skillfully adjust the sort and level of politeness to the type of the listener.

### 3.4.2. The selection of honorific humble forms

In one of the open-ended questions, the respondents were asked to suggest how would they inform their listener in a very polite way that they are off today<sup>13</sup>. There were no suggestions concerning what type of honorifics (vertically- or horizontally-oriented; standard or non-standard) should be selected.

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<sup>13</sup> The original question was: *Hijō-ni teinei-ni “Kyō-wa yasumimasu”-to itai toki, nan-to iimasu-ka?*.

Honorific form	Rates	Exemplified sentences
1 Causative-autobenefactive form -(s)asete itadaku	193; 69.9%	<i>Kesseki sasete itadakimasu</i> 'I will be humbly allowed to be absent' <i>O-yasumi sasete itadakimasu</i> 'I will be humbly allowed to take a break' <i>Yasumasete itadakimasu</i> 'I will be humbly allowed to rest' <i>O-yasumi torasete itadakimasu</i> 'I will be humbly allowed to take a day off'
2 Autobenefactive form [-o] itadaku/ chōdai suru	50; 18.1%	<i>O-yasumi [-o] itadakimasu</i> 'I will humbly receive a day off' <i>O-yasumi [-o] chōdai shimasu</i> 'I will humbly receive a day off' <i>O-yasumi [-o] itadakitai desu</i> 'I would like to humbly receive a day off'
3 Humble form o-(noun/ verb stem) suru/ itasu	33; 12%	<i>O-yasumi shimasu</i> 'I will humbly rest' <i>O-yasumi itashimasu</i> 'I will humbly rest' <i>Kesseki itashimasu</i> 'I will be humbly absent'

Table 3. The selection of honorific forms when answering the question:  
*How would you say "Today I am taking a day off" in a very polite way?*

As presented in Table 3, the students predominantly chose causative-autobenefactive form: -(s)asete itadaku 'I will be humbly allowed to' – 69.9%. The sentences with autobenefactive form were selected in only 18.1% of cases, while the least indicated form was analytic humble form – 12%.

All forms suggested by the respondents represent vertically-oriented honorifics that reflect the humble attitude of the speaker. Nevertheless, the popularity of the causative-autobenefactive form, which is also humble, is indisputable. Students' choices were to certain extent impacted by the popularity of this form, which according to Shiina (2022: 3) is recently very common in public and media language, among entertainers and even politicians. Another potential factor might be the implication of the agreement or consent received from the addressee which implies that there is no conflict between speaker's intentions and receiver's feelings and in this way makes the message very polite. Finally, emphasizing the presence and importance of the addressee in the statement through the use of causativeness may create positive impressions and good feelings on both sides.

### 3.4.3. The evaluation by and attitude of young Japanese native speakers toward modern honorifics and their application

As illustrated in Table 4, respondents of the survey were asked five questions regarding the current status of honorifics and requested to evaluate the level of their agreement (A~F: *very much, a little bit, I cannot say either, rather not, absolutely not* and *other*). Three of the questions were opinion-based (*Do you think that...*) and two questions were self-evaluating (*How often do you feel that you...*). All questions referred to the frequency of the incorrect usage of honorifics in written and spoken Japanese.

	<b>A</b> Yes, very much/ very often	<b>B</b> Yes, a little bit/ sometimes	<b>C</b> I cannot say either	<b>D</b> Rather not	<b>E</b> Absolutely not/ never	<b>F</b> Other (comments)
<b>1</b> Do you think that modern honorific category is disintegrated?	16; 5.8%	<b>195;</b> <b>70.7%</b>	51; 18.5%	0; 0%	16; 5.8%	1; 0.4%
<b>2</b> Do you think that modern honorific category is changing?	68; 24.6%	<b>177;</b> <b>64.1%</b>	27; 9.8%	0; 0%	9; 3.3%	0; 0%
<b>3</b> Do you think that honorifics that reflects vertical relations suits the current times?	16; 5.8%	<b>214;</b> <b>77.5%</b>	18; 6.5%	<b>30;</b> <b>10.9%</b>	1; 0.4%	2; 0.8%
<b>4</b> How often do you feel that you are using honorifics incorrectly in conversation?	50; 18.1%	<b>176;</b> <b>63.8%</b>	0; 0%	37; 13.4%	5; 1.8%	10; 3.6%
<b>5</b> How often do you feel that you are using honorifics incorrectly when writing formal message/letter?	23; 8.3%	<b>137;</b> <b>49.6%</b>	0; 0%	<b>95;</b> <b>34.4%</b>	12; 4.3%	7; 2.5%

Table 4. The evaluation by and attitude of young Japanese native speakers toward Japanese honorifics and their changes<sup>14</sup>.

### 3.4.3.1. Opinion-based questions

In terms of the opinion-based questions, firstly, students were asked to estimate the level of their agreement with the common opinion concerning the “disintegration of honorifics” (see Introduction). 211 of the respondents (76.5%) (1A+1B) agreed with this opinion, however 70.5% of them claimed to slightly agree (1B). Only 16 students (5.8%) completely disagreed (1E), while 51 respondents (18.5%) (1C) found it difficult to state their opinion clearly. One student commented that while watching Japanese TV programs that are aimed at confirming the level of correctness of the honorifics used among Japanese entertainers, he was surprised to discover that the entertainers’ language use is apparently chaotic<sup>15</sup>.

Secondly, students were asked to give their individual opinion on the topic of changes occurring within Japanese honorifics. The majority of them (245 people, 88.7%) answered that *keigo* is changing (2A+2B), while only 9 students (3.3%) claimed not to observe any changes (2E). 27 students (9.8%) admitted that they cannot say either (2C).

Thirdly, respondents were requested to state whether vertically-based honorifics, in their opinions, fit in with modern times or not. The most frequent answer to this question was “yes, a little bit” (214 students, 77.5%) (3B), while secondly selected choice was “rather not” (30 students, 10.9%) (3D). One respondent commented that although deferential and humble forms ought to be applied at work places and universities, in conversations with seniors (*sempai*) who are familiar to the speaker, they should be sometimes omitted. A certain number of students agreed that vertical honorifics are an important component of Japanese language and heritage and therefore, they should not be disregarded. They also added that Japanese communication without honorifics would become problematic and chaotic since the use of honorifics makes the relations between interlocutors clear, while lack of it make the communication vague and complicated<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> The attitude of young speakers towards honorifics distinguished by factors such as age, gender and region of birth were left out of this study due to space constraints and are intended to be discussed and analyzed in detail in the author’s separate work, which is currently in the preparatory phase.

<sup>15</sup> From the comment of the male respondent: *Terebi-de keigo-o tadashiku tsukaeru-ka-no tesuto-o shite ite, geinōjin-no keigo-ga midarete ite bikkuri shita* ‘I took a test on TV to see if I was using honorifics correctly, and was surprised to discover how haphazard their use was among performers’.

<sup>16</sup> From the notes taken during the post-survey discussion on 15 February 2023 with students of Osaka Kyōiku University: *Keigo-ga aru-kara-koso, ningen kankei-to sono komyunikēshon-wa kuria*



The above-mentioned data indicates that although young Japanese native speakers are generally aware of developments in honorifics, the majority of them regard standard vertical honorifics as needed and demanded.

### 3.4.3.2. Self-evaluating questions

Questions 4 and 5 were self-evaluating. Survey respondents were asked to evaluate the frequency of their potential tendency to use Japanese honorifics incorrectly<sup>17</sup> in two situations: in spoken Japanese and in written Japanese. As the data presented in Table 4 indicates, a noticeable majority of the respondents (226 students, 81.9%) admitted to using it incorrectly (very often or sometimes) during conversations, while 160 students (57.9%) claimed to use it incorrectly (very often or sometimes) in written formal messages (compare 4A+4B with 5A+5B). On the other hand, 42 students (15.2%) claimed not to make any mistakes (rather not or absolutely not) in spoken communication, while 107 students (38.7%) admitted the same in case of written communication (compare 4D+4E with 5D+5E). The above results are of no surprise as spoken communication is more spontaneous and mistake-prone than written one.

Students also left some interesting comments on this topic. Ten students (3.6%) stated that during conversations, they are not aware of whether they commit any mistakes in the use of honorifics or not. Three students (1.1%) admitted that when writing formal letters or messages, they usually tend to check the correct way of using honorific expressions using Internet sources or dictionaries. One female student commented that although she is sometimes aware of the incorrect use of honorifics when writing formal e-mails, she is not lacking in her confidence in the use of honorifics<sup>18</sup>. During discussion, most of the students agreed that, in both cases of spoken and written communication, it is recommended to make an effort to use honorifics, even if it may be misused, rather than to entirely skip it<sup>19</sup>. The

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*da-to omoimasu* ‘I think that it is honorifics that makes people’s relationships and their communication clear’.

<sup>17</sup> The students were instructed in writing about how to interpret the notion of “incorrect use of honorifics” which was defined as: making grammatical and lexical mistakes in the use of honorifics, mixing deferential forms with humble forms, using *nijū keigo* ‘double honorifics’ (the use of more than one honorific marker in one structure), using inappropriate register (e.g. intermediate form) in public communication, etc.

<sup>18</sup> From the comment of the female respondent: *Machigaete iru-ka, ishiki-wa suru-ga, jishin-ga nai wake-de-wa nai* ‘Although I try to be aware of the correctness of my speech, I cannot say that I lack confidence’.

<sup>19</sup> From the notes taken during the post-survey discussion on 15 February 2023 with students of Osaka Kyōiku University: *Machigaete ite-mo, kanzen-ni tsukawanai-yori, tsukatte mita hō-ga ii-to omoimasu* ‘I think that even if incorrect, it is better to try to use it, rather than not to use it entirely’.

respondents revealed rather positive attitudes toward the use of honorifics and frequently underlined their significance in Japanese communication.

## Conclusion

Japanese honorifics make up a complex lexico-grammatical category which fulfils many significant pragmatic functions. Since there is no official stratification system in modern Japan, and contemporary language in both private and public spheres becomes more and more internationalized and individualized, the notion of honorifics is widely discussed. Recently observed shifts from vertically-based to horizontally-based honorifics, as well as a structural simplification of certain honorific markers, especially those applied in spoken communication, are associated with such processes as the *equalization* or *simplification* of language. Among others, the growing popularity of the intermediate *-ss(h)-* or causative-autobenefactive *-(s)asete itadaku* forms are considered crucial demonstrations of how the paradigm of modern honorifics has been expended.

The notion of the chaotic and disordered state of Japanese honorifics (*midare*) is often associated with the mentioned changes. Such recent tendencies as the negligence of standard honorifics in public communication, the misuse or lack of confidence in the proper use of certain markers, along with new linguistic trends (e.g. the use of the above-mentioned intermediate form), results in criticism of the younger generation for the current state of language.

However, the outcomes of the present research indicate that young language users in Japan have interest in the discussed topics and a rather positive attitude towards honorifics, which is consistent with the results presented in the mentioned surveys published by the *Bunkachō* (e.g. 2005, 2006). Young people tend to consider honorifics as an essential feature of the Japanese language. It seems very supportive in preserving clear relations between interlocutors and facilitating smooth communication that minimalizes the risk of conflicting interests. Respondents of the survey also demonstrated a high level of language awareness towards honorifics and underlined that its development is natural and inevitable. They also said that honorifics based on vertical opposition is necessary in modern communication, while its omission must be justified through the impact of certain factors e.g. familiarity with the listener. Vertically-based relations are still present in Japanese society as illustrated in senior-junior (*sempai-kōhai*) relations. Respondents of the survey underlined that the status of co-student or colleague is of significant value and highly impacts their language use. However, as it also was several times indicated, their choice of a particular

standard or non-standard marker often results from the concern for a good and conflict-free relationship with the receiver and this factor, in certain situations, prevails over the feeling of distance.

Honorifics are undoubtedly a pragmatically and sociolinguistically diversified phenomenon. The present research confirmed the influence of such attributes as (from the most influential): relationship, status, origin, gender and age on the selection of standard (vertical/ horizontal) or non-standard (regional/ intermediate) honorifics as language register depending on the type of the listener. Also the communicative sphere (private or public) was indicated as a significant factor – standard honorifics are mostly demanded in public sphere, while non-standard honorifics characterize private or more intimate communication.

The impact of the place of birth or affiliation was also taken into account. The students with affiliations in the regions impacted by the use of regiolects (75% of all respondents) claimed to use regional honorifics in communication with listeners of the higher status (e.g. senior students) with whom they feel familiar. They also indicated the use of regional casual forms as mostly spoken with family members, classmates and junior students.

What should be lastly emphasized is that the tendency to omit honorific markers or to skip vertically-oriented honorifics, to apply markers inappropriately or to use non-standard markers, does not prove any language disintegration, but indicates the relation between honorifics and adulthood. Shiina (2022: 98) emphasizes the importance of the “application of honorifics after becoming adult” (*keigo-no seijingo saiyō*). Language use is linked to the maturity of the speaker. Therefore, it should be expected that young people who tend to use honorifics at a level appropriate to their age will, along with life and professional experience, improve their honorific usage skills accordingly.

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