

Dimensions of politeness in Japanese

- ‘Polite’ or ‘honorific’ language in Japanese is traditionally described in terms of the following three categories. (Some sources make additional distinctions.)
- It is an empirical question as to how these categories of polite/honorific language are used in practice! (See Barke (2010) for one quantitative study.)

I. Horizontal distance: Formality / performative politeness

(1) Expressing social distance from your addressee: **formality** or **performative politeness** (also called “addressee honorifics”)

- Corresponds to the Japanese concept 丁寧語 *teeneego* ‘polite language’

(J&N 1987) *Genki*

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|-----|--------------------------------|--|--|
| (a) | Kaigi-ga
<i>meeting-NOM</i> | ar-u.
<i>exist-NONPAST</i> | informal / ‘direct style’ / ‘ short form ’ |
| (b) | Kaigi-ga | ar-imas-u.
<i>exist-FORMAL-NONPAST</i> | formal / ‘distal style’ / ‘ long form ’ |
| (c) | Kaigi-ga | goza-imas-u.
<i>exist.FORMAL-FORMAL-NONPAST</i> | formal+ / ‘ neutral-polite ’ / — |

- (a) → (c): **increasing horizontal distance** between speaker and hearer
- The third option (formal+) is only available for specific verbs

(2) Morphology: Formal forms are generally marked by *-mas-* (verb) or *des-* (copula)

- (a) Verb suffix *-mas-* (conjugates as irregular verb)
- (b) Adjectives: Inflection as usual (tense, negation) followed by copula *desu* (always in its nonpast affirmative form, except *desyoo* for probable)
- (c) Nouns (also AN, other non-conjugating categories): With copula in *des-* form (conjugates as irregular verb)

Examples:

	Verbs (‘eat, read’)	Adjectives (‘high/tall’)	Noun (‘book’) + copula
nonpast	V-(i) mas -u <i>tabemasu, yomimasu</i>	A-i des -u <i>takai desu</i>	N des -u <i>hon desu</i>
nonpast negative	V-(i) mas -en <i>tabemasen, yomimasen</i>	A-ku na-i des -u (or) A-ku ar- imas -en <i>takaku nai desu</i> (or) <i>takaku arimasen</i>	N zya na-i des -u (= N de wa na-i des -u) <i>hon zya nai desu</i> (<i>hon de wa nai desu</i>)
past	V-(i) masi -ta <i>tabemasita, yomimasita</i>	A-katta des -u <i>takakatta desu</i>	N desi -ta <i>hon desita</i>

	Verbs ('eat, read')	Adjectives ('high/tall')	Noun ('book') + copula
past negative	V-(i) mas -en desi -ta <i>tabemasen desita,</i> <i>yomimasen desita</i>	A-ku na-katta des -u (or) A-ku ar-imas-en desi-ta <i>takaku nakatta desu (or)</i> <i>takaku arimasen desita</i>	N zya na-katta des -u (N de wa na-katta des -u) <i>hon zya nakatta desu</i> <i>(hon de wa nakatta desu)</i>
volitional	V-(i) mas -yoo <i>tabemasyoo, yomimasyoo</i>		
probable	(V-NPAST or V-PAST) des -yoo <i>taberu desyoo, yonda desyoo</i>	(A-NPAST or A-PAST) des -yoo <i>takakatta desyoo</i>	N des -yoo <i>hon desyoo</i>

- (3) The informal/formal distinction (performative politeness) is the closest counterpart in Japanese to the second-person pronoun politeness systems in European languages (*tú/usted, tu/vous, du/Sie, thou/you, ...*), which reflect politeness or social distance toward the addressee

- But in Japanese **all** (main-clause) predicates have to be marked, regardless of whether or not the **addressee** is a referent of the utterance!

II. Vertical distance: Social hierarchy / referent honorifics

- (4) Two traditionally recognized categories, with first-approximation definitions

- (a) 尊敬語 *sonkeego* — forms used when **SSS** is the **subject**
- (b) 謙讓語 *kenzyoogo* — forms used when **speaker** (or in-group) is the **subject** and **SSS** is the **addressee**; sometimes called 'humble' honorifics
- **SSS** = "socially superior to the speaker" (Harada 1976; cf. 目上 *me-ue*)

- (5) Some lexical items

sensee 'teacher,' but also used for writers, politicians, etc. — intrinsically SSS

- this is a title:
 - use as a referent, or as a form of address
 - use alone or as a suffix to a name

watasi 1st person sg "pronoun" — cannot ever be SSS

- used in male-typical and female-typical speech if formal
- characteristic of female-typical speech if informal

- (6) Answer to question: "Who went?" | (see data set, "Verbs meaning 'go'")

= inappropriate usage

- (a) Watasi-ga ikimasita. (d) # Sensee-ga ikimasita.
- (b) Watasi-ga mairimasita. (e) # Sensee-ga mairimasita.
- (c) # Watasi-ga irassyaimasita. (f) Sensee-ga irassyaimasita.

(7) How do these verbs reflect SSS?

- mair- • used when the addressee is SSS and the speaker is 'goer' (*kenzyoogo*)
irassyar- • used when 'goer' is SSS (*sonkeego*)

(8) How do the **vertical** and **horizontal** dimensions of politeness interact?

Sensee-ga	irasita.	/	Sensee-ga	irassyaimasita.
# Sensee!	Irassyaru?	/	Sensee!	Irassyaimasu ka?
# Watasi/Boku-ga	maitta.	/	Watasi-ga	mairimasita.

(a) When speaking **about** a SSS, can informal forms be used?

(b) When speaking **with** a SSS, can informal forms be used?

III. Beautification honorifics

(9) Use of honorific morphology to sound 'elegant' or 'refined', separate from the conditions for performative politeness or referent honorifics

- Sometimes it can be hard to distinguish this category from others
- On the other hand, some cases of beautification honorifics have become completely conventionalized: *o-tya* 'tea', *go-han* 'cooked rice, a meal' (not just **tya*, **han*)

For more on this topic:

- *An early influential paper*

Harada, Shin-Ichi. 1976. Honorifics. In Masayoshi Shibatani (ed.), *Japanese Generative Grammar*, 499-561. Syntax & Semantics 5. New York: Academic Press.

- *Some more recent discussions*

Ivana, Adrian, and Hiromu Sakai. 2007. Honorification and light verbs in Japanese. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 16(3): 171-191.

Barke, Andrew. 2010. Manipulating honorifics in the construction of social identities in Japanese television drama. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 14: 456-476.

- *See also*

Jorden, Eleanor Harz, and Mari Noda. 1987. *Japanese: The Spoken Language, part I*. New Haven: Yale UP.