

## 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 within these categories.)
- 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. Formality, aka performative politeness or horizontal distance

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

		(J&N 1987)	<i>Genki</i>
(a) Kaigi-ga	ar-u.	<b>informal</b>	/ ‘direct style’ / ‘ <del>short form</del> ’
<i>meeting-NOM</i>	<i>exist-NONPAST</i>		
(b) Kaigi-ga	ar-imas-u.	<b>formal</b>	/ ‘distal style’ / ‘ <del>long form</del> ’
	<i>exist-FORMAL-NONPAST</i>		
(c) Kaigi-ga	goza-imas-u.	<b>formal+</b>	/ ‘neutral-polite’ / —
	<i>exist.FORMAL-FORMAL-NONPAST</i>		

- These three options reflect **increasing horizontal distance** between speaker and hearer
- (2) Formal style is generally marked by:
- (a) Copula in *des-* form
  - (b) Verb suffix *-mas-* (conjugates as irregular verb: *-mas-u*, *-masi-ta*, *-mas-en* NEG, *-mas-yoo*)
  - (c) Adjectives: Inflection as usual (tense, negation) followed by copula *desu* (always in nonpast affirmative form)
- (3) Performative politeness is the closest counterpart in Japanese to the 2p pronoun politeness systems in European languages (*tú/Vd.*, *tu/vous*, *du/Sie*, *thou/you*, ...)
- But note that in Japanese **all** (main-clause) predicates have to be marked, regardless of whether or not the **addressee** is a referent of the utterance!

### II. Referent honorifics, aka vertical distance

- (4) Some lexical items

*sensei* ‘teacher,’ but also used for writers, politicians, etc.

- 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”

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

- (5) Verbs of going (see data set, “Verbs meaning ‘go’”)
- (a) Watasi-ga ikimasita.
- (b) # Sensei-ga ikimasita. # = inappropriate usage
- (c) Watasi-ga mairimasita.
- (d) # Sensei-ga mairimasita.
- (e) # Watasi-ga irassyaimasita.
- (f) Sensei-ga irassyaimasita.
- (6) Terminology: **SSS** (“socially superior to the speaker”) (Harada 1976)
- mair- • used when the \_\_\_\_\_ is SSS
- irassyar- • used when the \_\_\_\_\_ is SSS
- (7) How do these *referent honorifics* relate to *performative politeness (formality)*?
- Sensei-ga irasita. / Sensei-ga irassyaimasita.
- # Sensei! Irassyaru? / Sensei! Irassyaimasu ka?
- # Watasi/Boku-ga maitta. / Watasi-ga mairimasita.

### III. Beautification honorifics

- (8) 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.