

HONORIFICS AND HONORIFIC CATEGORIES

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Abstract: This research investigates the complex system of honorifics and honorific styles across diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes, emphasizing how language reflects and reinforces societal structures, interpersonal relationships, and worldviews. Honorifics, conventionalized forms of linguistic politeness and social deference, are universally found across languages, yet their form, usage, and underlying ideologies vary significantly. Analyzing pronoun and noun-based honorifics, as well as verbal expressions used to convey politeness, this study uncovers the intricate sociolinguistic mechanisms that govern honorific usage. By tracing the roles of honorifics as indicators of power, respect, irony, and even resistance, this study expands the conventional understanding of politeness strategies and situates honorifics at the intersection of language, culture, and identity. It argues that honorifics are not peripheral elements of grammar but essential expressions of how societies perceive and manage social relationships.

Key Words: Honorifics, styles, language, expressions, English, categories

Introduction

Language serves as a mirror of its speakers' worldview, and this is especially evident in the use of honorific expressions across cultures. Honorifics, conventionalized linguistic forms used to convey politeness, respect, and social hierarchy are present in all languages, including English. However, due to their deeply culture-bound nature, honorifics are difficult to define uniformly, particularly in intercultural contexts where interpretations and expectations often differ across linguistic communities.

These forms function as crucial tools in navigating social dynamics such as age, kinship, familiarity, and status. For native speakers, the use of honorifics is typically acquired intuitively as part of broader linguistic socialization. In contrast, learners of a foreign language must make conscious choices about which honorific forms to use, often requiring nuanced understanding of cultural norms. Selecting appropriate honorific markers demands sensitivity to interpersonal relationships and a solid grasp of the target language's socio-cultural context.

Definition of Honorifics

Few languages possess structured lexical and grammatical phrases according to the research of Yonemoto. He argued that the use of honorifics is governed by linguistic conventions and is influenced by a variety of social factors. Chen and Lee noted that although honorifics are commonly associated with positive qualities such as respect, they can also be interpreted as indicators of impoliteness. Likewise, when honorifics are not used in the culturally or contextually expected manner, the speaker may be perceived as rude. Sylak-Glassman similarly proposed that honorific systems are not rigid

frameworks but rather collections of choices made by speakers when referring to others or their actions during communication.

Furthermore, Wolfram and Schilling emphasized that the notion of words and expressions carrying social meanings such as respect is relatively consistent across cultures. However, they argued that this view only partially captures the broader semiotic reality. They pointed out a significant limitation in traditional definitions of honorifics namely, that they are typically seen as directed only toward the addressee, which does not align with the broader range of types that will be explored later. Watts, in a similar line with Brown and Levinson, classified honorifics under the grammatical dimension of language but also stressed their verbal function. This view closely aligns with Irvin's, who stated that "honorifics are grammatical words intended to reflect the social standing of the actors in the verbal engagement, including levels of politeness or respect."

Agha, focusing on the semantic level, argued that the term "honorific" should be interpreted broadly, meaning not only forms that actively bestow honor or respect, but also those associated with the general idea of respect. He emphasized that honorific styles are shaped by the unique cultural and linguistic knowledge of specific societies and are used selectively. These styles are often employed to maintain social ties and ensure harmony within the community.

In a study of the Dampelas language spoken in the Donggala Regency of Central Sulawesi, Siswandi and Setiawan Afifah observed that native speakers are highly intentional in their selection and application of honorifics. They identified five main categories of honorific styles in this language: terms used for personal address, kinship terms, professional titles, both academic and non-academic degrees, and terms used in religious contexts.

Yonemoto concluded that honorific styles are in fact reflective of the social, cultural, and ideological foundations of the communities that use them. These styles are deeply embedded in both individual attitudes and cultural perceptions regarding language. Similarly, Park's research on Korean language learners demonstrated that social ideologies and cultural norms significantly influence learners' attitudes toward language. These factors shape their motivations, learning goals, and level of engagement, all of which contribute to the formation of their linguistic identities. Ultimately, each ethnolinguistic community develops its own distinctive system of honorific styles, which mirror its cultural values, social structures, and linguistic characteristics.

Categories of honorifics

Honorific styles that are directed toward individuals can be classified into two major categories based on their part of speech: pronoun appellative honorifics and noun appellative honorifics. Within Chinese linguistic and cultural contexts, the humble form and verbal honorific expressions are considered counterparts of appellative honorifics. These forms are predominantly employed in formal spoken communication and written correspondence. The use of such polite language not only reflects a person's self-discipline and refined upbringing but also signifies advanced mastery of linguistic competence. As noted by Lee, norms surrounding polite speech are not universal but vary across languages. This underscores that effectively knowing "what to say," "when to say it," and "to whom" demonstrates not only linguistic proficiency but also communication expertise. Conversely, misuse or

inappropriate application of honorifics can signal linguistic inexperience and may potentially offend the listener.

Noun appellative honorifics are further broken down into several subcategories: General, Kinship, Sub-kinship, Rank, Aged, Professional, First Naming, and No Naming. At times, the primary purpose of these noun honorifics may be inverted in ironic contexts to convey disdain or mockery. It is crucial to recognize that the use of honorifics is not confined to hierarchical or aristocratic systems; they can also occur in everyday interactions to express respect or to establish social distance, independent of royal courts or rigid social structures.

Abdulaziz and Muhammad define appellative honorifics as forms of address that can be used across diverse communicative situations. Min and colleagues explain that these honorifics often precede names, examples in English include titles such as Mr., Mrs., Miss, Sir, and Ma'am. According to Herlina and Tarwana's study on EFL learners' perceptions of English honorifics (EHs) in Indonesia, these learners tend to equate the function of English honorifics with their counterparts in the Indonesian language. This tendency indicates that students may naturally revert to Indonesian cultural norms when learning English if they encounter significant cultural interaction. Furthermore, the application of generic appellative honorifics in Chinese linguistic styles demonstrates the speaker's relational dynamics with others, while also suggesting that power structures—especially those governing interactions between authority figures and the public—are acknowledged and linguistically encoded.

Choksi's study, titled *Structure, Ideology, Distribution: The Dual as Honorific in Santali*, explores how the dual pronominal form in Santali, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken in eastern India, is used as a general honorific, regardless of kinship relationships. Notably, recent efforts to revive the Santali language through its unique script and increasing educational exposure have contributed to the evolving patterns in the use of such generalized honorifics. These shifts are also linked to broader movements for Santal cultural autonomy. The research highlights how ideological factors such as the interplay between tradition and modernity, cultural identity, and evolving perceptions of respect shape the use and social meaning of the honorific dual in Santali.

Takeuchi and Dibello's investigation into Japanese Keigo (honorific language) emphasized the necessity for foreign language educators to acknowledge the linguistic ideologies that affect classroom instruction and to validate the experiences of second-language (L2) speakers. In Japanese, honorifics are employed based on a range of variables: referents, group membership, age, social rank, the status of interlocutors, social connections, and the degree of familiarity. Barke added that in addition to adhering to cultural norms, speakers often consider their own "personal interactional goals" when selecting appropriate honorific forms. This study challenges rigid, prescriptive views that confine honorifics to signaling hierarchy, formality, or deference. Instead, it reveals that these forms are used to fulfill a broader array of communicative purposes. The use of honorifics evolves in parallel with the social and linguistic progression of ethnolinguistic communities.

It is also essential to examine the linguistic structures that constitute honorific forms. Identifying the specific parts of speech that convey respect and elevation varies across languages. Honorifics may be used before, after, alongside, or even without including the addressee's name. Generally, however, their application is considered more constrained compared to colloquial language.

A substantial body of research supports the close relationship between pronouns and speakers' social characteristics. These linguistic elements can reveal information about a speaker's socioeconomic background, societal attitudes, and the broader interpersonal dynamics between speaker and listener. More specifically, Shibatani argued that pronouns, particularly second-person forms referring to the addressee, are central to the system of honorific elaboration. He emphasized that plural forms of "you," third-person "they," and inclusive "we" are often employed to show respect toward either a singular addressee or a third-party referent. Additionally, pronouns combined with titles such as "Your Honour," "Your Majesty," and similar forms function as honorifics. These constructions are sometimes referred to by scholars as "pronominal expressions."

Titles constitute one significant category of address forms, where the mere usage of a title may reveal a person's rank or professional role. According to Shibatani, dignified titles that accompany personal names such as Mr., Miss, or Mrs. are the most frequently encountered forms of honorifics. He further explained that some titles originate from societal roles or occupational ranks, such as those found in business, the military, or kinship structures. Examples include Professor, Uncle, and General, among others. In line with this, Gramley and Patzold classify titles into the following categories:

Generic Titles (M-forms): These are generalized honorifics like "Sir," "Ma'am," "Mr.," "Miss," and "Mrs." Among these, only "Sir" and "Ma'am" are used independently without accompanying names. Such titles are commonplace in institutional or formal public settings, including schools, hospitals, and government offices. While "Mr.," "Miss," and "Mrs." are typically paired with surnames and convey information about marital status and gender, "Sir" and "Ma'am" are generally neutral and widely accepted across English-speaking cultures.

Kinship Titles: These forms refer to individuals within a familial relationship examples include mother, father, grandfather, brother, and uncle. In many societies, kinship terms also reflect levels of formality, emotional closeness, or social status. In collectivist cultures, these terms may even be extended beyond the family context to reinforce social hierarchy and group identity.

Occupational Titles: These honorifics are derived from the addressee's profession. Words such as doctor, teacher, professor, and waiter serve not only to identify the individual's occupation but also to reflect their status or function within society.

Conclusion

Honorifics serve as more than linguistic accessories because they are deeply entrenched in the cultural and social consciousness of the communities that use them. This research has demonstrated that the deployment of honorifics is not random or purely grammatical but is guided by social rules, historical contexts, and cultural ideologies. The ways people choose and interpret honorific forms are shaped by their perceptions of status, age, familiarity, social role, and relationship dynamics.

What emerges is a picture of honorifics as flexible, ideologically driven tools that both reflect and shape social reality. Their usage can signal deference, but also irony, mockery, resistance, or solidarity depending on context, tone, and speaker intent. This versatility underscores the semiotic richness of honorifics and their value as a field of study for linguists, sociologists, and educators alike.

In sum, the study of honorifics and honorific styles reveals the profound link between language and lived human experience. They are linguistic expressions of respect, identity, and social order. As globalization continues to intensify intercultural communication, the awareness and appropriate use of honorifics will remain vital to fostering mutual understanding and respect among speakers of different languages. Understanding honorifics is, ultimately, about understanding people, their values, their relationships, and their place in the world.

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