Japanese Referent Honorifics in Computer-Mediated Communication

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Abstract

In the anonymous environment of comment sections on Japanese news sites, informal and non-honorific styles are generally used. Commenters usually do not know other participants, and third person referents are normally absent and unlikely to read the posts, making the use of referent honorific forms seemingly unnecessary. However, drawing upon data from readers' comments on online news articles, this study finds that Japanese internet users do employ referent honorifics, albeit relatively infrequently, for various discourse purposes. While some honorifics convey deference or politeness, others are used for the opposite purpose: namely, to convey impoliteness, through verbal attacks on other interlocutors or referents. Honorifics used impolitely often co-occur with other linguistic impoliteness strategies, which provide contextual cues to guide readers' understanding. The article concludes that the choice to use referent honorifics is influenced by multiple factors, including commonly agreed-upon social norms and posters' attitudes towards the issues or persons being discussed.

Introduction

The Japanese language has an elaborate grammaticalised system of honorifics. For smooth communication and harmony among participants, Japanese speakers need to choose the "right" style and the "right" level of honorifics for the addressees of – and the referents mentioned in – each utterance. In other words, every utterance is a result of the speaker's language choice based on multiple contextual and social factors. Due to their ubiquitousness and the important linguistic and communicative roles they fulfil, Japanese honorifics have been studied extensively. However, most previous studies focus on language practices in face-to-face communication (e.g., Cook, 2011; Fukada & Asato, 2004). Even though computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become prevalent in daily communication, with innumerable posts and exchanges being produced on the internet virtually every moment, only a few linguistic studies have examined the use of Japanese honorifics in this relatively new yet prolific discourse genre (e.g., Nishimura, 2008, 2010). Moreover, in comparing internet users' linguistic behaviours on two Japanese bulletin board systems in terms of the norms orienting the two online communities, Nishimura (2008) mentions the term "honorifics" only in passing. Further, Nishimura's (2010) more detailed discussion focuses on the distinction between *desu-/masu*-forms versus plain verb forms, that is, issues related to addressee honorifics (see the next section for types of Japanese honorifics). Referent honorifics, the topic of the present article, are not addressed. Thus, the use of referent honorifics (and Japanese honorifics in general) in CMC remains under-explored.

Moreover, contemporary studies of language use need to be conducted in relation to modalities and genres, given that interactional relations among participants, rules followed by communities, and expectations concerning language choices may differ across genres (Llopis et al., 2016) and modalities. The findings of honorifics in face-to-face communication do not necessarily transfer to CMC. To this end, the present study investigates how referent honorifics are used in multiparticipant textual interactions among internet users, using data collected from one specific genre of CMC, readers' comments on online news.

Among the features distinguishing the genre of readers' public comments from other types of CMC (e.g., emails and exchanges on Facebook) and traditional genres of communication (e.g., letters, face-to-face interactions) are its anonymous and polylogal (versus dyadic) characteristics. Commenters post to an unknown number of unspecified readers, ranging from active participants in the discussion to silent 'lurkers'. In most cases, the commenters do not know the members of their potential audience personally, and they have no control over who exactly will read or respond to their posts. Conversely, readers of the comments may not know much about the commenters either, maybe not even their usernames. Some sites (e.g., Yahoo Japan) only display part of each username, and replace the rest with asterisks (e.g., abc***). Therefore, unlike in other types of communication, social factors bearing on one's choice between the use and the non-use of honorifics – as well as one's identification of what sort of honorific to use in a given instance – are unavailable in the anonymous settings of CMC (cf. Herring, 2001; Hiltz & Turoff, 1993).

In addition, it is often the case that third person referents (e.g., higher-status public figures, famous politicians) are not present in the online environments where they are mentioned or expected to be reading the comments. Their "faces" therefore would not be directly honoured or threatened by a commenter's use or non-use of honorifics. Indeed, people tend to express themselves more informally and less politely in CMC (Herring, 1996, 1998), and non-honorific writing styles are commonly accepted in many online contexts where Japanese is used. Yet participants do sometimes use honorifics in such contexts, giving rise to several questions. How frequently are honorifics used in Japanese CMC? What prompts internet communicators to choose the (non-)use of honorifics to achieve their communicative purposes? What pragmatic functions do honorifics fulfill in CMC? This study aims to address these questions by analysing the use of referent honorifics in Japanese readers' comments on online news articles.

The article begins with a brief review of the Japanese honorifics system and a summary of relevant research. It then describes the data and methods used in the current study. Next, the frequency, types, and pragmatic functions of referent honorifics observed in the dataset are discussed and illustrated with examples. In the conclusion, limitations of the study are identified and topics requiring further research are identified.

Types and Forms of Japanese Honorifics

Japanese honorifics have long been seen as grammatically encoded expressions of deference (Dunn, 2011; Yoon, 2015). There are two main types: addressee honorifics and referent honorifics.

In Shibatani's (1990) words, Japanese honorification processes unfold "along the speaker-addressee axis and the speaker-referent axis" (p. 359). Addressee honorifics are realised in sentence-final position via the polite form of the copula and other verbs (i.e., *desu-/masu*-forms); they are used when speaking in a formal setting, or when expressing deference or respect towards an addressee whose social status is higher than oneself. Referent honorifics, in contrast, are used to show deference or respect towards a referent and/or the referent's group (Cook, 2011; Shibatani, 1990). Deference or respect can also be expressed toward addressees through the use of referent honorifics (verb conjugations or suppletive forms, polite affixes), in addition to addressee honorifics (polite sentence-final forms), e.g., when a writer/speaker knows that the addressee is older or of a higher social rank than him/herself. That is, the target or receiver of referent honorific expressions may be a second-person as well as a third-person referent (Dunn, 2005, p. 219).[1]

There are two sub-categories of referent honorifics, depending on the way in which deference is expressed. They are respect forms (*sonkēgo*), which are used to achieve deference through strategies of referent-elevation, and humble forms (*kenjōgo*), which are used for self-reference. Humble forms signal deference towards others by abasing or downgrading the speaker him/herself (Dunn, 2005; Shibatani, 1990).

Referent honorifics are expressed through various grammatical forms, including conjugations and the suppletive forms of verbs. There are also honorific affixes (i.e., the prefixes *o-* and *go-* and the suffixes *-sama* and *-san*), which are used to turn a noun, adjective, or adverb into respect language. The prefixes *o-* and *go-* are also conventionally used with certain everyday nouns (e.g., *o-kane* 'money'; *go-han* 'meal') as beautification prefixes (Shibatani, 1990); such prefixes are used to create polite or refined expressions that do not necessarily show deference to anyone in particular (Cook, 2011). A detailed summary of the types and forms of referent honorifics in Japanese is provided in Cook (2011). All the types and forms of Japanese honorifics discussed previously are included in Table 1, which is adapted from Cook (2011, p. 3656).

		Grammatical structures	
		Verbal	**Non-verbal**
Addressee honorifics	Polite/beautified form (*tēnēgo*)	Copula: *desu* Verb: *masu*	
Referent honorifics	Respect form (*sonkēgo*)	Conjugation: *o*-verb stem: *ni naru* verb stem: *(r)areru* Suppletive forms (e.g., *irassharu* 'come/go/to be (t)here')	noun-*sama/san* *o-/go* + noun /adjective/adverb
	Humble form (*kenjōgo*)	Conjugation: *o*-verb stem: *suru* Suppletive form (e.g., *itadaku* 'eat/drink/receive')	

Table 1. Types and grammatical forms of Japanese honorifics

Referent honorifics [REF-HON] can be expressed either in the addressee honorific form [ADD-HON] or in the plain form [PLN], as shown in the following examples. The first example exemplifies the plain form in (1)a and the addressee honorific form in (1)b of the suppletive verb *meshiagaru* 'eat/drink' – a verb used to elevate the referent's action (i.e., a respect form [RES] of referent honorifics). The pair of sentences in the second example illustrates the conjugations of the suppletive verb *itadaku* 'eat/drink', which is used to abase oneself (i.e., a humble form [HUM] of referent honorifics).

(1) a. *Kyōju* *mo* *meshiaga*tta.
professor also eat/drink.REF-HON.RES.*PLN*
'The professor had [some] also.'

b. *Kyōju* *mo* *meshiaga*rimashita.
professor also eat/drink.REF-HON.RES.*ADD-HON*
'The professor had [some] also.'

(2) a. *Watashi* *mo* *itadai*ta.
I also eat/drink.REF-HON.HUM.*PLN*
'I had [some] also.'

b. *Watashi* *mo* *itadaki*mashita.
I also eat/drink.REF-HON.HUM.*ADD-HON*
'I had [some] also.'

This study investigates referent honorific expressions of both plain and addressee honorific forms.

Review of Relevant Literature

Despite the general view that honorifics are expressions of politeness (Okamoto, 2002) which might be more obligatory in Japanese than in some other languages (Brown, 2013), scholars have long debated what leads people to use (or not use) honorifics and what functions honorifics serve in communication. One of the issues central to the controversy is whether honorifics are directly related to politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and social norms (Ide, 1992), or whether they should be viewed as indexes of a persona or identity interactionally and dynamically chosen by communicators (Cook, 2011). In addition, approaches linking pragmatically insincere use of honorifics with impoliteness have recently emerged (Brown, 2013; Ghezzi & Molinelli, 2018). Influential studies representing each of these approaches are briefly reviewed in the following sections.

Honorifics and Linguistic Politeness

Among the scholars who associate honorifics directly with linguistic politeness, Brown and Levinson (B&L hereafter) (1987) and Ide (1992) are most often mentioned in the literature on

honorifics and politeness in Japanese, although they in fact make different kinds of arguments about honorifics vis-à-vis politeness.

B&L's (1987) view is that honorifics are grammaticalised outputs of politeness strategies used to show deference and to save face by softening FTAs (face-threatening acts). This view has gained support, either fully or partially, from scholars working on the Japanese language (e.g., Fukada & Asato, 2004; Kiyama et al., 2012; Pizziconi, 2003). Other Japanese linguists, however, disagree with this interpretation (e.g., Dunn, 2011; Geyer, 2013; Ide, 1992). For instance, Ide (1992) claims that the use of honorifics in Japanese is socio-pragmatically obligatory and based on speakers' discernment (*wakimae*) of, or conformity to, socially prescribed norms of appropriate behaviour; such norms are grounded in speakers' social relations with the referent and the addressee in a given situational context. According to Ide (1982), the social norms calling for the use of honorifics specify that one must be polite to elders, to people with higher social standing or greater power, or when conversing with others in a formal situation. Although Ide (1992) rejects B&L's view of honorifics as face-saving strategies and proposes, instead, the notion of discernment, her framework still links the linguistic form of honorifics directly to issues of deference or linguistic politeness.

Both B&L's and Ide's approaches have their pros and cons. On the one hand, despite being challenged by scholars of non-Western languages, including Ide (1992) vis-à-vis Japanese, B&L's notions of facework and politeness strategies do play an important role in Japanese social interactions (Kiyama et al., 2012; Liu & Allen, 2014; Pizziconi, 2003). These notions thus cannot be ignored in the analysis of language use, including honorifics. On the other hand, B&L's ideas alone cannot fully account for all the issues in play, such as why Japanese honorifics occur when FTAs would not seem to be a major concern. Ide's (1992) discernment theory also has limitations, even though social norms do have an influence on people's expectations regarding honorific use and their perceptions of (im)politeness, as will be seen in later sections of this paper. In describing the use of honorifics as rule-regulated, Ide's approach cannot explain the complexity and diversity of honorifics in real-world language use – for instance, why speakers sometimes shift between honorific and non-honorific expressions in the same context with the same addressee(s). In sum, variations in the use of honorifics cannot be adequately explained by either B&L's or Ide's theory alone.

Discursive and Constructivist Approaches to Honorifics

Responding to the limitations of these earlier studies, more recent empirical studies adopt constructivist and discursive approaches in describing the use of honorifics. These studies pay particular attention to local social situations and the speaker's attitude in the context of those situations (e.g., Cook, 2011; Geyer, 2013; Yoon, 2015). Research along these lines maintains that honorifics should be viewed as more than devices that serve to perform linguistic politeness or that are regulated by social rules. Rather, honorifics, which are triggered by multiple contextual features, are dynamically, creatively, and strategically deployed by speakers to achieve various interactional goals (Cook, 2011), to construct desired contexts (Okamoto, 2011), and to

accomplish different pragmatic goals, including "for purposes other than 'being polite'" (Shibamoto-Smith, 2011, p. 3718).

Taking a social constructivist view, Cook (2011), for instance, maintains that the social relationships between participants in a given communicative event are actively negotiated and co-constructed by the participants themselves, rather than being statically regulated by social variables such as status and age. She views honorifics as indexes and claims that the social meaning of an index is "an outcome of complex discursive practice" (Cook, 2011, p. 3656). Based on an examination of the use of honorifics during a committee meeting in a Japanese company, Cook (2011) claims that honorifics index the institutional identity of the speakers. Using honorifics or not depends on the speakers' choice of the role they intend to play in the interaction – that is, whether they speak in the role of an official or formal persona or else in an unofficial role.

Another study based on empirical data is Shibamoto-Smith (2011). Drawing on data from televised political debates, she finds that referent honorifics are deployed as strategies for various purposes. Thus, the respect form (*sonkēgo*) is used as a means to elevate the audience when speakers defend themselves, the humble form (*kenjōgo*) is used as a strategy to refute an opponent's claims, and the double-*sonkēgo* form is used to create a more refined, higher-status persona for the speaker him/herself. Shibamoto-Smith (2011) concludes that none of the honorifics in her data has much to do with politeness; instead, they are "strategically used simultaneously to serve several different ends, rather than [being] a static set of forms linked solely to politeness" (Shibamoto-Smith, 2011, p. 3707).

Pragmatically Insincere Uses of Honorifics

While the majority of the literature focuses on honorifics as devices for expressing deference or adding positive value to the speaker and/or the addressee(s)/referent(s), pragmatically insincere uses of honorifics have also come under linguistic scrutiny. The insincere use of honorifics "violate[s] pragmatic rules of discourse, usually the maxim of sincerity" (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995, p. 3). By marking utterances as only ostensibly polite, insincere uses of honorifics, in essence, perform mock politeness or genuine impoliteness, via irony, sarcasm, teasing, and so forth.

Okamoto (2002) discusses sarcastic applications of Japanese honorifics. In two experiments, he examined the effects of politeness levels (i.e., impoliteness and over-politeness) on Japanese native speakers' perceptions of irony. His findings suggest that the politeness expressed by honorifics depends on social norms regarding interpersonal relationships between interlocutors (as Ide argued in 1992), and that "[w]hen a speaker is unexpectedly over-polite, listeners may well doubt the speaker's sincerity in being so polite" (Kumon-Nakamura et al., 1995, p. 14). However, Okamoto's (2002) work is more psycholinguistic than pragmatic, and his participants' answers to the questions included in the experiments only reveal what they think an addressee might feel in hypothetical situations. The participants' responses may be inconsistent with their language use or reactions in real communicative events. For this reason, investigations of naturally occurring interactions are essential (Rieger, 2017).

Another study related to the present article is Brown (2013), which investigated the use of honorifics as face-threatening or face-attacking strategies in Korean TV dramas. Like Okamoto (2002), Brown (2013) claims a connection between the unexpected use of honorifics and sarcasm or irony. He states that use of honorifics in a context where they are non-obligatory according to social convention (e.g., with a subordinate or an intimate of similar age) may be sarcastic and communicate mock or genuine impoliteness. In a context where honorifics are expected (e.g., with a non-intimate), they may also be marked as pragmatically insincere by specific strategies including (1) deploying "super-high honorific forms" that exceed normative requirements or expectations, and (2) "juxtapos[ing] such usage with face-threatening impoliteness strategies" (p. 176-177).

The studies of "non-normative" uses of honorifics discussed above highlight issues that are central to the current study. These issues, discussed in what follows, include expectations created by social norms, over-politeness, and the co-occurrence of honorifics with impoliteness strategies.

(Im)politeness in CMC

Impoliteness, like politeness, has received a great deal of attention in the literature. Since Herring established the field of linguistically-oriented CMC research in the early 1990s, a number of researchers have discussed (im)politeness in online textual communication (e.g., Herring, 1996), including interactions on various types of discussion boards (e.g., Kádár et al., 2013; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2010; Nishimura, 2008, 2010). Recent studies in this area focus on user-related (rather than media-related) discursive perspectives on language use (Georgakopoulou, 2006), arguing that linguistic behaviour and social interactions in CMC resemble what occurs in face-to-face communication (Graham & Hardaker, 2017; Locher et al., 2015). Most of these studies suggest that (im)politeness devices in CMC, as in other communicative settings, are used strategically by interlocutors for purposes of identity negotiation and presentation, interpersonal relationship construction, and community formation (Kádár et al., 2013; Nishimura, 2008, 2010).

While researchers generally subscribe to the view that "(im)politeness is not inherent in particular forms of language" (Culpeper, 2008, p. 20), there is no consensus about how to define "impoliteness." A "lowest common denominator" suggested by Locher and Bousfield (2008) is that "[i]mpoliteness is behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context" (p. 3). Meanwhile, a much-cited definition of impoliteness is Culpeper's (2005, p. 38):

> Impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2).

It is indisputable that both the speaker's intention and the hearer's construal play a role in impoliteness performance and realisation. In CMC settings, co-text, readers' metadiscourse, and/or metapragmatic comments/evaluations provide analysts with reliable information for identifying

practices and perceptions associated with impoliteness, including mock (im)politeness (Haugh, 2007; Locher et al., 2015; Wang & Taylor, 2019).

Mock (im)politeness is another situation-/context-dependant issue which warrants a discursive and interactional approach (Graham & Hardaker, 2017; Haugh, 2007). Mock politeness can be defined as FTAs "performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and [that] thus remain surface realisations" (Culpeper, 1996, p. 356). Culpeper (2011, p. 155-156) outlined three types of mock politeness based on the way in which impoliteness is implicated in each mode:

(1) Form-driven: the surface form or semantic content of a behaviour is marked.

(2) Convention-driven:
    (a) Internal: the context projected by part of a behaviour mismatches that projected by another part; or
    (b) External: the context projected by a behaviour mismatches the context of use.

(3) Context-driven:
    (a) Unmarked behaviour: an unmarked (with respect to surface form or semantic content) and unconventionalised behaviour mismatches the context; or
    (b) Absence of behaviour: the absence of a behaviour mismatches the context.

These categories of mock politeness provide an analytical framework for identifying and analysing insincerely used politeness strategies. The present study draws on Culpeper's definition and categories to analyse examples of honorifics used to perform mock politeness in the context of Japanese CMC.

Data and Method

The data for this study consist of readers' comments collected from the "Yahoo! Japan ニュース" ('Yahoo Japan News') website (https://news.yahoo.co.jp/). All the news reports/articles and readers' comments published on the site are written in Japanese. They are also open to the public: login is not required unless one is posting comments. After clicking on the link *"Rankingu"* ('ranking') on the homepage, one can choose to read either the most accessed or the most commented-on stories. Readers' comments are displayed beneath each news article.

The data include comment threads on four articles that received the most comments in the first week of July 2018. Given that participants' language behaviour may be affected by the topic of discussion (Kleinke & Bös, 2015; Liu, 2017; Nishimura, 2008), in order to minimise any possible bias in the data, this study selected four of the most commented-on articles on different topics instead of the top four articles of the week. The titles of and timestamps for the articles are listed in a) to d) below.

a) 橋下徹氏が日本の「時間稼ぎ」に持論

Hashimoto Tōru-shi ga nihon no "jikan kasegi" ni jiron

'Mr. Toru Hashimoto's view on Japan's [national football team's] "killing the clock"'
(22:07 on 1 July 2018)

b) NHK 解約しないと死後も受信料が発生？

NHK kaiyakushinai to shigo mo jushinryō ga hassē?

'Will people still be charged for the NHK TV viewing fee after death, if they don't cancel their contract?'
(22:11 on 1 July 2018)

c) 日本を私物化して開き直る安倍夫妻の異常

Nihon o shibutsukashite hirakinaoru Abe fusai no ijō

'Appropriating taxpayers' money for private interests: Mr. and Mrs. Abe's "so-what" attitude'
(9:15 on 2 July 2018)

d) 「恥を知れ」「フェアに」＝学生から怒りの声–東京医大

"Haji o shire" "Feani": Gakusē kara okori no koe – Tōkyō Idai

'"Be ashamed" "Be fair": Students' anger towards Tokyo Medical University'
(21:52 on 4 July 2018)

The length of comments in each thread varies from one word to multiple long sentences. Instances of referent honorifics (see Table 1) were manually identified and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively with respect to frequency, linguistic context, and pragmatic functions. Direct quotations and repetitions of previous comments, which are marked by commenters with quotation marks, the quotation particles *to* or *tte*, or the greater-than sign ">", were excluded to avoid double counting in the analysis. For convenience, the four comment threads are referred to in the discussion as "Football," "NHK," "Abe," and "University," respectively. Excerpts quoted in the discussion are presented together with the topic and the sequential number of the comment (e.g., NHK-4503).

Frequency of Referent Honorifics in the Online Reader Comments

Among the four threads, NHK attracted the most comments in total, 6,552. University garnered 4,190 comments, whereas Football had 2,014, and Abe had 1,099. Figures indicating the size of the dataset and the number of comments containing referent honorifics are presented in Table 2. As mentioned previously, addressee honorifics (i.e., *desu-/masu*-forms) are outside the focus of this study, and they are therefore not included in the table.

Title	Number of Comments	Number of characters	Comments with referent honorifics	Instances of referent honorifics
NHK	6,552	478,078	145 (2%)	182
University	4,190	238,468	50 (1%)	61
Football	2,014	168,279	41 (2%)	37
Abe	1,099	72,745	57 (5%)	61
Total	**13,855**	**957,570**	**293**	**341**
Average			**(2.5%)**	

Table 2. Size of the dataset and number of comments containing referent honorifics

One can see from Table 2 that referent honorifics were used infrequently, only in 2.5% of readers' comments, on average. They were used most frequently in comments about Abe, a high-ranking politician (i.e., the prime minister) who is normally accorded respect, compared to comments on the other topics (i.e., 5% versus 1% or 2%). This distribution is in conformity with social norms, which specify that one should respect and be polite to people of higher social status and use appropriate language to evince such deference. Some of the metapragmatic comments included in the posts support this connection. Examples (3)-(5) elucidate why the posters think honorifics are expected.

(3) ……「*様*」とまでは言わないが、せめて首相の奥さんに「*さん*」ぐらい付けろ。礼儀も知らない屑記事、屑雑誌。

*…… "*sama*" to made wa iwanai ga, semete shushō no okusan ni "*san*" gurai tsukero. Rēgi mo shiranai kuzu kiji, kuzu zasshi.*

'…… I'm not saying that you have to use "-*sama*", but at least put "-*san*" after the prime minister's wife's name. Such an ill-mannered crap article, crap magazine.' (Abe-103)

(4) 文中敬称略とは書いているけど、安倍は～、安倍は～って書き方はどうかと思うよ。総理という肩書で呼べばいいのに敵意むき出しにするにしても品位が無さ過ぎる。……

Bunchū kēshō ryaku to wa kaiteiru kedo, Abe wa ..., Abe wa ... tte kakikata wa dō ka to omou yo. Sōri to iu katagaki de yobeba ii noni teki'i mukidashi ni suru ni shite mo hin'i ga nasasugiru……

'Although it does say "honorific titles are omitted", I still question whether one should write "Abe so and so, Abe so and so." They could just refer to him as "the prime minister". It's too rude [to refer to the prime minister by his surname only], even if you are hostile towards him. ……' (Abe-947)

(5) 文中敬称略とはいいながらだな、一国の首相をつかまえて「安倍」呼ばわりかよww 個人ブログでやって下さいませ。

Bunchū kēshō ryaku to wa ii nagara da na, ikkoku no shushō o tsukamaete "Abe" yobawari ka yo ww kojin burogu de yatte kudasai mase.

'It's true that there's a note "honorific titles are omitted", but still, can you just call the nation's prime minister "Abe" [by his name only]? lol Please write like that [only] in your personal blogs.' (Abe-48)

These excerpts written in plain form (except the last sentence in (5)) clearly show that socially agreed-upon rules influence the posters, and suggest that at least some Japanese speakers still observe or expect others to observe these rules even in CMC – that is, even in settings where the referent is not present and the commenter is anonymous, and where addressee honorifics (i.e., *desu-/masu-* forms) are commonly considered unnecessary, as the excerpts themselves indicate. This pattern aligns with the findings of earlier studies suggesting that traditional hierarchical social values and norms are not completely irrelevant in some online contexts (Matsuda, 2002).

In addition, excerpt (5) indicates that some internet users regard posting comments on news sites as a public communicative event rather than purely personal expression. According to a widely accepted convention regarding addressee honorifics in traditional offline publications, using or not using *desu-/masu-*forms is left to the writer's choice (Shibatani, 1990). Internet users' awareness of the publicness of their comments may account in part for why plain forms are generally considered acceptable in CMC.

In short, readers use referent honorifics infrequently in their comments on news sites in these data. Both the number of instances observed and readers' metapragmatic comments suggest the influence of social norms on some internet communicators and their (expectations regarding) obedience to those norms. The data also provide clues about how to answer the research question: What makes internet communicators choose between the use and non-use of referent honorifics? These clues are discussed further in the following sections.

Types of Referent Honorifics Used in the Dataset

Among the instances of referent honorifics observed in the data, there are more respect forms than humble forms. Although some of these honorifics are used in the "normal" way to convey politeness or deference, some obviously involve non-normative uses employed to achieve various pragmatic effects. The statistics for normative and non-normative uses of referent honorifics are presented in Table 3. The columns labelled "Sub-total" indicate the numbers of observed instances of the two forms, and the columns labelled "Non-normative use" show the numbers (and percentages) of the two forms used for purposes other than demonstrating respect or politeness.

Title	Respect form		Humble form	
	Sub-total	Non-normative use	Sub-total	Non-normative use
NHK	130	33 (25.4%)	52	2 (3.8%)
University	49	19 (38.8%)	12	1 (8.3%)
Football	28	16 (57.1%)	9	0
Abe	49	7 (14.3%)	12	0
Average		(33.9%)		(6.1%)

Table 3. Frequencies and types of referent honorific expressions observed in readers' comments

Table 3 indicates that respect forms of referent honorifics occurred more frequently than humble forms in this dataset; compared to humble forms, respect forms also have a higher rate of non-normative use (33.9% vs. 6.1% on average) for various pragmatic purposes. Among the 130 instances of respect forms observed in the comments on NHK, 33 (25.4%) cannot plausibly be interpreted as verbal manifestations of politeness or deference. Likewise, 19 out of 49 (38.8%) comments on University, 16 out of 28 (57.1%) comments on Football, and 7 out of 49 (14.3%) comments on Abe belong to this same category.

In contrast to the respect forms, the humble forms have only limited non-normative instances, and they function primarily as a means to communicate the posters' humble attitude. Only two out of the 52 comments on NHK and one out of 12 on University appear to involve reversed pragmatic meanings, and no such uses were observed in the threads on Football and Abe. These figures taken alone may not be statistically significant due to the small number of instances, but they show that humble forms are used in readers' comments in both normative and non-normative ways.

It is worth mentioning that humble forms have also been reported to occur much less frequently than respect forms in face-to-face communication (Katagiri, 1990; Tak, 1989). The reason behind this phenomenon may be that Japanese speakers no longer consider undercutting their own status as a viable means of expressing deference to others (Tak, 1989). I leave this issue related to changes in views regarding honorifics for future study.

The following sections detail the functions of each type of referent honorific listed in Table 3.

Functions of Referent Honorifics in Readers' Comments

Referent Honorifics Expressing Deference or a Sense of Sharing

Some instances of the referent honorifics observed in the data are used as politeness devices to express deference towards the referent(s), when commenters refer to people of a higher social rank (e.g., social status, age, etc.), make general remarks about referents, or mention other participants whose views they share. Examples (6)-(8) illustrate each of these cases, respectively.

(6) まあ工工やないですの。*皆さん*大半は*御*自身の能力で東大に入った*方々*でしょう。結構な頭のある*方々*。

Mā ē yanai desu no. Minasan *taihan wa* go-*jishin no nōryoku de tōdai ni haitta* katagata *deshō. Kekkōna atama no aru* katagata*.*

'Well, that's OK. I think most of *them[REF-HON.RES]* who got into The University of Tokyo did well on the exam by *themselves[REF-HON.RES]*. They are quite smart *people[REF-HON.RES]*.' (University-1952)

(7) 高齢者下宿でヘルパーしてますが、入居者*様*が亡くな*られ*てから料金未払いの書類が届いたことあります。ご家族も*いらっしゃらず*、会社から NHK に電話しましたが、死亡の手続き取って*いただけました*。転居*された方*についても、電話で手続きして*いただけました*。……

Kōrēsha geshuku de herupā shiteimasu ga, nyūkyosha-sama *ga nakuna*rare*te kara ryōkin mibarai no shorui ga todoita koto arimasu.* Go-*kazoku mo* irassharazu*, kaisha kaka NHK ni denwa shimashita ga, shibō no tetsuzuki totte* itadakemashita*. Tenkyo*sare*ta* kata *ni tsuite mo, denwa de tetsuzuki shite* itadakemashita*.*

'I'm a helper at a senior boarding house. There were some occasions when a notice of overdue payment addressed to a *resident[REF-HON.RES]* arrived after they *passed away[REF-HON.RES]*. They didn't *have[REF-HON.RES]* a *family[REF-HON.RES]*, so our company called NHK and *asked[REF-HON.HUM]* them to complete the procedures for the deceased. We were also able to *ask[REF-HON.HUM]* them to complete the procedures via telephone for *people[REF-HON.RES]* who had *moved house[REF-HON.RES]*.' (NHK-4095)

(8) *おっしゃる*とおり。明石家さんまが逃げずに勝負するべきとか言って批判してるの見てがっかりした。

Ossharu *tōri. Akashiya Samma ga nigezu ni shōbusuru beki to ka itte hihanshiteru no mite gakkarishita.*

'Exactly as you *said[REF-HON.RES].* I [too] was disappointed when I watched [on TV] Akashiya Samma criticising [the Japan football team] and saying that they should have fought [until the last minute].' (Football-424)

Example (6) occurs in the University thread, where many participants criticise or express their anger about corrupt admissions processes. Although it is written in a casual way (i.e., using the interjection *mā* ('well') and a colloquial form of the copula *ya*, and omitting the copula from the last sentence), the commenter uses referent honorifics to frame a general remark about students of the University of Tokyo: "most of them who got into the University of Tokyo did well on the exam by *themselves[REF-HON.RES]*. They are very smart people*[REF-HON.RES]*." Starting with the

word *minasan*, a polite way to refer to a group of people (instead of a neutral term such as "students"), the poster then attaches the honorific prefix *go-* to the noun *jishin* ('self'), and uses *katagata* ('people') – an honorific noun – twice. In addition to the comment's nature as a general remark, another factor that may have triggered the use of honorifics (and that makes them sound natural) in this post is that the poster, like other participants who wrote similar comments, seems to have admiration and respect for students at the University of Tokyo, who must pass a highly competitive entrance exam for admission to the most prestigious university in Japan, and who are generally seen as elites and future leaders of the country.

Excerpt (7) is about the poster's own satisfactory experience with NHK, posted in response to the many negative stories about the broadcasting organisation others had told. In talking about residents of the senior boarding house and their families, the poster attaches the honorific suffix *-sama* and the honorific prefix *go-* to the nouns *nyūkyosha* ('resident') and *kazoku* ('family'). She also uses the respect or suppletive forms of the verbs 'pass away' (*nakunararete*), 'do not have' (*irassharazu*), and 'moved house' (*tenkyosareta*). The polite word *kata* ('person/people') is also used to refer to the residents. When mentioning the helper's (company's) own actions, the poster uses the humble form of the benefactive verb (i.e., *itadakemashita*). For a helper working at a senior boarding house, residents and their families are clients, and thus using honorifics when referring to them complies with prevalent social conventions and norms.

Excerpt (8) expresses the poster's agreement with a previous post. This is an example of referent honorifics being used toward an addressee (i.e., the writer of an earlier post). There are several ways to say "as [you/someone] said" in Japanese – for instance, by using an impersonal expression such as *sono tōri* ('That's correct') or a sentence with a non-honorific verb (e.g., [name]-*san ga* itta *tōri, '*as you/someone said'). However, the writer of (8) chooses the honorific verb *ossharu* ('say') to indicate that he/she agrees with a previous post, although the entire comment is written in a non-honorific style. The non-honorific nature of excerpt (8) is displayed via various linguistic features: the omission of the copula after the noun *tōri* ('as') in the first sentence; the contraction of *shiteiru* ('doing') in *hihan-shiteru* ('criticising') and the omission of the object marker *o* for *mite* ('watching') in the second sentence; and the plain form of the past tense auxiliary ending the second sentence. Using the honorific verb *ossharu* in this non-honorific context, however, does not make (8) sound strange or over-polite or evoke any reversed pragmatic meaning, as in examples (9)-(12) discussed in the next section. In short, the referent honorific expression in (8) remains a positive politeness device because of the sense of sharing evident in the comment, as well as the favourable attitude of the writer towards the other poster. Along these same lines, *ossharu tōri* ('as you/someone said[REF-HON.RES]') is observed many times in this dataset when a participant agrees with the views expressed by another participant.

These examples show that Japanese internet users may use referent honorifics when referring to a third party who is absent from the online discussion context (i.e., (6) and (7)) or when commenting on other posters' remarks (i.e., (8)). Their choice of honorifics appears to be influenced by multiple factors, including social norms and their own attitudes towards the topic or the referent(s) in question. These factors function simultaneously. When someone mentions or makes general

remarks about clients or people they respect, or when one writes about other participants holding the same opinion as oneself, referent honorifics are used as a means of conveying respect, deference, or a sense of sharing. Participants' deployment of referent honorifics thus constitutes positive facework towards the target. At the same time, these honorifics are used, consciously or subconsciously, to add positive value to the users' own image or persona (i.e., to enhance their own positive face) by enabling them to present themselves as polite people.

Referent Honorifics Constituting FTAs

Instances of referent honorifics used to perform impoliteness are also found in these data. These instances involve mock politeness, that is, FTAs "performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and [that] thus remain surface realisations" (Culpeper, 1996, p. 356). These uses fall into Culpeper's (2011) categories of mock impoliteness and are identifiable due to form-, convention-, and/or context-driven mismatches. In many cases, other impoliteness strategies are observed concurrently with the reversed honorifics, providing clear clues to readers about how to interpret a poster's message correctly. Examples (9)-(12) contain referent honorifics used to perform impoliteness.

(9) ……ジャーナリストって何？つまりは、この人たちの頭の中には、「反権力」という 80 年代的価値観しかない。野党の議員、左翼教授、弁護士、それらの者の*ご高説*をありがたく鵜呑みにして政権批判をつづける一部のヤフコメ民、、。みんな、馬鹿としか言いようがない。つまりは、単純脳なのだ。

…… Jānarisuto tte nani? Tsumari wa, kono hito-tachi no atama no naka ni wa, "han-kenryoku" to iu 80-nendai no kachikan shika nai. Yatō no gi'in, sayoku kyōju, bengoshi, sorera no mono no go-kōsetsu *o arigataku u'nomi ni shite sēken hihan o tsuzukeru ichibu no yahoo-kome-min. Minna, baka to shika iiyō ga nai. Tsumari wa, tanjunnō na noda.*

'…… What are the journalists doing? In a word, they are only trying to be "anti-government," embodying the values of the 80s. Opposition legislators, left-wing professors and lawyers, and some commenters on Yahoo who graciously swallow those people's *valuable opinions[REF-HON.RES]* and keep criticising the government are all fools but nothing else. In other words, they are simple-minded.' (Abe-27)

It is clear that the poster of (9) is making critical comments, i.e., verbally attacking all the referents mentioned in the post. Yet the honorific prefix *go-* is attached to *kōsetsu* ('valuable opinions') in the noun phrase "those people's valuable opinions." The phrase "those people" refers to "journalists," "opposition legislators," and "left-wing professors and lawyers." An earlier study claimed that honorifics sound "bizarre" when the "acts involved are generally considered dishonourable" (Fukada & Asato, 2004, p. 1997). This argument, however, is not applicable here, as "those people" mentioned in (9) may not be "*generally* considered dishonourable." On the contrary, many readers could disagree with the poster; they might value the oversight functions of "those people" in ensuring the government's administration and consider their existence truly

valuable. Rather, the poster's own negative attitude appears to be the determining factor that assigns the honorific form a reversed pragmatic meaning. Although it is impossible for a reader or researcher to check with the poster about his/her intention or attitude, there are clues in the context that indicate pragmatic insincerity; these clues are consonant with those noted in previous studies of such insincerity (Culpeper, 2011; Nishimura, 2010). The key clue in (9) lies in the incongruity of the poster's language choices. In deploying the honorific prefix *go-* to refer to their "*valuable* opinions," the poster uses *mono*, a belittling term for 'people,' to refer to the politicians, professors, and lawyers. This incongruity clearly signifies that the prefix *go-* is a sarcastic application of the honorific expression. The poster's negative attitude is further manifested in the expressions used in the next sentence – *unomi ni shite* ('swallow'), *baka* ('fools'), and *tanjunnō* ('simple-minded'). All these expressions co-occur in this speech act of criticism, explicitly indicating that the poster dislikes the people being discussed. This example thus falls into Culpeper's category of internal context-driven implicational impoliteness, where "the context projected by part of a behaviour mismatches that projected by another part" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 155).

The honorific suffix *-sama* in (10) is another instance of sarcastic use. In this example, the pragmatic insincerity is self-explained by the poster's metapragmatic comments rather than implied by the co-text.

(10) 当然大学側も贈収賄罪の対象になるだろうが、これじゃ「東京医科*様*大学」だな、敬称じゃないよ、蔑称だよ

*Tōzen daigaku gawa mo zō-shūwaizai no taishō ni naru darō ga, kore ja "Tōkyō Ika-*sama *Daigaku" da na, kēshō janai yo, besshō da yo*

'Of course, the University will also be accused of taking bribes, so we should call them "Tokyo Medical-*sama* University". This is not a title of honour but a pejorative term.' (University-465)

As the metapragmatic comment in (10) explains, the poster uses the honorific suffix *-sama,* added to *Tōkyō Ika* ('Tokyo Medical'), not to express respect but rather to disparage the university for its back-door admissions practices. In addition, the poster does not follow the convention of attaching *-sama* after a person's/institution's full name*,* but instead places it after the word *Ika* (医科 'medical'). Although the resulting expression uses the same characters as the conventional form, the sound of *Ika-sama* is suggestive of a homonymous noun *ikasama,* written as 如何様, which means "fault" or "cheat." That is, the poster is calling the university "Tokyo *Cheating* University." This paronomasia further heightens the sarcastic flavour of the post. The post is thus an example of, in Culpeper's term, form-driven impoliteness: impoliteness that is marked by "the surface form or semantic content of a behaviour" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 155).

In addition to the reversed use of respect forms discussed in connection with (9) and (10), instances of the strategic use of humble forms are also observed in the data, although much less frequently (refer to Table 3). As with the respect forms, inferences about pragmatic insincerity in uses of the humble forms are normally triggered by the poster's negative view and aversion towards the issue

or the opinion/behaviour or the person being discussed. Such insincerity is also implied by linguistic incongruity and co-text, as illustrated in example (11).

(11) アホな政治家、官僚など　自分の保身のための政治はやめて*いただきたい*。

Ahona sējika, kanryō nado jibun no hoshin no tame no sēji wa yamete itadakitai.

'Stupid politicians and government officials, I *would like to humbly ask[RES-HON.HUM]* you to stop using politics for your self-protection.' (NHK-3180)

Although the beneficial humble form *itadaku* ('benefit [from other's action]') is used in the expression *yamete itadakitai* ('I would like to humbly ask you to stop') and makes the request sound tactful and humble, the co-occurring offensive adjective *ahona* ('stupid') modifying "politicians" and "officials" tells readers clearly that the humble form does not raise the target by lowering the writer him/herself. On the contrary, the mismatch between the (im)politeness strategies signals impoliteness or mock politeness driven by internal context, in Culpeper's term. That is, this is an example of a humble form falling into the same category as (9) – an example of respect form – discussed earlier.

Another type of sarcastic use of referent honorifics involves over-politeness, as (12) illustrates.

(12) …… 裏口を、請け負っていた方からの実話です。……和服姿の*お母様*と思しき*方*といかにもこの大学の創成期に入ったバカ親父の子供らしく口を半開きにした馬鹿面下げてきているやつとで大学の重役職員連中に囲まれて*おいであそばした*ようです。…… こんなクソ医学部こそ本来はあってはいけない。

…… uraguchi o ukeotteita kata kara no jitsuwa desu. …… wafuku sugata no okā-sama *to oboshiki* kata *to ikanimo kono daigaku no sōsēki ni haitta baka oyaji no kodomo rashiku kuchi o hanbiraki ni shita bakazura sagete kiteiru yatsu to de daigaku no jūyaku shokuin renchū ni kakomarete* oide-asobashita *yō desu. …… konna kuso igakubu koso honrai wa atte wa ikenai.*

'It's a true story I heard from someone who was asked to assist with back-door admissions . . . A *lady[REF-HON.RES]* in a kimono, the *mother[REF-HON.RES]*, and her stupid-looking son with his mouth hanging half-open *came[REF-HON.RES]* to him, accompanied by a tribe of executives of the university. It's like they were trying to tell people that the stupid father of the youngster was one of the earliest members of the university when it was first established . . . This kind of shitty medical school should not exist at all.' (University-277)

Japanese has neutral forms of the word "mother" (e.g., *hahaoya*) as well as a more polite form: *okā-san*. The post, however, uses *okā-sama*, the most polite version. The verb *oide-asobashita* ('came') is also a super-high honorific, which is almost obsolete and no longer used in daily communication in contemporary Japanese. Here the over-use of honorifics delivers a strong sense

of sarcasm. In addition, words such as the term *baka* ('stupid') used for the prospective student and his father, as well as the abusive words *renchū* ('guys', with a disdainful nuance) and *kuso* ('shit') used to refer to the executives and the school, further strengthen the sense of impoliteness. All these factors function together as devices of genuine impoliteness in a speech act attacking the face of the referents. The coexistence of referent honorifics and abusive expressions in (12) constitutes a further example of what Culpeper labels "internal context-driven" mock politeness. (12) also features an example of external context-driven impoliteness, according to Culpeper's classification introduced earlier, namely, the super-polite description of the mother, which is not expected given the overall tenor of this post.

In sum, both the respect forms and the humble forms of referent honorifics are occasionally used as devices of genuine impoliteness in comments on Japanese news sites. In such uses, referent honorifics convey sarcasm, criticise the target(s), or urge or request the target(s) to do or not to do something. In these data, there are always co-occurring linguistic features in the text signposting the poster's negative attitude and hence their intended message.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Japanese internet users use referent honorifics in the anonymous environment in which readers post comments on news stories published on the Yahoo Japan News website. Posters use these referent honorifics vis-à-vis other participants or absent third person referents in their comments, where it might seem unnecessary to do so because the third parties are not present or likely to read the comments; but they do so infrequently, as suggested by the statistics in Table 2. Respect forms are used in the majority of the observed instances, with humble forms occurring more rarely. Both respect forms and humble forms are used strategically for various discourse purposes. Whereas some instances are "normative" uses conveying deference or politeness, others are clearly used to perform impoliteness.

Social norms regarding the use of honorifics are among the factors that influence the linguistic behaviour of the commenters, as shown by analysis of the data, including some self-explanatory metapragmatic comments. That is, those who use honorifics and criticise others for not using honorifics believe that using polite language to refer to high-status persons shows expected etiquette or good manners, even when communicating online. This finding provides part of the answer to the research question about why communicators use honorifics in Japanese CMC. It also explains why some posters utilise respect forms when making general remarks about people of higher social ranks (e.g., politicians, aged people, customers, etc.) and humble forms when writing about themselves. The data suggest that, although Japanese people's perceptions about honorifics may be changing in ways that lead to an increase in non-honorific language practices (Katagiri, 1990; Tak, 1989), and although language use is generally more informal and less polite online (Herring, 1998; Nishimura, 2003), traditional social values and norms cannot easily or immediately be abandoned.

The findings also show that when discussing a specific third party or commenting on another participant, posters tend to use referent honorifics to express deference only when they have a

favourable attitude towards the referent or the referent's behaviour or view. That is, the poster's positive attitude towards the referent is an essential determinant of honorific use.

At the same time, referent honorifics are also used for reversed, ironic purposes in Japanese CMC, in cases where a poster has a negative attitude towards the issue or the referent/interlocutor. Brown (2013) found that insincere uses of Korean honorifics can be devices for performing both mock politeness and mock impoliteness in telecinematic discourse. In contrast, the reversed referent honorifics analysed in the present study index not mock impoliteness but rather mock politeness. That is, the reversed honorifics are only ostensibly polite; in actuality, they are used to conduct verbal aggression. Accordingly, in this dataset, strategic uses of honorifics function as devices of genuine impoliteness, and they are employed to perform speech acts involving sarcasm, criticism, requests, or demands. The impolite intentions motivating the insincere referent honorifics are conveyed by marked forms and conventional or contextual mismatches. This finding confirms Culpeper's categorisation of mock politeness as being form-, convention-, or context-driven. When used for reversed purposes, referent honorifics often co-occur with other linguistic impoliteness strategies, which provide readers with further clues about the poster's critical viewpoint and, at the same time, make the verbal attack harsher and more acrimonious.

Conclusion

This article has investigated the frequency, types, and pragmatic functions of Japanese referent honorifics using data collected from readers' comments on the Yahoo Japan News website. Despite the large and growing body of linguistic studies of CMC, research into honorifics in CMC is scant. Japanese referent honorifics represent a particularly under-explored topic, even in prior research based on face-to-face communication. The present study of Japanese referent honorifics in readers' comments thus makes a novel contribution. It brings Japanese referent honorifics in CMC into the scope of linguistic inquiry, and it contributes to advancing understanding of honorifics – and of digital language practices more generally – by situating them in a broader communicative context which includes polylogal, disembodied, asynchronous, and anonymous interactions.

The use of referent honorifics in Japanese online communication is a multifaceted issue, and the findings reported here represent the tip of the iceberg as regards linguistic inquiry in this area. In future research, it would be interesting to explore how honorifics of all types are used in other genres of CMC, including on social media sites focusing on less serious or non-political topics, or used for purposes of information-exchange or entertainment. Previous studies have emphasised that language practices in CMC are dynamic social practices (Georgakopoulou, 2006) and that (im)politeness strategies are closely related to communicators' self- and group-identity presentation and community formation (e.g., Kádár et al., 2013). How internet users employ honorifics to negotiate, construct, and present their identities in virtual communities is an important issue requiring further study.

Acknowledgements

An early version of this article was presented at the 6th Japanese Linguistics Symposium in Sydney, Australia. I would like to thank the convenor and the audience for their helpful feedback. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers and the Editor-in-Chief of *Language@Internet* for their insightful comments. All remaining errors are my own responsibility.

Note

1. For this reason, the terms "addressee honorifics" and "referent honorifics" may not be the best labels to represent the true natures of Japanese honorifics. This article uses them because they are commonly adopted terms in the literature.

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