# **Attunement in Sequential Use of Japanese Honorifics**\*

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## 0. Introduction

Japanese honorifics have been traditionally described based on relatively fixed dimensions of social context, e.g. formality of the speech situation, interlocutors' hierarchical relation in age and status, the lack of interlocutors' familiarity, or soto 'outgroup' relations as opposed to uchi 'ingroup' relations (Oishi 1975, Harada 1976, Hinds 1978, Wetzel 1984, Minami 1987, Mizutani and Mizutani 1987, Ide 1989, Shibatani 1990, Tsujimura 1992, Kikuchi 1994, Sukle 1994). These dimensions are helpful in considering expected and typical honorific usage. However, in actual interaction, they are not clearly present but multiply and ambiguously existent. For example, the dimension of "formality of the speech situation" varies from a wedding reception, parliament discussion, tea ceremony, or business meetings, to student-teacher interaction. Also, addressees' higher social status is often ambiguous, for instance when the addressee is younger than the speaker but hierarchically superior to the speaker. By reducing actual social context into these dimensions, significantly different phenomena are lumped together. Thus, we find that many instances of honorific usage do not operate in the way that the traditional account would predict. There is a need for a different framework that is fine-grained and pragmatically revealing.

The aim of this paper is to find a language in which to talk about unexpected or atypical uses of Japanese honorifics in social interaction. For this purpose, I introduce the concept of "attunement" to mean a participant's fine-tuned coordination with others in social relations, both linguistically and non-linguistically. As I will explain in the next section, the phenomenon of attunement is observed when participants engaged in social interaction have to deal with a greater goal of communication rather than making their behaviors conform to social expectations. This paper shows that the notion of attunement makes it

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Other dimensions include the speaker's gender and the conversational topic.

possible to treat "unexpected" honorific usage as an interactionally relevant and successful usage.

## 1. Attunement in Social Interaction

# 1.1. When Expected Behaviors Are Not Observed: A Case of Finger-Bowl Etiquette

Before introducing the notion of attunement, I should discuss when and how people do not follow expected behaviors. Generally speaking, following expectations is effective and positively valued, while ignoring them is regarded as a lack of manners or a misunderstanding of expectations. But occasionally, breaking rules and expectations becomes necessary and is excused, as the following case of finger-bowl etiquette shows.

In a formal Western meal, a small bowl filled with water may be placed on the table. This "finger bowl" is used to wash the fingers during a meal. Any other use of the finger bowl, such as drinking the water, is a violation of table manners. But diners might also violate finger-bowl etiquette. For example, when there is a fire on the table or when red wine is spilled, people may use the water. In situations like these, people would care less about table manners than about coping with the emergency.

There is an anecdote about anomalous finger-bowl use. Once, a member of the British royal family was dining with a guest. The guest, unaware of finger-bowl etiquette, drank the water out of the finger bowl. The royal also drank the water from his own finger bowl and minimized the guest's faux pas. Others who were at the table followed the royal. The royal knew how to use a finger bowl, but he broke the expected rule of using the finger bowl in order to save the guest's face. This anecdote suggests that ignoring rules and expectations can sometimes supersede strict adherence to them, especially when participants try to achieve a greater goal of interaction.

# 1.2. Attunement

The anecdote in the previous section illustrates several aspects of human behavior. First, rules and expectations are not absolute: there are situations in which we have to ignore them, in dealing with emergencies and preserving politeness. Second, participants' behaviors are emergent, based on requirements arising out of the current social interaction. Third, each person's behavior is the responsibility of everyone present. Fourth, all participants pay attention to and respond to one another's behavior. These points will form the basis of the notion of attunement.

In this paper, attunement is defined as an interactive, relational, and ethological phenomenon that takes place at the local level of context in human interaction. As the finger-bowl anecdote shows, one guest's behavior has direct consequences for that of others. The fact that others respond to and adopt the guest's (mis)behavior suggests that they are paying close attentions to each other's behavior. The unit of production in attunement is not a single actor but the

social relationship of all parties in the interaction. Attunement arises out of the interactive context as an outcome of mutual participation (Goffman 1974) by several individuals.

Attunement is about being on the same footing with others. By "footing," Goffman (1981) refers to the position or alignment of an individual. The royal in the anecdote adopted his guest's (mis)behavior and placed himself on the same footing as his guest, by drinking the water out of the finger bowl. Thus, attunement is face-work (Goffman 1959) for co-present participants.

Linguistic aspects of attunement overlap with other theories of communication and pragmatics such as accommodation theory (Giles and Powesland 1975; Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991; Coupland 2001:200), audience design (Bell 1984), referee design (2001), dialogism (Bakhtin 1981, Voloshinov 1929[1986]), parallelism (Jakobson 1966), dialogic syntax (Du Bois 2001, 2003), and speech style and style-shifting (Eckert and Rickford 2001). In these theories, it is asserted that interlocutors are always sensitive and constantly paying attention to what other interlocutors do and say, and adjusting their speech or behaviors accordingly. Thus, the unit of speech production is not the speaking subject alone, but the momentary social relationship of all parties in the interaction. Interaction is not an achievement of one individual, but represents the collaborative efforts of all participants in the same act. Moreover, as human behaviors always move, shift, and change, conditions of interaction also move, shift, and change at each moment. Forms of interaction are not uniform, nor are the processes of interaction. Thus, interaction is ever changing and emergent at each moment.

Following the assumption that interaction is relational and emergent, I will further consider aspects of attunement in actual interaction. In what follows, I will show that attuning to the interlocutor's speech is one recurrent pattern observed in Japanese honorific usage.

# 2. Methodology

This paper uses data collected in various Japanese-speaking communities. I analyze three conversations: two brief service-encounters at a supermarket in the city of Yokohama (a suburb of Tokyo) and a segment of a 30-minute conversation at a community center in the village of Kariwa in Niigata prefecture. Subjects at the supermarket and one subject at the community center speak standard Japanese, while one subject at the community center speaks a dialect of Niigata.

## 3. Japanese Honorifics

Japanese honorifics consist of three major categories: polite forms (teinei-go), respectful forms (sonkei-go), and humiliative forms (kenjōgo). Polite forms refer to "addressee honorifics" (Comrie 1976, Shibatani 1990) in American scholarship. The use of polite forms is said to be based on a speaker-addressee

axis of relationships or the level of the formality of the speech situation.<sup>2</sup> Polite forms appear as verbal suffixes or as suppletive forms of the copula. Respectful forms and humiliative forms refer to "subject honorifics" and "non-subject (object) honorifics," respectively. They appear as pronouns, nominal suffixes, and predicate forms. Respectful forms conventionally elevate the status of the referent in the argument of subject, while humiliative forms conventionally lower the status of the referent in the subject position, which is usually the speaker or the speaker's ingroup member. The uses of these are based on a speaker-referent axis that can be mediated by referent-addressee and speaker-addressee axes of interpersonal relationships.

## 4. Data Analysis

## 4.1. Attuning to the Interlocutor's Speech

In this section, I examine two interactional exchanges at a supermarket. Examples illustrate that the Japanese honorific usage does not operate in the way that the traditional account would predict. Instead, the notion of attunement better explains the speaker's choice of speech forms.

In (1), Kanako, a 29-year-old woman, went to a supermarket in Yokohama, a suburb of Tokyo. At the supermarket, clerks were busy trying to sell out all the fresh products before they closed the shop. At the vegetable section, a male supermarket clerk, A, age 32, was rearranging packaged vegetables with stickers of "50 yen off" or "half price" and announcing that vegetables were at a discount, as in (1). The underlined parts indicate the use of honorifics.

(1) 1 Clerk A:	irasshai <b>mase</b>
	welcome:POL <sup>3</sup>
	'Welcome.'

2	tadaima	kochira	no	zen	shoohin
	right now	this	GEN	all	product

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The terms "formality" and "formal" are used to apply not to the speaker, addressee, referent, participants, or content of speech but to the description of the speech situation. Formal speech situations include ceremonial occasions that have opening and closing statements, public speeches, lectures, seminars, conference talks, classroom talks, weddings, funerals, and so on, often with plural addressees.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Transcription conventions are as follows: ADV=adverbial; BEAUT.PRE=beautification prefix; COP=copula; GEN=genitive; HONP=honorific prefix; HUM=humiliative form; NEG=negative; POL=polite form; PST=past; Q=question; QT=quotative; SUPER.POL=super polite form; RESP=respectful form; SFP=sentence-final particle; SUB=subject; ?=rising intonation; (( ))=nonverbal movement and scenic detail.

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4 Kanako: kore
                                         ka?
                                                ((pointing at zucchinis))
                   mo
                          desu
                          COP:POL
                   also
           this
                                         Q
            'Is this one also (cheaper)?'
5 Clerk A: osore iri
                          masu.
                          POL
           sorry
            '(I'm) sorry.'
6
           sochira
                      taishougai
                                             natte
                                                               orimasu.
                                     to
                      inapplicable
                                                               HUM:POL
           it
                                     QT
                                             become:ADV
            '(I'm) afraid that (the discount) is inapplicable to that product.'
7
           moushiwake
                              gozaimasen.
           sorry
                              COP:SUPER.POL:NEG
            '(I'm) terribly sorry.'
8 Kanako: a
                   hai
                          suimasen.
                   yes
                          sorry:POL
            'Oh, yes, sorry.'
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In lines 1 through 3, clerk A announced the discount time, using *-masu* ending polite forms, an honorific prefix, and a humble form. In line 4, Kanako talked to clerk A with the polite form of the copula *desu* and the question particle *ka*, both of which are often omitted in casual speech. In lines 5 through 7, clerk A uses two apologetic formulae, *osore iri masu* '(I'm) afraid' in line 5 and *moushiwake gozaimasen* '(I'm) terribly sorry' in line 7, that both ended with polite forms, in addition to line 6 with the humble form *ori-* and the polite form *masu*. In clerk A's speech, all the predicates are invariably polite forms. In line 8, Kanako said *suimasen* 'sorry' in the *-masu* ending polite form.

In Kanako's interaction with clerk A, polite forms are reciprocally used. The traditional account would explain this based on their asymmetric relationship and the lack of familiarity between the two interlocutors at a service encounter. The role of clerk A is to serve the customer and the customer is supposed to be served. Their asymmetric relationship requires clerk A to use polite forms to the customer. Moreover, because they are strangers to each other, the customer is also supposed to use polite forms to the clerk. The traditional account might appear sufficient to explain the use of polite forms in (1). However, it is not valid in the next example, in which Kanako does not talk in polite forms with a different clerk

Example (2) is her interaction with another male clerk, B, age 33, who was putting 'half price' stickers on packages of fish at the same supermarket.

(2)1 Clerk B: hai taimu sa:bisu ne

yes time service SFP

'OK, (it's) discount time!'

2 dore demo ju pa:sento biki ne

anything even ten percent discount SFP

'Everything is discounted 10%.'

3 Kanako: kono o-sushi mo? ((pointing to sushi in boxes))

this BEAUT.PRE-sushi too

'This sushi, too?'

4 Clerk B: sore mo ne, sore shi:ru tsuiteru?

it too SFP it sticker put 'That (is cheap), too. (Is there) a sticker (on it)?'

5 Kanako: tsuitenaai

put:NEG

'No (sticker on it).'

6 docchi ga oishii kanaa

which one SUB delicious SFP '(I) wonder which one is more delicious.'

7 Clerk B: kocchi kana

this one SFP 'Probably, this one.'

8 Kanako: *jaa kocchi* ((handing it to the clerk B for a discount sticker))

then this one

'Then, (I'll take) this one.'

In lines 1 and 2, clerk B announced the discount time, while pasting the stickers on packages. Clerk B's speech in these lines ended with the sentence-final particle *ne*. Compared with clerk A's speech, which always ended with polite forms, clerk B's speech does not contain any polite forms.

In line 3, Kanako asked clerk B a question, pointing to boxes of sushi with no stickers. Kanako's utterance in line 3 in (2) contrasts with her utterance in line 4 in (1). Both were interrogative utterances with rising intonation. In both, Kanako was engaged in an interactional service exchange as a customer at the same supermarket. Her interlocutors were both male clerks of an age similar to Kanako's. Her relationship with them was the same. But in (1), she used the polite form of the copula *desu*. In (2), her verbal predicate contains only a plain form. The crucial difference between (1) and (2) is in the clerks' speech. Clerk A started

his speech with polite forms, whereas clerk B started with plain forms. This difference could be due to individual variation in speech style, but it influenced Kanako's use of speech forms.

In line 3 in (2), Kanako could have used the polite form of the copula *desu* and the question marker ka, as she did in line 4 in (1). But Kanako did not use them and talked to clerk B in plain forms. In line 4, clerk B said *shi:ru tsuiteru?* '(does that) have a sticker?' in a plain form. In lines 5 and 6, Kanako talked to him in plain forms. In line 7, clerk B told her his choice of sushi in a plain form. In line 8, Kanako decided to choose the one that clerk B recommended, talking to him in a plain form.

Throughout their interaction, Kanako and clerk B kept speaking with plain forms, unlike her previous exchange with clerk A. Even though the setting of this supermarket exchange in (2) predicts that she would use polite forms to a stranger such as clerk B, Kanako used plain forms, as her interlocutor did. Neither the asymmetric relationship between clerk B and the customer nor their social distance of unfamiliarity explains Kanako's use of plain forms in (2). The reason why she used plain forms instead of polite forms is that her speech was made to attune to her interlocutor's speech.

These examples present compelling evidence that one person's speech can be influenced not simply by expected use of speech forms and certain properties of social context but by an interlocutor's speech in spontaneous and socially engaging interaction. Therefore, attuning to the interlocutor seems to be an influential factor in Kanako's use of speech forms.

# 4.2. Attunement Sequences at the Time of Footing Shifts

Attunement sequences of honorific usage frequently appear at the time of footing shifts. When one participant changes footing by suddenly including an unexpected honorific form from the prior context of interaction, other participants respond to the change, by adopting the honorific forms introduced by the first participant. Such attunement sequences are observed even in conversations among people of different ages or statures, for whom we would normally expect the dimension of hierarchy to determine language usage, as the next example shows.

Example (3) was one of the conversations collected on December 28, 2002, at the community center in the village of Kariwa in Niigata prefecture.<sup>4</sup> Participants in the conversations include Mr. Suzuki and Ms. Fujita. Mr. Suzuki is a local man in his late 60s, who is a head of the volunteer group at the community center. Ms. Fujita is a visitor, who has been living in a neighboring city for one year and a half. At the community center, she had met Mr. Suzuki for the first time. Their relationships are asymmetric: older and younger, volunteer and visitor, familiar and unfamiliar with others, and insider and outsider in the region. Prior to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Niigata prefecture is located on the main island of Honshu in east-central Japan, facing the Sea of Japan. The village of Kariwa, located in the center of Niigata prefecture, is a rural agricultural area with a population of 5000.

this segment of conversation, their conversation had continued for a long time with asymmetric footing in plain and polite forms. Mr. Suzuki had used plain forms. Ms. Fujita had almost invariably used polite forms but had not used respectful and humiliative forms in her speech. On the surface, dimensions such as age, hierarchical relations in the community networks, degree of familiarity among participants, and group membership in the region seem to explain the complementary uses of plain and polite forms between Mr. Suzuki and Ms. Fujita. But a close analysis of their interaction reveals that Mr. Suzuki's speech shows attunement to Ms. Fujita's speech. Mr. Suzuki inserts polite and respectful forms when Ms. Fujita's speech becomes more deferential than her usual speech, as in (3).

(3) ((Mr. Suzuki had previously talked about handmade noodles that were made at the community center. Then, he served Ms. Fujita the noodles.))

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1 Suzuki: kore ga sono soba dayo this SUB the noodle COP.SFP 'These are the noodles.'
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- 2 Fujita: ara maa jaa enryo naku choodai itashi masu well wow then hesitation NEG HUM:receive do:HUM POL 'Well, wow, then, (I) will (eat) them with no hesitation.'
- 3 Suzuki: meshiagatte kudasai RESP:eat please:POL 'Please eat.'
- 4 Fujita: *hai* yes 'Yes.'

In line 1, Mr. Suzuki spoke in a plain form as usual. In line 2, for the first time Ms. Fujita included two instances of humble forms, *choodai* and *itashi*-, in addition to the polite form *masu*. Her use of humiliative forms brought a striking change to the conversation in which humiliative forms were not used previously. In her expected and continuous uses of polite forms, these humiliative forms, due to the rarity of their occurrence in her speech, highlighted the change of her footing. Since this change was noticeable, it motivated Mr. Suzuki to respond to and attune to the change, by adopting an equally deferential footing. In line 3, Mr. Suzuki used respectful and polite forms with his interlocutor, demonstrating alignment with Ms. Fujita's use of humiliative and polite forms.

After this exchange, Mr. Suzuki switched back to his typical use of plain forms. However, example (3) illustrates several points about their interaction. First, Mr. Suzuki's speech, which seemed to be independent of his interlocutor's

speech, is still the collaborative result of his interaction with the other participant. His response to Ms. Fujita's uses of humiliative forms with respectful and polite forms indicates that he was indeed sensitive to the speech forms that his interlocutor used. He was paying attention to the interlocutor's use of speech forms, and adjusted his own uses of speech forms accordingly. Second, the more significant the impact of the change in speech forms on the previously established interactive sequences, the more likely that interlocutors respond to the change and attune to it, by taking a similar footing. Third, the emergent instance of complementary alignment in Mr. Suzuki's speech enabled him to indicate that he and his interlocutor were both respectful beings and worthy of equal amounts of respect. His complementary alignment made his addressee worthy of respect, while making Mr. Suzuki himself look like a friendly and polite person who knew how to receive and return deference.

Footing shift in one person's speech is likely to trigger attunement sequences in the speech of others. It contributes to the emergence and maintenance of the newly established sequences of unexpected honorific usage in the middle of interaction. When one party changes their footing by adding more honorific speech forms than used previously, the other party is sensitive to the change and starts attuning to them, by adopting the use of the new honorific speech forms. Thus, current interlocutors' decision to use honorifics is motivated by previous interlocutors, and influences subsequent interlocutors' honorific usage.

In the unexpected sequences of speech forms, speech forms are chosen in each interactive context, often based on attunement. As participants individually organize their contributions in relation to other participants, properties of context such as age, degree of familiarity, and group membership cannot often tell us which forms of speech are most appropriate in a given interactive context. Relevant context for the use of honorifics is not pre-structured but arises spontaneously in response to prior utterances.

# 5. Attunement as a Pragmatic Framework

The analysis in the previous section has demonstrated that attunement is a relational and dynamic process by several participants. In this section, I would like to locate the notion of attunement in pragmatic theories. I will first discuss the fundamental premise that the notion of attunement shares with the other theories of pragmatics that are mentioned earlier. Then I discuss the point that makes the notion of attunement a distinct analytic framework from other theories.

Like previous theories of pragmatics such as accommodation theories, dialogicality, and audience (referee) design, the notion of attunement is based on the idea that the speaker is not the only person who enters into social relations. Interaction is not an achievement of one individual, but represents all participants' co-engagement. The unit of speech production is not the speaking subject alone, but the set of participants engaged in a conversation. Furthermore, the notion of attunement is based on the idea that interaction is locally situated. As the analysis of this paper suggested, participants constantly respond to, adjust, and negotiate

each other's honorific usage in the course of interaction. The phenomenon of attunement arises only out of the immediate interactive context. These two points about interaction are fundamental to many theories of pragmatics, including the notion of attunement.

But attunement is a human behavior that emerges when conventional and expected behaviors are suspended for some reason. This is the point that makes the notion of attunement distinct from the other theories. As in the case of the finger-bowl etiquette, attunement can supersede conventional rules. For instance, the examples of "unexpected" honorific usage analyzed in the previous section seem to be ill-formed from the perspective of conventional honorific usage. But they still make successful communications in reality, by fulfilling the principle of attunement in interaction. From the perspective of attunement, such "unexpected" honorific usage is not regarded as ill-formed for asserting the rightness of the suspension of conventions. In other words, attunement is one of the means to achieve successful communication and better interpersonal relationships. Hence, attunement is embedded within pragmatics, while it can suspend conventional rules of language use when emergency, politeness, or face-saving is seen as more important than observing rules.

The notion of attunement enables us to consider how human beings use linguistic resources to adapt themselves to changing and unpredictable circumstances, and to connect to others. Thus, attunement is a meaningful analytic frame in considering pragmatics and humans' behavior in interaction.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that attunement is one recurrent pattern in Japanese native speakers' acts of honorific usage. It has also illustrated that some properties of context (e.g. formality of the speech situation, interlocutors' social status or group membership, or the lack of intimacy among interlocutors) are not always the factors determining which speech forms are to be used in interaction. Rather, attunement seems to describe participants' spontaneous and dynamic honorific usage in ongoing interaction.

Using the notion of attunement, I presented dynamic processes of interaction, in which co-present participants respond to and adjust each other's honorific usage in the course of interaction. Unlike many previous studies on honorifics, this paper suggested that the conditions for the usage of honorifics do not depend exclusively on relatively fixed properties of context (e.g. formality of the speech situation, interlocutors' social status or group membership, or the lack of intimacy among interlocutors). Participants use or do not use honorifics, in order to linguistically attune to others' use or non-use of honorifics. Because honorific usage is not locally rule-governed, the notion of attunement can explain participants' dynamic honorific usage in ongoing interaction. By introducing the notion of attunement, I attempted to characterize honorific usage as a phenomenon that is dialogic, emergent, dynamic, and ever-changing in social interaction. The notion of attunement enables us to see honorific usage not as a

linguistic fact but as an interactional move that emerges out of the on-going process of interaction.

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