

Politeness Strategies among Japanese College Students: Discussion of the Acquisition of Honorifics and Onomatopoeias

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Abstract

In general, learning the proper use of parts of speech peculiar to the Japanese language, such as honorifics and onomatopoeias, often becomes a problem in Japanese language education. Honorifics are considered to be difficult by many Japanese and are used incorrectly on many occasions. Also, onomatopoeias are frequently used in various cartoon and comic books, however, the correct meaning and use of such terms is generally obscured. This study aimed to measure the communication abilities of college students by exploring their knowledge of honorifics and onomatopoeias as well as the connection between the two. A survey on Japanese female college students about the honorifics and onomatopoeias they used on a daily basis was made. In this survey, honorifics were divided into respectful, humble, and polite language, whereas onomatopoeias were grouped by origin. A few typical examples of each expression were provided to evaluate students' understanding of them. Furthermore, a survey on their attitudes toward learning onomatopoeias and honorifics was conducted. According to the survey results, 46% of the students consider honorifics to be the most important aspect of the Japanese language to be learned. Simultaneously, approximately 40% managed to use honorifics correctly, and these students also demonstrated a sound knowledge of onomatopoeias. In communication, students who excelled in negative politeness strategies (like honorifics), which are used by the speaker to maintain distance from the interlocutor, were also proven to be proficient in positive politeness strategies, such as onomatopoeias, which indicate intimacy between the speaker and the listener.

Keywords: politeness strategy, Japan, college student, Japanese language, honorifics, onomatopoeias.

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Introduction

In general, learning the proper use of parts of speech that are peculiar to the Japanese language, such as honorifics and onomatopoeias, can often pose a problem in Japanese language education. Honorifics are considered to be difficult by many Japanese and are used incorrectly on many occasions. Further, while onomatopoeias are frequently used in various cartoons and comic books, the correct meaning(s) and use(s) of such terms are generally obscure.

This study aimed to measure the communication abilities of college students by exploring their knowledge of honorifics and onomatopoeias as well as the connection between the two.

Methods

1. Research subjects: 72 male and female college students (19–20 years old).
2. Survey period: From March 2016 to April 2016
3. Survey method: A questionnaire survey was carried out twice during the survey period mentioned above.

1) The first survey (Survey A)

Questionnaire and survey method: Referring to the “Guidelines of honorific” issued by the Agency of Cultural Affairs (Agency of Cultural Affairs, 2007), five respectful words and eight humble words were selected as the most representative and popular in honorific language. Short sentences using these honorifics erroneously were presented to research subjects, and the subjects were made to correct the sentences.

Regarding the selection of onomatopoeias: (a) the most popular and basic 24 onomatopoeias were selected from the basic Japanese onomatopoeias (70 words) proposed in the literature (Mikami, 2006), (b) from the 92 words used in Japanese elementary school language textbooks (year 1–6) (Okaya, 2015), (c) and from those extracted from ONOMATO-PERA-PERA (for the publication of 1996–2010 years) published in The Daily Yomiuri (Mizuno, 2015). All research subjects were asked to construct correct short sentences using these onomatopoeias.

2) The second survey (Survey B)

Questionnaire and survey method: The author investigated the various sentences that many college students wrote during last 10 years and selected words with a high rate of misuse in conjunction with communication in particular. As a result, 12 honorifics and 18 onomatopoeias (4 degree adverbs, 8 mimetic words for laughter, and 6 adverbs at the time of the oral statement) were selected. For the survey method, all the honorifics and onomatopoeias were shown via short problem sentences, an appropriate word was chosen from them, and was then fitted in the short sentence blanks.

3) Evaluation method

As for the evaluation of the onomatopoeias of survey A, two different types of evaluation methods were adopted. The first evaluation method was employed to determine whether the research subjects fully understood the correct meaning of the

words, and the second was employed to check the knowledge about how to use these words correctly; scoring of these two evaluations were adjusted to be the same. The evaluation results of both Surveys A and B were translated based on 100-point scoring, and the necessary statistical treatments were also carried out.

Results

The correct answer rates concerning honorific language in Survey A are shown in Table 1; relatively large differences can be observed between the correct answer rates of the maximum and the minimum for the honorific language (whole), including respectful and humble languages. The average value of correct answer rates for humble language was significantly low when compared with those of respectful language.

The correlations between the correct answer rates for honorific language and those of respectful language and humble language in Survey A are shown in Table 2. The figures shown in the table are calculated correlation coefficients, and the extremely high value of 0.863 clearly suggests the strong positive correlation between honorific language (whole) and humble language. On the contrary, the correlation between honorific language (whole) and respectful language does not appear to be as strong.

In Table 3, the correct answer rates for onomatopoeias in Survey A were summarized. The averaged value of onomatopoeia use, other than syllable repetition, was considerably high at 92, which undoubtedly reflects the importance of overall usage of onomatopoeias. The “ST” given in Table 3, is the subtotal of “meaning” and “usage”.

Table 1. Correct answer rates for honorific language in Survey A.

Items	Honorific language, whole	Respect language	Humble language
Average	57	75	44
Maximum	96	100	100
Minimum	25	20	0

Table 2. Correlations for the correct answer rate between honorific language and those of respect language and humble language in Survey A. (Correlation coefficients)

Correlation coefficient	Respect language	Humble language
Honorific language	0.694	0.863

Table 3 Correct answer rate for onomatopoeia use in Survey A.

Items	Onomatopoeia, whole			Syllable repetition			Onomatopoeia*		
	M	U	ST	M	U	ST	M	U	ST
Average	83	90	85	88	88	85	79	92	85
Maximum	100	100	98	100	100	100	100	100	100
Minimum	50	63	60	50	50	54	25	58	42

Abbreviations M: meaning, U: usage, ST: subtotal (ST=M+U).

* Onomatopoeia other than the syllable repetition.

Table 4. Correlations of correct answer rate of honorific language and those of Onomatopoeias in Survey A (Correlation coefficients).

Honorifics	Correct answer rate of Onomatopoeia								
	Onomatopoeia, whole			Syllable repetition			Onomatopoeia*		
	M	U	ST	M	U	ST	M	U	ST
**Correct answer --	0.336	0.456	0.414	0.307	0.452	0.450	0.286	0.258	0.321

Correct answer --	0.375	0.332	0.367	0.206	0.295	0.304	0.333	0.268	0.351

Abbreviations M: meaning, U: usage, ST: subtotal (ST=M+U).

* Onomatopoeia other than the syllable repetition.

** Correct answer rate of honorific language, whole.

*** Correct answer rate of humble language.

Correlations of correct answer rates of honorific language with those of onomatopoeia in Survey A were shown in Table 4. The values given in the table were calculated correlation coefficients, and relatively high values, around 0.45, clearly suggested the relatively strong positive correlation relationship between honorific language (whole) and onomatopoeia (whole, usage). A similar type of relationship between honorific language (whole) and syllable repetition onomatopoeia, especially in case of “usage,” were also observed. More importantly, these relatively strong correlations were only observed in the usage of these onomatopoeias, and not observed in their meanings.

The visual confirmation of the correlations between the correct answer rates of honorific language (whole) and those of onomatopoeias (whole, ST), and those between the correct answer rates of honorific language (whole) and those of onomatopoeias (whole, usage) are also shown in Fig.1, and Fig.2, respectively.

As shown in Fig.1, a relatively strong positive correlation ($r = 0.414$) is observed between honorific language (whole) and onomatopoeias (whole, ST). Similarly, a slightly stronger correlation ($r = 0.456$) between honorific language (whole) and

onomatopoeias (whole, usage) is shown in Fig.2.

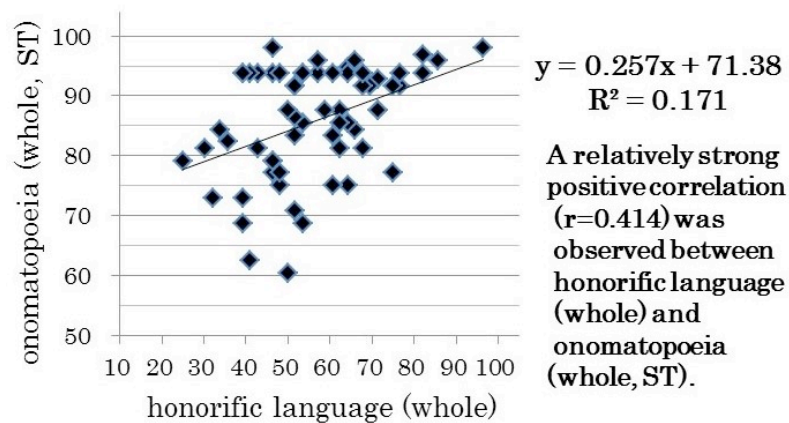


Figure 1. Correlations between the correct answer rates of honorific language (whole) and onomatopoeias (whole, ST).

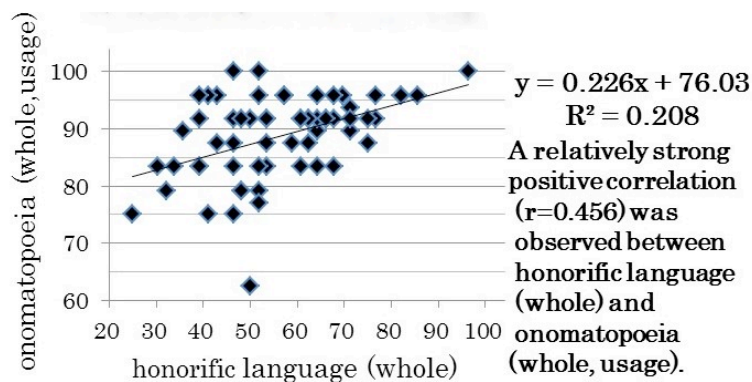


Fig.2 Correlations between the correct answer rates of honorific language (whole) and onomatopoeias (whole, usage).

Table 5 Correct answer rates of honorific language and onomatopoeias in Survey B.

Items	Honorific language	Onomatopoeia		
		Degree adverb	Mimetic word*	Adverb at**
Average	67	75	25	50
Maximum	100	100	75	100
Minimum	33	0	0	0

* Mimetic word of the laughter.

** Adverb at the time of the oral statement.

Correct answer rates for honorific language and onomatopoeias in Survey B are shown in Table 5. As shown in this table, the differences between the maximum and minimum values observed in onomatopoeias are extremely large as compared with those observed in Survey A (Table 3). The average correct answer rates for onomatopoeia (mimetic word for laughter) were considerably lower than those of onomatopoeia (degree adverb) and onomatopoeia (adverb at the time of the oral statement).

Discussion and Conclusion

Even for Japanese people who are born and raised in Japan, the correct use of honorifics seems to be difficult. In recent years, a few studies on honorifics in relation to politeness have been reported (Murata, 2005; Xu, 2014), and a guidebook of honorifics (respectful language) for foreigners was published in 2016 (O’neill, 2016). However, the importance of Japanese onomatopoeias in the communication of Japanese people was pointed out by various sources. Studies were conducted on the role of onomatopoeias as an important tool for infant language (Miyoshi, 2006) and the changes of the onomatopoeias of laughing and smiling (Nakazato, 2007). An important discussion on sound symbolism and the structure underlying the Japanese onomatopoeia has been published (Hamano, 2014).

In general, the honorifics have been classified into three large groups: respectful language, humble language, and polite language. In 2007, “Guidelines of the honorific” was issued by the Cultural Council (Agency for Cultural Affairs), and humble language and polite language were further divided into two sub-classes; therefore, honorifics are now officially classified into five groups in Japan. However, for the sake of convenience, the conventional three-tier classification is still frequently used. Therefore, this conventional three-tier classification was also employed in this study.

As shown in the results section, regarding the honorifics described in Survey A, there are large differences in the correct answer rates for honorific language between those who know honorifics quite well and those who do not (Table 1). However, regarding the correct answer rate for onomatopoeias (Table 3), smaller differences between the maximum and minimum were observed compared to the case of honorifics. Also, averaged values, especially those observed in case of “usage,” were considerably higher than those observed in the case of honorifics; therefore, it could be suggested that although the meanings of onomatopoeias might be not fully understood, the subjects could manage to customarily use these onomatopoeias well.

However, based on the results of Survey B, most of the research subjects seemed to be specifically unaccustomed to onomatopoeia (mimetic word for laughter), and therefore the correct answer rate of onomatopoeia (mimetic word for laughter) showed extremely low values. However, in daily Japanese communication that is based on conversation, the recognition and evaluation of the state of laughter is important to strengthen mutual understanding and relationships.

According to these survey results, many students consider honorifics to be the most important aspect of the Japanese language to be learned and, simultaneously, most of

them managed to use honorifics correctly. These students also demonstrated a sound knowledge of onomatopoeias. In communication, students who excelled in negative politeness strategies (like honorifics), used by the speaker to maintain distance from the interlocutor, were also shown to be proficient in positive politeness strategies, such as onomatopoeias, indicating intimacy between the speaker and the listener. This suggests that they are capable of using the interpersonal function of the Japanese language effectively.

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