PRAGMATICS OF JAPANESE PERFORMATIVE HONORIFICS IN SUBORDINATE CLAUSES*

Yoshiko Matsumoto

1. INTRODUCTION

The category of honorifics in Japanese that (since Harada, 1976) is often called “performative honorifics” or “PH” is represented by the forms mas-, which is suffixed to the infinitive form of a verb, and des-,1 which follows an adjective or a noun. As the term “performative honorifics” suggests, the usage is determined by factors that are relevant to the context of an utterance, such as “the speaker, the addressee, and the situation in which the sentence is uttered” (Harada, 1976: 553). A precise determination of when speakers will choose to use PH is a complex research issue in itself. However, it suffices to say for the purpose of this paper that, in simple terms, they are used when either the relationship between the speaker and the addressee or the purpose or occasion of the utterance is such that an indication of formality in speech is called for.

PH are contrasted with “propositional honorifics,” whose usage is determined by elements of the event or state described in the sentence (e.g., the relationship between the speaker and the referents of the subject or the object, cf. Harada, 1976). The use of PH has been considered as a type of main clause phenomena (rather than a subordinate clause phenomenon) in that it is a matter of the speaker’s attitude toward the entire content of the sentence uttered in the specific

* This paper is based on “Honorifics in Subordinate Clauses,” which I presented in the panel “Integrating Pragmatics to Pedagogy” at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Association for Asian Studies, New Jersey, October 1990. I am thankful to Bruce Fraser for his encouragement and patience.

1 Degozaimas- is another form that indicates a higher level of honorification.
speech situation and is expressed at sentence-final position. However, PH are also found in certain subordinate clauses, a fact that raises questions that this paper seeks to address.

As examples (1) and (2) illustrate, certain subordinate conjunctions such as -nagara “while doing x” do not co-occur with the PH forms of verb endings in the subordinate clause, while other conjunctions, such as kara “because,” do:

(1a) Tabe-nagara arukimasu.
    eat-while walk (PH)
    ‘(X) walks while eating.’

(1b) *Tabe-masi-nagara arukimasu.
    eat (PH) -while walk (PH)

(2a) Kore wa moo yomimasita kara tosyokan e kaesimasu.
    this TOP already read (PH) because library LOC Return (PH)
    ‘(I) will return this to the library because (I) already read it.’

(2b) Kore wa moo yonda kara tosyokan e kaesimasu.
    this TOP already read because library LOC return (PH)

For grammarians of Japanese, such as Mio (2002 [1958]) and Mikami (1970), the unacceptability of a PH (-mas-) ending in such subordinate clauses is considered as a measure of the degree of subordination; that is, a subordinate clause that allows a PH verbal ending, as in (2a), is judged to be more independent from the main clause than one which does not, as in (1b). Put differently, the subordinate clause in (2a) is more main-clause-like than that of (1a). The adverbial subordinate clause tabe-nagara “while eating” in (1a) is explained as being an integral part of the main clause, so that the speaker’s attitude is sufficiently conveyed by the PH ending in the main predicate.

A similar argument is often given in relation to the verb-ending form within noun-modifying clauses of the type generally known as relative clauses. As relative clauses are subordinate to the nouns that are elements of the main clause, under the grammatical analysis referenced above, they would not be expected to support PH. For example, the clause Tani-san ga katta “Ms Tani bought” in (3) is clearly subordinate to the modified noun hon “book”; together they form the noun phrase Tani-san ga katta hon (“the book that Ms Tani bought,” which appears as the topic noun phrase of the main sentence:

(3) [[Tani-san ga katta ] hon] wa are desu.
    Ms/Mr. Tani NOM bought book TOP that is (PH)
    ‘That’s the book which Ms Tani bought.’

Although the ending of the copula in the main clause is a PH form, which indicates that the speech situation for (3) is such that a PH form is appropriate, the ending of the modifying verb katta “bought” is in a non-PH form (which is often termed as the “plain” form).