

Analyzing Honorific Expressions in Japanese

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As we all know, honorific expressions play a pivotal role in Japanese, and whether or not they can be used correctly plays a crucial role in interpersonal communication. It has been proved by research and practice that honorific expressions in Japanese are usually divided into three types: respectful form, humble form, and polite form, and each type of honorific expression needs to be used differently according to the occasions, and if it is not used correctly, it will cause rude behavior to the other party instead.

Keywords: honorific expression, respectful form, humble form, polite form

Basic Connotation of Honorific Expressions in Japanese

Concerning the basic connotation of honorific expressions in Japanese, the famous Japanese linguist, Kindaichi Kyosuke, once said in *Thesaurus* that, “人を敬い、自らを遜る意を表す語で、尊敬する言い方と、卑下する言い方と、尊卑に関せず丁寧という言い方とある。それをそれぞれ尊敬語・謙譲語・丁寧語と言う” (Kindaichi, 1959, p. 362). Roughly speaking, honorifics are linguistic expressions that express the sender’s respect for the listener. The form of expression that expresses respect is “respectful form”, the form that expresses humility is “humble form”, and the form that expresses neither respect nor humility is “polite form”.

According to the Japanese scholar Kawaji Masaru, respectful form is used directly for older and higher status objects, while humble form is used to indirectly raise the status of the other person by lowering one’s own status, and polite form has a slightly lower degree of respect than the former two, but is slightly more polite and appropriate than ordinary expressions (Kawaji, 2006).

Another Japanese scholar, Saeki Tetsuo, argues that “敬語とは話し手、または書き手が他の人物を上位者と待遇している特定の言語形式のことである” (Saeki & Yamauchi, 1998, p. 92). It means that honorifics are a specific form of linguistic expression used by the sender or writer to treat the other person as an object of higher status than himself.

According to Chinese studies scholar Zhou Xiaojuan, people tend to have different opinions about honorifics when they stand from different perspectives, and there are two ways of saying honorifics in a broader and narrower sense for most people. In the broad sense, all words and phrases that express respect are honorifics. In the narrower sense, it refers only to the rational and acceptable forms of language that express etiquette and respect in various communicative situations. That is, honorifics are forms of linguistic expressions that convey respect and modesty in both the broad and narrow sense of the word used by both communicating or communicating parties in a two-party interactive situation (Zhou, 2008).

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Therefore, it is generally accepted that honorifics in Japanese are usually categorized into three types: respectful form, humble form, and polite form. Respectful forms are honorifics that show respect to the person to whom they are addressed or to the person appearing in the topic. It is used when it involves the person in the topic, as well as objects, things, behaviors, and states belonging to that person. There are several types of respectful form, and different types express respect to different degrees. Humble form is used when the speaker speaks humbly to the listener about himself or someone close to him in the topic, such as his family or close associates. Polite form is used when the speaker conveys respect to the other person through polite expressions, and is also used when he/she expresses himself/herself in a civil and gentle way about things.

Analyzing Common Expressions of Respectful Form

Respectful Expressions Using the Honorific Auxiliary Verbs “れる” and “られる”

The honorific auxiliary verbs “れる” and “られる” are attached to the verb “未然形” to express respect for the behavior of an elder. This is one of the most widely used forms of honorifics, especially in men’s speeches, newspapers, essays, and official documents. This form does not express as much respect as “お（ご）～になる” and “お（ご）～なさる”. For example:

社長の考えられたとおりです。
先生は毎日散歩をされます。
先輩はいつ富士山に登られたのですか。
課長は毎朝何時ごろお宅を出られますか。

Honorifics Formed by “お（ご）～になる”

The “お+动词连用形”, “ご+サ变动词词干” subsequent to “になる” is also used to describe the behavior of an honored elder, with a higher degree of respect than “れる” and “られる”. This form can be used for almost all verbs, except that the verb conjugation form is not used if it is a one-syllable verb, such as “見る”. For example:

ここでちょっとお待ちになってください。
課長はまだお帰りになっていません。
社長は何時ごろご出勤になりますか。
先生は毎日新聞をお読みになりますか。

Honorifics Formed by “お（ご）～なさる”

The auxiliary verb “なさる” is attached to the verb conjugation or the stem of the “サ变动词” to form honorifics. In most cases, the verb can be preceded by the conjugation “お” or “ご”, but this expression is old-fashioned compared to “お（ご）～になる”, and is used less often. “なさる” is a five-syllable expression, but the conjugated form of “ます” is “なさい” instead of “なさり”. For example:

早くお電話なさった方がいいと思います。
先生はいつもこの時間にご出勤なさいますか。
社長は毎朝六時に起きて、散歩なさいます。
課長は遅刻なさいませんか。

Honorifics Formed by “お（ご）～です”

The “お+动词连用形”, “ご+サ变动词词干” followed by “です” can also express respectful behavior.

Sometimes the behavior it expresses is a continuous state, and it has the same meaning as “～ている”. This form is usually used in the form “お（ご）～の名词” when modifying a noun. For example:

先生、お帰りですか。

お客様がこちらでお待ちです。

社長は今日の会議にはご欠席です。

申し訳ありませんが、当店の会員カードをお持ちでない方に割引致すことはできません。

Honorifics Formed by “お+动词连用形+ください”

One of the expressions of respect is “お+动词连用形+ください”, which is used to ask the other party to do something. You need to use the form “ご+サ变动词词干+ください” for the “サ变动词”. For example:

どうぞお入りください。

しばらくお休みください。

どうぞご協力ください。

ここは禁煙です。タバコはご遠慮ください。

Analyzing Common Expressions of Humble Form

Self-Effacing Phrases Formed by “お+动词连用形+する”

“お+动词连用形+する” is one of the expressions of humble form, which is used when the speaker humbly does something for the other person. The “サ变动词” should be in the form of “ご+サ变动词词干+する”. For example:

先生、ちょっとお聞きしたいですが。

お茶は私がお入れします。

一万円お預かりします。

先生、お荷物をお持ちしましょう。

Self-Effacing Phrases Formed by “お+动词连用形+いたす”

“いたす” is a humble verb of “する”. Therefore, “お+动词连用形+いたす” is a more humble expression, and is used when the speaker does something for the other person very humbly. The “サ变动词” should be used in the form of “ご+サ变动词词干+いたす” or in the form of “サ变动词词干+いたす”. For example:

鈴木先生にお会いしていろいろお話しいたしました。

これから学校をご案内いたします。

すみません、たいへんお待たせいたしました。

今後必ず注意いたします。

Analyzing Common Expressions of Polite Form

Polite Expressions Consisting of “～+です” and “～+ます”

In Japanese, polite expressions are also known as “丁寧語”. The most common polite form is the polite expressions consisting of “～+です” and “～+ます”. For example:

わたしは東京大学の学生です。

桜の花がきれいです。

今度の日曜日に富士山に登ります。

卒業後、日本へ留学に行きます。

Polite Expressions Consisting of “～+ございます”

“ございます” consists of the auxiliary verb “ござる” and the auxiliary verb “ます”. The tone is more respectful and polite than “です”. For example:

三菱商事の木下でございます。

このあたりは買い物にはとても便利でございます。

リングはみんなこのぐらいのお値段でございます。

先生、おはようございます。

Conclusions

To summarize, honorific expressions in Japanese are usually divided into three types: respectful form, humble form, and polite form, depending on the age and status of the two parties to the conversation, and the closeness of their relationship to each other. Respectful form is an expression of respect for the other person or the person appearing in the conversation. There are several types of respectful form, and different types express respect to different degrees. Humble form is an expression that indirectly shows respect to the other person by recounting his or her behavior or the behavior of the person on his or her side in a self-effacing manner. Polite form, also known as “丁寧語”, is a way of expressing the speaker’s seriousness of conversation and directly showing respect to the listener by making solemn statements about the content of things in the topic and the end of the utterance. When using honorifics for expression, we need to pay attention to the following points:

First of all, students should grasp the superiority and inferiority of children and elders. Japan is an island nation with a small land area, which requires close and harmonious interpersonal relationships. The hierarchy of seniority and inferiority is a reflection of these relationships, and it is also reflected in the language. An obvious example of this is the expression of respect in Japanese. For example, respectful form is used when facing people of higher status than oneself; humble form is used when humbling oneself or someone on one’s side; polite form is used when expressing politeness.

Secondly, students will understand to comprehend the relationship between inside and outside and affinity of Japanese people. Modern Japanese people regard the internal and external and affinity relationships between people as one of the most important conditions for whether or not to use honorifics. The sense of affinity is also the sense of internal and external relations in a broad sense. It is well known that Japanese people have a strong sense of group consciousness and a sense of distinction between inside and outside. It goes without saying that Japanese people have a strong sense of family, and most Japanese companies are “family-run”, with all members being one family, so the sense of exclusion is very strong. The most typical manifestation of this sense of exclusion is the use of honorifics. Japanese people usually use honorifics only to people outside their circle, but not to people inside their circle.

Furthermore, when using honorifics, compound verbs are usually used with honorifics for the last verb, and when there are several verbs, only the last verb is changed to honorifics. When the subject is something or a pet, honorifics are not used even for elders. Except for special cases, generally no honorifics are used for historical figures, celebrities, and so on.

Finally, it is important to cultivate students’ intercultural communication skills. Intercultural communicative competence directly affects language acquisition and application. Strengthening the cultivation of students’ intercultural communication skills will help students understand more accurately the expression of honorifics in Japanese, make it easier for them to understand why Japanese people use honorific expressions in certain specific

occasions, and further make them understand the hidden cultural connotation behind honorific expressions. Because the nature of language is a tool for communication rather than communication itself, culture is the core of communication. Continuously deepening the understanding of the commonalities and differences of different cultures and introducing the concept of cross-cultural communication into foreign language teaching, we will get new ideas and improvement programs for teaching.

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