

## THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE IN A HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the Japanese language in a historical and sociocultural context. The Japanese language is deeply rooted in a unique cultural and social system. The various aspects of the honorific system of the language are presented, including those honorific expressions that indicate social status, respect for the individual or persons being addressed, gender differences, and various cultural constraints. An analysis of some of the theories concerning the origins and genetic classifications of the Japanese language is also included.

**Key words:** Japan, culture, language, history, sociolinguistics, honorifics.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Japanese is ranked sixth among the languages of the world in terms of number of native speakers. It is spoken by some 122.8 million people in Japan (Japan Statistical Yearbook, 1989:25). Despite its status as a major world language and its centuries of literary history, its historical genetic relationship to other languages remains uncertain.

The Japanese language consists of five vowels, a basic consonant-vowel (CV) syllable structure, and a subject-object-verb (SOV) word order that is shared by many other major world languages. The language has a complex writing system, honorifics, and some grammatical particles relating to male and female speakers. Japanese lexicon consists of a large number of

loan words borrowed from Ainu, Korean, and Chinese. The Sino-Japanese words constitute the largest proportion of these loan words. The proportion is similar to the Latinate words in English vocabulary which is estimated to be 55 percent (Shibatani, 1987:861).

The earliest foreign loan words (non Sino-Japanese words) came from the Portuguese after their arrival on the shores of Japan during the middle of the sixteenth century. The Spaniards and the Dutch followed the Portuguese and more loan words were added. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Dutch was replaced by English as the language of foreign studies and today about 80 percent of the Japanese foreign vocabulary trace their origin to English. Loan words, except for those belonging to Sino-Japanese words, are referred to as *gairaigo*.

In addition to many borrowed words, the Japanese lexicon has a large number of onomatopoeic words. The lexicon of onomatopoeic words includes three groups. The first is the conventional mimetic expressions of natural sounds, *wan-wan* 'bow-wow'. The second group of words depicts the external world, such as *yoboyobo* 'wobbly'. The third depicts mental conditions or states, *tikutiku* 'stingingly'.

The *Kojiki* 'Record of Ancient Matters' (A.D. 712), among the earliest written records of the Japanese language, was written in Chinese characters. The *Kojiki* is difficult to interpret because of the uncertainty of the way the Chinese ordering of elements is related to the Japanese method of ordering. Chinese and English have an SVO word order but in Japanese the word order is SOV. For example, *John likes candy* is the word order in Chinese and English as opposed to *John candy likes*, the Japanese word order. The elements in the *Kojiki* may have been read only in the pure Chinese style or they may have been read in the Japanese style by using words that correspond to the written characters and reversing the word ordering to follow the Japanese system.

By the time *Manyoshu* 'Collection of a Myriad Leaves' was completed in A.D. 759, the Japanese had learned to use Chinese characters as phonetic symbols. Thus, a word in Japanese could be written two ways, both using Chinese characters. One used the Chinese word and character, and the other used the semantically equivalent Japanese word and corresponding Chinese characters. The latter Japanese syllabary writings, commonly known as *kana*, have developed as simplified Chinese characters and style. There are two types of *kana*. *Katakana* were originally used in combination with Chinese characters, while *hiragana* were predominantly used by women and were not mixed with characters. Today, however, Chinese characters called *kanji* are used for content words, *hiragana* are used for grammatical function words, and *katakana* are used to write foreign loan words and some onomatopoeic expressions.

Japanese has been linked to almost all of the major families of languages including Altaic, Austronesian, Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, and Dravidian. But there appears to be a lack of evidence relating Japanese to any of these languages. It has been proposed that Ryukyuan, spoken on the island of Okinawa, may be considered a sister language to Japanese, but other scholars consider it a dialect of Japanese. Ainu, spoken on the northern part of Hokkaido and on the island of Sakhalin, is also considered a sister language to Japanese, but there is still not enough evidence on the Japanese-Ainu connection. Korean and Japanese may be related, though not closely (Shibatani, 1987:856).

Several scholars, including Miller (1971, 1980), Street (1962), and Poppe (1965), support the position that Japanese is related to the Altaic family. Although there are various configurations for the subgroupings of Altaic by these scholars, there is a consensus that the Altaic family is composed of Turkic, Mongolian, Tungus, and three isolated languages: Japanese, Korean, and Ainu.

The Japanese language is deeply rooted in a special cultural and social system. Fishman (1969:22) uses the term 'speech community' to designate members of a community who share at least one speech variety along with the norms for its appropriate utilization. The Japanese are often referred to as a homogeneous people and this reference can include the language spoken as the mother tongue of its 122.8 million citizens.

Linguistic minorities in Japan include a very small number of Ainu speakers. However, due to declining numbers of speakers, this language appears to be headed toward language death (Loveday, 1986:2). There are only 15,000 Ainu living in Hokkaido and about 1,500 on Sakhalin Island. There are 570,000 Koreans who are an ethnic minority in Japan. Of these 101,000 were born in Korea and 50,000 received their education at local ethnic schools in Japan. There are also less than 75,000 Chinese from Taiwan and mainland China. There are a small number, less than 6,000, international refugees.

The Japanese language is sometimes called agglutinative. The language is known for its honorific system and postpositions where a particle or word is placed after a word to indicate its relationship to other words in the sentence. Noun classifiers are also prevalent in the language. The phonological system is consonant-vowel with open syllables. The nasal is in final position and there are double consonants because of Japanese having come into contact with Chinese. The Japanese vocabulary contains mostly two or three syllable words but some larger forms have developed due to borrowing from other foreign languages. The Tokyo dialect is used and understood throughout Japan, although several local dialects are used throughout the country.

Although 47% of the Japanese lexicon contains Chinese loan words and its writing system comes from Chinese characters, Japanese and Chinese are not related. Japanese may have its origins in a contact variety because Japanese has some of the same features as Korean, Altaic, Malay o-Polynesian, Tibeto-Burmese, and Dravidian (Loveday, 1986:2).

## 2. HONORIFIC SYSTEM

The honorific system of the Japanese language is unique. Nakane (1974:129) claims that there are three classes of interpersonal communication for Japanese speakers: "(i) those people within one's own group; (ii) those whose own background is fairly well known to the interactant; and (iii) those who are unknown strangers." Nakane (1974:129) goes on to say that: "Japanese behave politely when involved with people of the first or second category, but different with strangers . . . even to the extent that they may be very rude". But Japanese are expected to use the honorific forms when inferiors speak to superiors and when status or age is involved. Nakane describes the Japanese society as so vertically structured that differences of status are always encoded in their linguistic usage. Japanese will refrain from using polite speech and from speaking Japanese to a non-native speaker even though the non-native speaker may be fluent in Japanese.

Shohara (1952:33) points out that "It is not to be assumed that honorific expressions merely indicate social status. On the contrary, the correct usage of honorific terms serves to indicate the respect of the user for the commendable personal qualities and attainments of the person addressed, such as social responsibility, knowledge, culture, etc. It also indicates the cultural status of the speaker."

Honorifics are not only used as markers for inferiority and superiority. Loveday's (1986) study indicates that honorifics are used to mark fictive statuses. He observed:

These fictive statuses may be alluded to for a variety of as yet not fully explored reasons such as to highlight sexual differences (Miller 1967:278; cf 3.2.1), to express formality because of setting constraints (Neustupny 1978:220 and 222) or to create or level social distance, mark the addressee as either belonging in or outside one's group, or stylistic purposes such as sarcasm, raillery and humour (Shinoda 1981), to support face, to seek favour or patronage (Mio 1958), present specific messages such as expressing gratitude, to protect individual space and privacy (Ide 1982), to "decorate" exchanges of business and service or to indicate the "cultural refinement" of the speaker.

Ogino's (1985) study conducted in Tokyo, found a close relationship between the frequency of honorifics and several variables, including women, adults, higher education, and those occupying positions in the professions and those employed as shopkeepers. His study found that honorifics are used mainly as markers of social class.

There are several linguistic terms in Japanese that may be used to refer to persons, including relative/role terms and suffixes. Although Japanese contains several words for 'I' and 'you', these forms are usually not used among college students. College men and women use a nickname, first name, or last name when referring to the second person. The second person pronoun *kimi* 'you' is used by women only when talking with their closest friends and when addressing persons of lower status. However, men may use *kimi* when talking with people they don't know.

Ishikawa's (1981:139) research showed that the Japanese address system includes six categories: "kin terms, first and last names, professional names (e.g. 'teacher'), post-designating terms (e.g. 'section chief'), second person pronouns and fricatives." Because relationships in Japan are on a hierarchical level, Japanese view gender, age, and status as important markers. Thus, pronouns are used with persons of the same status or lower status.

The Japanese use alternate terms when talking about the members of one's family to those outside the family group. These features are an important part of the language that cuts off one's own family group from others. Befu and Norbeck (1958:66-86) studied Japanese kinship and found that several elements affect the choice of alternate terms, including the type of occasion taking place, social status of family members, level of intimacy of speakers, and the forms of authority existing between relatives.

The relationship between language and gender, in the Japanese language, has generated much discussion. In the Heian period (794-1192), the classical literature of that period consists of many sex-based linguistic distinctions. During this time, women in Japan were denied the right



to use Chinese characters and were allowed to use the syllabic system. Thus, women did not have access to the higher, intellectual aspects of written works. Japanese women were given a lower status in society until the end of World War II and the American military occupation of Japan. While the idea was prevalent among the Japanese upper classes prior to World War II, this notion was also passed down to the lower classes who were historically less elitist in their beliefs on the subject. Before the changes brought about by World War II took place, women in Japan, because of their lower status in comparison with men, were expected to show "deference to men of their own as well as higher classes through the use of polite language and honorific forms of address, bowing more deeply than men, walking behind their husbands in public, and in numerous other ways deferring to men" (Pharr, 1976:306).

Today, Japanese women use a more polite form of the language than do men, which has less to do with social status than it does with the expectations of roles played by women in the society. Femininity is just as important as the female's social inferiority. As Lebra (1976:87) states: "To be a woman means to play a woman's role in relation to others. Femininity thus may be consciously or deliberately displayed in external adornment as well as behavior and speech."

### 3. SUMMARY

The Japanese language is deeply rooted in a special cultural and social system. It has an extensive honorific system which encodes the interpersonal communication between Japanese speakers. The Japanese speaker behaves politely when involved with individuals within his own group and quite differently when speaking with strangers, even to the extent of being rude. The Japanese speaker also uses honorific forms when status or age is involved and when speaking to superiors. In addition, honorifics are used to mark fictive statuses for reasons such as to highlight sexual differences, to seek favor or patronage, or to indicate cultural sophistication.

Japanese has been linked to almost all of the major families of languages including Altaic, Austronesian, Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, and Dravidian. But there appears to be a lack of evidence relating to any of these languages. Several scholars, including Miller, Street, and Poppe support the position that Japanese is related to the Altaic family in an isolated language subgrouping including Korean and Ainu.

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