

Japanese honorifics are often associated with Japanese traditional forms of institutional organizations that are based on hierarchy and seniority. In contemporary Japan, institutional restructuring brings about changes in Japanese honorifics from hierarchy-based linguistic forms into more performance-based linguistic forms. In this paper, I illustrate changes of honorification from two directions: change from above (institutional authorities) and change from below (actual practice). I will demonstrate an ideological shift of honorification in various institutions and their prescriptions. I examine a series of unconventional and new honorific usage in the speech of young speakers. I will discuss the changes from above and below are based on the idea of promoting “smooth” communication. (Here, “smooth” is a metalanguage, explicitly used in the guidelines of the National Language Council, meaning successful communication on the basis of mutual respect and considerations towards others and situations.) My argument is that regardless of prescriptions and “changes from above”, speakers’ actual practices, namely “changes from below” indicate innovative ways to use honorifics in a less hierarchical way. Thus, authorities’ linguistic ideologies only partially influence actual speakers’ communicative practices.

A reformulation of the linguistic ideology of Japanese honorification has become a focal point for a broad process of institutional restructuring in contemporary Japan. I show how the shift in the terminology of honorification from *keigo* ‘honorifics’ to *keii-hyougen* ‘respect expressions’ plays out in a series of institutions. I demonstrate that this shift in honorification terminology indexes a more general change in communication, perceived to be necessary for a transformation of institutional organization based on hierarchy to one based on efficiency and performance. Honorifics, like traditional forms of organizations, are imagined as inefficient and undemocratic, whereas ‘respect expressions,’ like new forms of organizations, are imagined as efficient and democratic. In 2001, the National Language Council (*Kokugo Shingikai*) revised the guidelines for communication, in which they emphasized the use of *keii-hyougen* based on reciprocity rather than hierarchy. In business, companies have discouraged employees from using honorific titles, so that they can exchange ideas freely and make decisions quickly. At the level of various institutional authorities, linguistic ideologies of Japanese communication are shifting to the direction of developing a more fluid understanding of honorifics, dropping honorifics, or abolishing honorifics at the expense of efficiency and better human relationships.

In this socio-political context of contemporary Japan, I discuss (mis)conceptions of linguistic ideology of Japanese honorifics. Drawing on examples from actual usage, I show that honorifics can be used as both democratic and undemocratic markers. My data demonstrate that depending on the contexts in which people use them, honorifics signify hierarchy or formality on the one hand, and solidarity on the other. This suggests that as part of the “change from below,” young speakers of Japanese seem to start using honorifics in a very unconventional way, in order to create humor and promote “smooth” communication in their unique ways. While the authorities demonstrated an ideological shift of honorification in Japanese, their linguistic ideologies cannot fully account for actual speakers’ language usage. Actual speakers’ honorific usage is not overdetermined by prescriptions or explicit proposals of the Council and corporations. Speakers especially in younger generations are trying to find efficient, non-undemocratic, and egalitarian ways of using honorifics, independently of “changes from above.” Thus, authorities’ linguistic ideologies only partially represent actual speakers’ communicative practices. Furthermore, viewing honorifics as inherently undemocratic and hierarchical linguistic forms is an oversimplification. In social interaction, speakers use honorifics as part of their linguistic resources that can help them accomplish various communicative goals.