

2.5.1.1 A Brief Description of the Japanese System of Honorifics

The Japanese system of honorifics (*keigo*) integrates morphological, syntactical, and lexical devices. There are two basic types of classification. The less detailed one divides *keigo* into three modes: respectful (*sonkeigo*), humble (*kenjōgo*) and polite (*teineigo*). Generally, **respectful forms** are used to express respect⁷ and indicate deference to a person or the person's group, activities and things. **Humble forms** are used to lower the speaker, including the speaker's in-group members, and thereby pay respect to the hearer indirectly, through showing the speaker's humility. **Polite forms** are neutral with regard to the target of respect, and thus they are used when a conversational situation is formal, and yet does not require the use of honorific or humble forms.

The second, more precise categorization of Japanese honorifics makes clear distinction between addressee, i. e. hearer, and referent. **Referent honorifics** (*sozai keigo*) can be further subdivided into **respectful forms** (*sonkeigo*, see above) and **humble forms** (*kenjōgo*, see above). They are used to show deference toward the person being talked about, which can but does not necessarily have to be the addressee. **Addressee honorifics** (*taisha keigo*) are further subdivided into two subcategories of **polite forms**: *teichōgo* and *teineigo* (see above). In form, *teichōgo* often, but not always, resemble *kenjōgo*, so the speaker has to be constantly aware whether speaking humbly with respect to the referent or just speaking politely about one's own actions. Thus it makes sense to have two separate categories.

There are also so-called *bikago* ('beautification' + 'words'), which are used for making the utterance sound "refined" or "elegant". These are classified either as a third subcategory of referent honorifics (e. g. Okamoto, 2004: 39, based on Minami, 1987) or as a separate category (e. g. Iori et al., 2000: 322). As they are often used without a direct reference to the referent, here they are classified separately.

The following table summarizes the two most common classifications:

⁷ Respect here should be understood in the social sense as acknowledgement of the hearer's or referent's higher position in the particular situation (see p. 23 on discernment).

Figure 2.3

Summary of the categorization of Japanese honorifics (adapted from Iori et al. 2000: 322)

	5 categories		3 categories
Honorifics	Referent honorifics	Respectful forms <i>Sonkeigo</i>	Respectful forms
		Humble forms <i>Kenjōgo</i>	Humble forms
	Addressee honorifics	Polite forms <i>Teichōgo</i>	
		Polite forms <i>Teineigo</i>	
		<i>Bikago</i>	

The following examples (Iori et al., 2000: 314) demonstrate the differences between referent and addressee honorifics:

- 1) (hearer: Mr. Tanaka)
Sensei wa mō o-kaeri ni natta?
Has the teacher returned yet?
- 2) (hearer: Mr. Tanaka)
Sensei wa mō o-kaeri ni narimashita ka?
Has the teacher returned yet?
- 3) (hearer: teacher)
Sensei wa mō o-hiru o meshiagarimashita ka?
Have you (= teacher) had lunch yet?

In example 1, the speaker shows respect towards the teacher (referent) by the use of the respect form *o-kaeri ni naru* 'to return', but speaks informally to Mr. Tanaka (addressee), which is evidenced by the informal ending of the verb *naru* → *natta*. In example 2, the speaker again expresses respect to the referent, but shows respect also to the addressee by the usage of the polite form of the verb *naru* → *narimashita* (*teineigo*). In example 3, the

referent and the addressee are the same person (teacher) and thus both *sonkeigo* (the respectful verb *meshiagaru* 'to eat') and *teineigo* (the ending-*-mashita*) are used.

As demonstrated by the above examples, the Japanese verb has an important role in expressing politeness. Its modification indicates various levels of politeness. An important characteristic of honorific politeness is indirectness, as the verbal formations in the honorific expressions may involve periphrastic constructions, or suffixes identical in form to the passive and causative morphemes, or both.

The honorific and humble variants of some of the most common verbs are lexically completely different, rather than just morphologically altered. The verb *meshiagaru* in example 3 above is the respectful equivalent of the verb *taberu* 'to eat', the humble one being *itadaku*. However, the majority of verbs, instead, make use of morphologically standard ways of forming honorific and humble forms. Typically, the verb *naru* ('to become') or the passive suffix *-rare* are used for the honorific form (see ex. 2 and 3). Both the verb *naru* and the passive *-rare* are normally used in sentences that require agentless constructions in order to impersonalize the expression. The verb *naru* is used to describe an event as if it happened "by itself", without explicit identification of the agent. This impersonalization and non-control are the basic means of expressing deference through distancing. The humble construction, on the other hand, makes use of the verb *suru* ('to do') and the causative suffix *-sase*, both of which explicitly indicate the agent (cf. Tokunaga, 1992). An expression utilizing the causative form sounds humble since it implies that the speaker is going to do the intended action with the hearer's permission.

Some nouns may function as polite forms either morphologically by the addition of prefixes, the most common of which are the prefixes *o-/go-*⁸, or lexically, in that they can be used only politely.

⁸ An example of the honorific prefix *o-*: *tegami* ('a letter') – *o-tegami* ('your letter', 'a superior's letter')
An example of the respectful prefix *ki-* ('respected') and humble prefix *shō-* ('small'): *kaisha* ('a company') – *kisha* ('your company') – *shōsha* ('our company')