Understanding Thai honorifics via Japanese concepts

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Setting the scene

• Frequent observations that Thai has a complex system of honorifics (Shibatani, 1998; Ide, 2005)

• Lack of research specifically addressing Thai honorifics (cf. Iwasaki and Ingkaphirom, 2005; Khanittanan, 2005; Srinarawat, 2005, for instance)

• Application of analytical frameworks used extensively for Japanese honorifics and modes of thinking, to understand Thai honorifics
Two types of honorifics

1. Addressee honorifics
   (addressee-controlled; index of formality and/or social distance)
   - address forms (e.g. sir, madam)
   - particles (e.g. Thai khaʔ vs. kʰráp)
   - verb endings (e.g. Japanese -masu, Korean -sumnī)
   - linguistic systems (e.g. Japanese teinei-go (polite forms))

2. Referent honorifics
   (referent-controlled; index of deference and/or power status)
   - honorary titles (e.g. professor, uncle)
   - pronouns (e.g. French second person singular vous)
   - nouns (e.g. Javanese arta ‘your esteemed house’)
   - linguistic systems (e.g. Japanese sonkei-go (respect forms) and kenjō-go (humble forms))

Hierarchy in Thai society

(Kummer, 1992: 330)
Hierarchy in Thai society (cont’d)
Thai sociolinguistic conventions

“In Thai special weight is put upon operations in the field of socio-pragmatics with a highly differentiated hierarchy of personal relations. The ways of communicating in Thai [...] are, in fact, the means of norm and convention, typical of the language and culture group. [...] In Thai, the communicative partners are constrained by the variables of sex, age, education and profession. It is on the basis of such norms that Thai people will distribute sets of expressive with care” [my emphasis]. (Kummer, 1992: 328)

“In Thai culture, for instance, the traditional polite form of language may include the use of polite particles, nouns, pronouns, address forms, kinship terms, titles, and particular verbs of varying degrees of politeness. These are chosen with respect to the grading of interpersonal factors such as social status, role relationships, age, educational background, and intimacy” [my emphases]. (Srinarawat, 2005: 176)
Data

- Thai subset of Mr O Corpus to data collection (collected audiovisually in February 2012, supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (JSPS))
- 20 informant pairs from universities in the Greater Bangkok area:
  1. 10 student-teacher pairs (- social distance/strangers)
  2. 10 student-student pairs (+ social distance/acquaintances)
- Activities:
  1. task of arranging 15 picture cards into a coherent story
  2. personal narrative on outcome of task 1 (told to data collector)
  3. conversation relating to experience with surprises
Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1 (teacher-student pairs)**
Teachers may use or drop honorifics when speaking to students.

**Hypothesis 2 (teacher-student pairs)**
Students use honorifics appropriate to their subordinate role when talking to teachers.

**Hypothesis 3 (teacher-student pairs)**
Students use honorifics anyway even when talking to a stranger who looks more senior.

**Hypothesis 4 (student-student pairs)**
It is not necessary for fellow students to use/exchange honorifics.

**Hypothesis 5 (general case)**
There is a regularity as to when honorifics are to be used or found.
Conventional use (formal)

Excerpt 1 (T09 (task) 2.23-2.43)

OK let’s see INJ INJ soon you(dim) try see RCL it correct QST
‘OK, let’s see. Hmm. Hmm. Why don’t you try and see if this is the right way?’

2 Student: khâ ʔanni: kʰw: kʰâ:m dâj di: mâj kʰá kʰru:
PCL(pol) this one copula cross able good QST PCL(pol) teacher
‘Yes. Do you think this [picture] can get across, ma’am?’

3 Teacher: [incomp. speech]

4 Student: ?à:w tʰammaj man kʰâ:m dâj soŋ ?an ???
INJ why it cross able two CLS
‘Well, how can both get across?’ [laughter]

this one also able PCL(pol) already also this one already this one copula what PCL
‘This one’s also fine. What is this one doing here?’ [laughter]

6 Teacher: diaw ná
soon PCL
‘Wait.’
Conventional use (formal)

student (L) vs. teacher (R)
Conventional (mock)

Excerpt 2  (T10 (task) 0.03-0.10)

1  Student L:  rian  /rːj/  h₃
   arrange already  PCL(pol)
   ‘Please arrange it then.’

2  Student R:  /ɔː/  h₃
   INJ  PCL(pol)
   ‘Oh, OK.’

3  Student L:  temtʰiː  /lɐːj/  h₃
   fully  PCL  PCL(pol)
   ‘Please do it anyway you like.’
Conventional (mock)

student (L) vs. student (R)
Conventional use (informal)

Excerpt 3  (T10 (task) 1.07-1.10)

1  Student L: ʔawtɛ:caj ʔawtɛ:caj
   self-centered self-centered
   ‘You’re so self-centered.’

2  Student R: ɭɛ́ːw ṁaː ɭɛː ʔanníː ɭɛː kɔː dɛːn klàp
   already come find this one and then walk return
   ‘Then he finds this and then walks back.’

3  Student L: chán māj kʰwcaj naj locik keː
   l(equ+coa) not understand in logic you(equ+coa)
   ‘I don’t understand your logic.’ [very heightened voice]

4  Student R: kɔː kɔp ʔà ɗi jɛŋŋàn ʔɛː nː man pen ḥɛːtkːaːŋ tɔː kan pàw duː di duː ʔanníː di
   then end PCL PCL like that er this it copula event next mutual not look PCL look this one PCL
   ‘Then we’re done. Well, but are these consecutive events? Look. Look at this one.’
Conventional use (informal)

student (L) vs. student (R)
Creative use (zero honorifics)

Excerpt 4  (T15 (task) 1.35-1.48)

1 Teacher: sêt le:w kò: le:w man kò: dr:n klàp di: pà finish PST then PST it then walk return good QST ‘After this’s done, then he walks back. How’s that?’

2 Student: c'âj ???

yes ‘Yes.’

3 Teacher: dr:n klàp ma: le:w paj cr: máj penpajdâj me’ walk return come PST go find stick possible QST ‘He walks back and finds the stick. Is that possible?’

4 Student: dâj ?? man mi:? anní: t'h: man klà:j k'hà:j kan ?? able it have this one RP it similar similar together ‘Yes. This one looks similar [to something else].’

5 Teacher: ?annia ha:’ ?annia jaŋ máj hën ?anní: jim sàdɛ:n wa:’ k'hôt?ò:k this one search this one still not see this one smile show that recall ‘This one means he’s searching. This one means he hasn’t seen it. This one means he’s smiling, showing he can recall something.’

6 Student: c'âj ?? ?anní: hâ: kò:n ?? yes this one search before ‘Yes, this one means he first searches for something.’

7 Teacher: penpajdâj pà? âjnia hâ: le:w ma: cr:? r: possible QST this one search PST come find yeah ‘Is it possible that this one means he’s searched and then found it? Yeah.’
Creative use (zero honorifics)

student (L) vs. teacher (R)
Creative use (status reassignment) (1)

Excerpt 5  (T17 (task) 5.37-5.44)
1  Student: ʔaw māj  ??  *pʰiː:
   get  PCL  older [sister]
   ‘Is that OK, big sister?’
2  Teacher: nācā  chāj  ʔawlá  ʔawlá
   likely  yes  INJ  INJ
   ‘Yes, maybe, maybe.’
3  Student: ʔannī: ʔaːcaːn  ruːː  plāw  kʰá
   this one  lecturer  QST  not  PCL(pol)
   ‘Are you a lecturer?’
4  Teacher: ʔaːcaːn  kʰá
   lecturer  PCL(pol)
   ‘I’m a lecturer’.
5  Student: ʔɔː ʔaːcaːn  kʰá  kʰɔːtʰɔt  duːj  ??  nuːk  waː  pʰiː:  ??
   INJ  lecturer  PCL(pol)  sorry  also  imagine  RP  older [sister]
   ‘Oh, a lecturer! I am sorry. [wai ‘apologetic hand gesture’] I thought you were a senior friend.’
Creative use (status reassignment) (1)

student (L) vs. teacher (R)
Excerpt 6  (T15 (task) 4.14-4.28)

1 Student: ?w: dâ:j má:j ma:
       hmm get stick come
       ‘Hmm. He got the stick.’

          TL this point OK  PCL older [sister] think it alright teacher think it alright
          ‘I think here is OK. I think it is alright. I think it’s alright.’ [chuckles and covers mouth with hand]

3 Student: kɔ: nán kɔ: nâ:teːà?
           so then so maybe
           ‘Er. Then maybe…’
Creative use (status reassignment) (2)

student (L) vs. teacher (R)
Verifying the hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1** (teacher-student pairs)  
Teachers may use or drop honorifics when speaking to students.  
*Confirmed*

**Hypothesis 2** (teacher-student pairs)  
Students use honorifics appropriate to their subordinate role when talking to teachers.  
*Rejected*

**Hypothesis 3** (teacher-student pairs)  
Students use honorifics anyway even when talking to a stranger who looks more senior.  
*Rejected*

**Hypothesis 4** (student-student pairs)  
It is not necessary for fellow students to use/exchange honorifics.  
*Yes, but there are exceptions*

**Hypothesis 5** (general case)  
There is a regularity as to when honorifics are to be used and found.  
*Predictable but inconclusive*
Some characteristics of Thai honorifics

- Mostly lexical alternates or lexical insertion
- No honorific morphemes affixed to verbs and nouns
- Use and non-use of speech acts and other conversational tokens
- Non-verbal communication (e.g. wai, facial expressions, other gestures, etc.)
- Focus on indexicality of speaker-hearer role relationships
- Mixture of styles even in a short conversational exchange that has no change of context
- etc.
Japanese and Thai views of honorifics

**Addressee and referent honorifics**

Japanese: (More or less) clear-cut distinction between both types of honorifics

Thai: No distinction between both types of honorifics in the commoner register. But there are systems similar to referent honorifics, for commoners to use when referring and talking to the royal family or Buddhist monks.

Despite a lack of honorific distinction in commoner interaction, Thais have an awareness of both addressee and referent honorifics; in most cases, an honorific form may index **not only** formality **but also** deference at the same time.
The concept of ‘sense of place’ in Japanese and Thai honorifics

- The extent to which role relationships are indexed and managed (rather than how face is threatened, maintained or enhanced) should serve as an better-suited framework for the analysis of Asian honorifics and politeness.
A dynamic model of ‘senses of place’

Static vs. dynamic ‘senses of place’ (roles)

primary  secondary  tertiary  etc.  etc.
(student) (pseudo-daughter) (younger sister) (admirer) (protectee)

(cf. Okamoto, 1997; Mey, 2001; Cook, 2011)
Students’ (changing) perception of teachers

- Students' perceptions of power status and social distance
  - Power status: +
  - Social distance:
    - Lecturer
    - Junior friend
    - Senior friend

- Other status:
  - Other status superiors
  - Other status inferiors
**Ba theory**

- *Ba* is a semantic space where interactants’ sense of interdependence, closeness, collaboration and achievement of oneness are shared.
- *Ba theory* explains (in broadest terms):
  - how interaction can be successful despite the seemingly ‘illogical’ (especially if seen from Western-based logic), features of communication used and
Four assumptions of *ba* theory

- Inside view
- Dual-mode thinking
- Dynamic model of improvised drama
- Covert communication

(Ide, 2011; Ide and Ueno, 2012)
Creative use of honorifics & ba theory (1)

- Zero honorifics
  - ‘intensified’ ba (Ide, 2011; Ide and Ueno, 2012)

Participants enter into a ‘merging discourse’ by dropping honorifics or not using modalities associated with their conventional roles. Such non-conformity of wakimae occurs as a result of:

1. Participants take **an inside view**, indicating their one-mindedness, closeness and (psychological) non-separability.
2. Participants employ **dual-mode thinking**, indicating that although they are independent individuals in physical terms, they belong to the same sense of place.
3. Participants perform **an improvised drama**. They synchronise their non-use of honorifics by means of several converging devices, which they have not previously explicitly agreed upon.
4. These assumptions are possible through participants’ **covert communication**.
Creative use of honorifics & ba theory (2)

- Status reassignment

  negotiated \textit{ba}

\textbf{Process}

Typically, one of the participants enters into a ‘merging discourse’ by dropping honorifics or not using modalitites associated with his/her conventional role. \textbf{Four \textit{ba} assumptions are in operation.}

The ‘creative’ participant realises his/her non-observance of \textit{wakimae} and self-corrects accordingly.

In spite of this, he/she may re-enter into \textit{ba} later on and even self-correct again. This entire practice shows the extent to which \textit{ba} is being negotiated.
Conclusions

A satisfactory model for the Thai honorific system must take into account:

• a non-reductionist nature of certain categories (i.e. addressee and referent honorifics)
• a complex web of overlapping role relationships
• wisdom based on local/indigenous philosophies (i.e. sense of place, ba theory)
References


_____ (2011). Let the Wind Blow from the East: Using the ‘Ba (Field)’ Theory to Explain How Two Strangers Co-Create a Story. Presidential Lecture, The 12th International Pragmatics Conference, University of Manchester, UK.


Thank you for your attention!