Abstract: In this paper, we revisit the popular assumption that politeness in languages such as Japanese and Korean with a complex honorific system is crucially different from politeness in languages with no comparably rich honorific repertoires, such as Chinese. We propose a bottom–up, contrastive and corpus-based model through which we challenge this binary view. This model combines interaction ritual and speech acts. As a case study, we compare a set of expressions representing lexico-grammatical honorifics in Japanese and Chinese, i.e., in a so-called “honorific-rich” and a “non-honorific-rich” language. Our results show that the group of honorifics studied work in an essentially comparable fashion, hence disproving the above-outlined binary view.

Keywords: binary view on honorifics; Chinese; interaction ritual; Japanese; speech acts

1 Introduction

In this study, we aim to revisit the widespread assumption that honorifics in languages with an extensive honorific system like Japanese and Korean are crucially different from their counterparts in languages which are claimed to lack comparably rich honorific repertoires, such as Chinese. We believe that this binary view is problematic. For instance, as Agha (1998, 2006, 2012) had pointed out, using “honorifics” as a grand category is misleading because there are actually various types of honorifics, including phono-lexical, pronominal and lexico-grammatical types.
Scholars who argued for the “richness” and uniqueness of honorifics in Japanese and Korean usually foregrounded lexico-grammatical honorifics, ignoring for instance the fact that European languages are rich in pronominal honorifics.

In this study, we propose a bottom–up, contrastive and corpus-based model through which we challenge this binary view from a new angle. This model combines interaction ritual and speech acts. As a case study, we examine a comparable set of expressions representing lexico(grammatical) honorifics in Japanese and Chinese—i.e., in a so-called “honorific-rich” and a “non-honorific-rich” language—by considering their speech act-indicating capacities and interactional use. We will demonstrate that these Japanese and Chinese honorifics are definitely comparable.

The structure of this paper is the following. Section 2 provides a review of literature. In Section 3, we present our model and the data of the case study. Section 4 presents the case study, and in Section 5 the paper is concluded.

2 Review of literature

In politeness research, honorifics have gained momentum in early criticisms of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) famous universalistic model, starting with Ide (1989). Ide argued that in languages with highly developed honorific systems politeness strategies become subordinated to pragmatic conventions of deference. This implies that such languages afford little pragmatic freedom for speakers to use politeness strategically—a phenomenon which Ide defined as “discernment”. Ide’s theory influenced many studies on Japanese and Korean politeness, such as Ide et al. (1992), Byon (2004), Hasegawa (2008, 2012), Tamaoka et al. (2010), Kim (2011), Cutrone (2011) and Shih (2020). Along with East Asian pragmatic enquiries, “discernment” has also influenced historical pragmatic research, like Ridealgh (2016), Ridealgh and Jucker (2019), and Jucker (2020). Furthermore, the idea that honorifics are inherently polite has also been present in research on politeness (e.g., Byon 2006), intercultural communication (e.g., Kim et al. 2012), foreign language learning (e.g., Nakane et al. 2014), and artificial intelligence (e.g., Seok et al. 2022). Such research set out from the assumption that certain expressions function as “politeness markers” (see e.g., Peterson and Vaattovaara 2014; Terkourafi 2011; Van Mulken 1996), a notion which was criticised already by House (1989) (see also Kádár and House 2020).

Since the 2000s, Pizziconi (2003, 2011), Fukada and Asato (2004), Haugh (2005), Cook (2011), Shibamoto-Smith (2011), Obana (2017), Obana and Haugh (2021), Okamoto (2021) and others have challenged the notion of “discernment”, arguing that it fails to capture the complex dynamics of politeness in Japanese and Korean. Also, cross-cultural pragmatic research has shown that honorifics per se cannot be used as a criterion for setting Japanese and Korean apart from other languages (e.g., Usami
2006; Brown et al. 2014). It has also been shown that expressing politeness may not be the only, or even the most important, function of honorifics (see Obana and Haugh 2023). In a different train of thought, Kádár (2017, 2023) argued that honorifics are always ritual in Goffman’s (1967) sense, and their use becomes associated with politeness whenever politeness is expressed in a ritual manner.

While criticisms of discernment and so-called “polite honorifics” have triggered a paradigmatic shift in the study of honorifics, in politeness research and broader pragmatics, honorifics have continued to be associated mainly with Japanese and Korean (see Brown 2022). Few scholars have referred to the concept of “honorific-rich” explicitly;¹ however, many researchers still assumed that Japanese and Korean are more relevant for the study of honorifics than e.g., European languages. When we conducted a Google Scholar search of “honorific politeness”,² Japanese and Korean turned out to be heavily overrepresented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number of academic publications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buginese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javanese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiswahili</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from the dominance of Japanese and Korean, nearly all languages in Table 1 are non-European: the only exceptions are English, French and Polish featured in 3 publications only.

¹ See Pizziconi (2011) who used this term in a pejorative sense.
² This search was conducted on 22/05/2023. We excluded studies which discuss honorifics and politeness in a general sense without referring to individual languages.
As noted above, we challenge the view that Japanese and Korean honorifics are somehow “unique”, by contrasting a comparable group of Japanese and Chinese honorific expressions. In Table 1, the third most frequent language is Chinese, which might suggest that scholars have also defined Chinese as an “honorific-rich” language. However, 3 out of 4 studies on Chinese in Table 1 examine Classical Chinese: while Classical Chinese can be clearly defined as a “proto-system” which influenced Japanese and Korean honorifics, modern Chinese is often (mistakenly!) referred to as a language with few honorifics (e.g., Rue and Zhang 2008). We thus believe that comparing Japanese and Chinese provides an example *par excellence* for a contrast between so-called “honorific-rich” and “non-honorific-rich” languages. By so doing, we also contribute to recent contrastive pragmatic research dedicated to the comparative study of Chinese and Japanese/Korean expressions (see e.g., Chen 2023).

The expressions examined in the case study below have received relatively little attention in pragmatics, but see e.g., Kuramochi (2011), Yu et al. (2016), Kavanagh (2017), and Ohashi (2018) who mentioned the Japanese *otsukare*- and *gokurou*-variants. To the best of our knowledge no corpus-based Japanese–Chinese contrastive study of these expressions exists, and so our study fills a knowledge gap.

### 3 Methodology and data

#### 3.1 Our framework

In this study, we compare Japanese and Chinese honorifics by focussing on their speech act indicating functions. While honorifics only represent one category among the cluster of expression types through which speech acts are indicated across linguacultures (Kádár and House 2021), contrasting speech act indicating capacities through a contrastive framework provides an important *tertium comparationis* for comparing honorific groups in Japanese and Chinese.

We first consider why the honorific expressions we wish to investigate are relevant at all. Following House and Kádár (2021), we are interested in honorific clusters which trigger cross-cultural pragmatic issues, such as untranslatability (see House 2023). In the current case study, we proceeded as follows: the first author is an advanced learner of Chinese and Japanese who found that variants of the Japanese expressions *otsukare* (‘to get tired of’) and *gokurou* (‘to labour hard’) and the Chinese expressions *xinku-le* (lit. ‘you laboured hard’) and *feixin-le* (lit. ‘you generously
wasted your effort’) are difficult to translate because they do not have direct equivalents in European languages. Furthermore, from a cultural outsider point of view, these expressions tend to be associated with thanking, even though both Japanese and Chinese have many alternative thanking forms, which raises the question why there is still a need for such expressions.

Once we identify the honorifics to investigate, the second step is to categorise them by using both honorific typologies and interaction ritual theory. As regards the former, our model builds on the seminal work of Agha (1998, 2006, 2012) who distinguished different core types of honorifics. The categorisation of the honorifics studied is then followed by an interaction ritual-based inquiry through which we interconnect honorifics with a politeness-relevant phenomenon. As Kádár argued (see Kádár 2017, 2023), while honorifics only have a casual, albeit conventionalised, relationship with politeness – in a somewhat similar way to the relationship between honorifics and speech acts – they are frequented in ritual interaction where the rights and obligations and related interactional patterns are set.

The expressions considered in the present case study typically represent what Agha defined as *lexico-grammatical*. A clear advantage of using the category “lexico-grammatical” is that it includes both expressions which function as honorifics as they are (lexical honorifics) and others which gain different honorific uses through grammatical changes. Clearly, Chinese expressions are honorifics in the lexical sense because Chinese does not afford morphosyntactic changes, unlike Japanese. Importantly, belonging to the same register only implies that the expressions studied are comparable.

Along with positioning the expressions studied within this typological category, it is also useful to refer to what Agha defined as *metapragmatic* register, i.e., consider how native speakers define them. Japanese grammars refer to expressions like *gokurou* as *negiraigo (kotoba)* 労い語(言葉), which literally means ‘language through which the other’s hard work is acknowledged’, and which is a smaller category of Japanese *keigo* 敬語 (‘respect language’).3 In descriptions of Chinese, expressions like *xinku* and *feixin* are referred to as *bianlao-daoxie* 偏劳道谢 (‘praising/laudatory words for someone’s hard work’). As Chinese etiquette treatises such as Fan (2000), Li (2007), Zhang (2009), and Ning (2011) pointed out, ‘praising/laudatory words for someone’s hard work’ is one of the “grand” Chinese honorific categories.

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3 See e.g., https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/bunkashinkai/kokugo/hokoku/pdf/keigo_tosin.pdf. Regarding sociolinguistic research on categorisations of *otsukare*- and *gokurou*-variants see e.g., Toda (2004).
We tested the comparability of these Japanese and Chinese expressions, without speculating about the outcomes of our subsequent corpus-based research, simply by consulting their definitions in etymological dictionaries like the Japanese *Koujien* and the Chinese *Ciyuan*. The following Tables 2 and 3 provide a historical overview of the expressions studied:

**Table 2:** The development of *otsukare*- and *gokuro*-variants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical era</th>
<th><em>otsukare</em>-variants</th>
<th><em>gokuro</em>-variants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late Edo Period (before 1868)</td>
<td>Used by countryside people to express camaraderie and acknowledge the hard work of the other at the end of a working day.</td>
<td>Used by lower-ranking interactants towards higher-ranking ones to acknowledge their hard work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meiji Period (1868–1912) and pre-WWII period</td>
<td>Becoming a general form to acknowledge someone’s hard work.</td>
<td>Becoming a military register, used by higher-ranking soldiers towards their subordinates to acknowledge their hard work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-WWII period</td>
<td></td>
<td>Used outside the army context in multiple functions. All these functions stem from the original meaning of acknowledging someone’s hard work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3:** The development of *xinku* and *feixin*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical era</th>
<th><em>xinku</em>-variants</th>
<th><em>feixin</em>-variants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republic of China (1911–1949)</td>
<td>Defined by etiquette manuals as <em>weiwenyu</em> ('comforting language'), frequent as an expression through which one acknowledges the other’s hard work.</td>
<td>Defined by etiquette manuals as <em>ganxieyu</em> ('gratitude language'), which is to be used to say thanks for someone’s hard work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s–1980s</td>
<td><em>Xinku</em> gains popularity as a military expression through which a higher-ranking person acknowledges the other’s hard work. Most famously <em>xinku</em> was used in this function in a public speech by Deng Xiaoping.</td>
<td>Largely absent from daily language use until the 1980s when certain traditional honorific expressions were revived.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-1980s</td>
<td>Used beyond the army context in multiple functions. All these functions stem from the original meaning of acknowledging someone’s hard work.</td>
<td>Used in multiple functions. All these functions stem from the original meaning of acknowledging someone’s hard work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Importantly, this historical definition reflects on the literal meaning of *xinku* in the Republic of China period, and presently the expressions studied are in the bianlao-daxie category.*
As Tables 2 and 3 show, these four expressions have many similar uses and both the gokurou- and xinku-variants have an interestingly similar association with military language. There is also a noteworthy parallel between the two pairs of expressions: gokurou and feixin are rarely used and are pragmatically ambiguous in comparison with otsukare and xinku. For example, various Japanese informants noted that they disprefer using gokurou in daily interaction because this expression has a “bossy” overtone, while Chinese informants argued that feixin is a “problematic” expression because by using it the speaker unduly “pressurises” the addressee.

Following this typological step, we considered the default ritual role of these honorific expressions. Following Kádár (2017), we interconnected the conventionalised use of these expressions with the interactional ritual practice of acknowledging someone’s hard work – here we set out from the assumption that such a ritual practice must be important enough in the respective linguacultures to be enacted through a set of honorifics. We did not venture beyond this assumption, e.g., we avoided cultural overgeneralisations, such as that Japanese and Chinese are so-called “work-cultures”. In the spirit of interaction ritual research, we also assumed that – as with many other honorifics – expressing politeness is simply the default function of the honorific groups under investigation. Because of this, in the present research we do not assume that the honorific use of an expression can only entail respect, following the take of scholars such as Cook (2011) and Okamoto (2021). This view is particularly important in the study of the two expression groups because both the Japanese and Chinese expressions can be used in non-respect contexts as well, similar to other honorifics.

In a final step, we conduct a speech act-based investigation of the expressions studied in comparable corpora. Our system of speech acts provides an interactionally-based alternative for various speech act systems starting from the seminal works of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) (see among others Geis 1995; Roberts 2018; Schiffrin 2005). More specifically, our system operates with a replicable set of speech act categories and a broader interpretive framework through which illocution and interaction can be fruitfully combined. The following Figure 1 presents our speech act typology:
The reason why this typology is useful for a contrastive study of how honorifics indicate speech acts is that it is finite. Ever since Austin and Searle, the idea that speech act categories need to be finite has been present in pragmatics (see e.g., Habermas 1979; Kissine 2013; Vanderveken 1990), with Levinson (2017) revisiting this issue more recently. The reason why finiteness is potentially controversial is that with the passing of time one may “identify” new speech acts. In contrast, we operate with a limited set of simple and replicable illocutions and consider how they are related to one another. As part of this system, we devote particular attention to how the units of illocution and interaction can be distinguished from one another, by arguing that many more complex phenomena which are categorised by some as illocutions actually represent interactional categories. A typical example is refusal, which in our sense an interactional move representing a case when the relationship between two speech acts is dispreferred. For instance, the speech act Invite (“Would you like to come to my party tonight?”) may either be “satisfied” (“Would love to thanks”), or not (“Can’t, I’m afraid”). In our system, the second responsive speech act is not a “refusal”, which is an umbrella term – rather, it is a Resolve in illocutionary terms. Of course, refusal is not necessarily realised by the speech act Resolve: for example, “I am really sorry, I have a commitment” is an Apologise which can fulfil the same refusing role as a Resolve here.

**Figure 1:** Our typology of speech acts, based on Edmondson and House (1981), Edmondson et al. (2023) and House and Kádár (2023).
In our case study, we used the above system as follows. Based on the historical origin and ritual use of the expression-groups studied, we assumed that they by default indicate the speech act Thanks. However, in examining uses of these expressions in our corpora, we did not start from the assumption that they only indicate this speech act – rather, we considered what House and Kádár (2021) defined as “modified” speech-indicating uses, i.e., cases when an expression indicates a speech act that differs from the basic speech act it indicates by default, without however failing to indicate the basic speech act. The following Figure 2 shows this binary speech act-indicating function:

In accordance with our bottom-up approach, we also considered whether there are “altered” speech act-indicating uses in our data, i.e., instances when the expressions studied completely lose their association with the speech act they indicate by default. As part of studying speech act-indication, we also considered polite versus ironic uses of an expression.

Figure 3 overviews our tripartite model presented in this section:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: Identifying honorifics and considering their relevance for research.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Categorising the honorifics by using honorific typologies and interaction ritual theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Corpus-based and speech act anchored research through which patterns of using the honorifics are identified.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: The binary modified speech act-indicating function of conventionalised expressions (adapted from House and Kádár 2021).

Figure 3: Our analytic model.
In this study we have used interrater coding, involving two groups of native-speaking informants: 5 speakers of Japanese and another group of 5 Chinese speakers.

3.2 Data

We used the following comparable corpora:
- 100 Japanese and 100 Chinese sampled interactions drawn from YouTube and Youku, each featuring two times 50 occurrences of the expressions studied.
- 100 Japanese and 100 Chinese randomly sampled interactions from the Chuu-nagon Corpus (https://clrd.ninjal.ac.jp/en/tool.html#03) and the Balanced Chinese Corpus (http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/), each featuring two times 50 occurrences of the expressions studied.

As part of our corpus-based contrastive research, we had to resolve the methodological challenge posed by morpho-syntactic differences between Japanese and Chinese. Japanese has many honorific suffixes, which vary according to the relationship between the interactants and other contextual factors. For instance, otsukaresama-de-gozaimasu お疲れ様でございます, otsukaresama-desu お疲れ様です, otsukare-san-desu お疲れさんです, etc. are all otsukare-variants with different stylistic meanings. Chinese has no such a morphosyntactic affordance. However, Chinese has a syntactic flexibility which one cannot find in Japanese: for instance, both ni-xinku-le 你辛苦了 (you-xinku-particle) and xinku-ni-le 辛苦你了 (xinku-you-particle) are in use, with different stylistic meanings. Furthermore, since pronouns are more prevalent in Chinese than in Japanese, in the Chinese data we could witness frequent variation between the T and V pronouns ni and nin. To resolve such linguistic differences, we focused on the “core” expressions otsukare, gokurou, xinku and feixin as we randomly sampled our data, by zeroing in on their speech act-indicating functions. As part of our data sampling, we excluded metapragmatic mentions of the expressions studied.

4 Analysis

Here we present the results of our analysis of the four expressions under investigation, followed by a contrastive examination.
4.1 Otsukare-variants

Table 4 shows the speech act-indicating uses of otsukare-variants.

Table 4: Speech act-indicating uses of otsukare-variants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech act-indicating function of otsukare-variants</th>
<th>Number of speech act-indicating uses (n out of 100 examples)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modified Greet + Thanks</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Default Thanks</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified Leave-Take + Thanks</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified Congratulate + Thanks</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altered Sympathise</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.1 Modified Greet + Thanks-indicating uses

The following examples illustrate modified Greet-indicating uses of otsukare-variants, i.e., cases when these expressions indicate the speech act Greet without losing their default Thanks-indicating function:

(1) Setting: Meeting between alumni members.
   1. Alumni 1: どうもお疲れさまです。
   2. Alumni 2: お疲れさまです。
   3. Alumni 3: お疲れさまでーす、どうする？
   1. Alumni 1: Doumo (lit. ‘very’) Otsukaresamadesu.
   3. Alumni 3 Otsukaresamadesu: ‘What shall we do?’

The three participants in example (1) reciprocate otsukaresama to realise the speech act Greet. What we have on hand here is a typical case of modified speech act-indication: while otsukaresama expresses its default Thanks-indicating function to some degree, by implying that the other took the trouble to attend the meeting, the modified Greet indication is more salient than this default one. Here, otsukaresamadesu loses some of its literary meaning as it is part of a ritual exchange where it has an important social meaning as the interactants ritually reciprocate this form to acknowledge an act which does not in fact involve real “hard work”.
Here *otsukare*-variants are again used in a modified way: in turn 2, N realises the speech act *Tell I am late* and, following an apologetic laughter, he utters *otsukaresamadesu* primarily to Greet the other, while this form also indicates the speech act Thanks for the others who already “endured hardship” by having to wait. In response, H reciprocates the Greet with the *otsukare*-variant *otsukaressu*, which again primarily indicates the speech act Greet, while at the same time keeping its default Thanks-indicating function as it implies a symbolic acknowledgement that N also travelled to the spot of the interview. Once again, *otsukare*-variants are used in a ritual way, with their Thanks function being mainly symbolic.

As example (2) shows, *otsukare*-variants often gain a modified Greet-indicating use when someone joins an interaction late. Example (3) also illustrates this use:

(3) Setting: Two PhD students talk to each other and a colleague of them joins the interaction.
1. Student 1: 中学校ときはね。
2. Student 2: ふーん。
3. Student 1: はやってたんだよ。なんか近くのゲーセンにさ。お疲れさまで
す。
4. Student 3: お疲れさまです。
5. Student 2: 懐かしい。
1. Student 1: ‘When I was in junior high school.’
2. Student 2: ‘Eh.’
3. Student 1: ‘I was doing it. At a nearby game arcade.’ *Otsukaresamadesu.*
4. Student 3: *Otsukaresamadesu.*
5. Student 2: ‘How nostalgic!’
In turn 3, while talking to his colleague the first student notices that a colleague entered and he utters *otsukaresamadesu* as a form of Greet, which is reciprocated by the newcomer in turn 4.

### 4.1.2 Default Thanks-indicating uses

Example (4) is a case when an *otsukare*-variant only fulfils its default Thanks-indicating function:

(4) Setting: Conversation between family members during a Japanese new year celebration.

1. Wife:  ‘I’m going to tuck in before the New Year arrives.’
2. Husband:  ‘Again for this year.’
3. Child:  ‘Let’s have a hot dog.’
4. Wife:  ‘Did you eat the rice balls?’

In turn 2, the husband utters *otsukaresamadeshita* to ritually express his gratitude to the family.

Example (5) also illustrates such a default Thanks-indicating use of *otsukare*-variants as in the previous cases:

(5) Setting: Interaction between a beautician and a customer in a beauty salon.

1. Beautician:  ‘That’s how I lift it. I think it would be better if you combed your hair like this.’
2. Customer:  ‘Yes, thank you.’
3. Beautician:  ‘Well, then,* otsukaresamadeshita.*’

As example (5) shows, *otsukare*-variants are often used by service providers to their customers as a routine form to indicate the speech act Thanks.
4.1.3 Modified Leave-Take + Thanks-indicating uses

*Otsukare*-variants also indicate the speech act Leave-Take, without losing their default Thanks-indicating function, as example (6) shows:

(6) Setting: A female civil servant is leaving the office and she says goodbye to her higher-ranking male colleague:

1. Female employee: おつかれさまでした。
2. Male employee: あ、でも。 
1. Female employee: Otsukaresamadeshita.

Here, the female interactant announces that she takes her leave in turn 1 by uttering *otsukaresamadeshita* to her senior colleague. Considering that this brief interaction takes place at the end of a working day, *otsukaresamadeshita* does not entirely lose its default Thanks-indicating function – i.e., it still implies a “thank you” for the other’s hard work – but this function is mainly ritual. For cultural-outsiders, it may be surprising that the female employee does not use *sayonara* or another formal Leave-Take form. However, for most speakers of Japanese it is exactly the underlying ritual Thanks-indicating meaning of *otsukaresamadeshita* which makes it preferable to a more formal Leave-Take in the face-threatening situation where the higher-ranking recipient remains in the office.

Example (7) also illustrates a modified Leave-Take + Thanks-indicating use of an *otsukare*-variant, this time in a less face-threatening situation:

(7) Setting: Elderly colleagues meet in a restaurant to take a photo together:

1. Colleague 1: そうです。ありそうだよね。まあいいやと思って。
2. Colleague 2: んー。 …
5. Colleague 1: よし。じゃあ帰りますか。
6. Colleague 2: はい。
7. Colleague 1: お疲れさまっす。
1. Colleague 1: ‘Yep, yep. It seems to be okay. I think it’s fine.’
2. Colleague 2: ‘Uh ah.’
5. Colleague 1: ‘Shall we go back then?’
7. Colleague 1: *Otsukaresama-ssu.*
Following a speech act Suggest in turn 5, Colleague 1 in turn 7 utters *otsukaresama-ssu* to ritually acknowledge their “joint labour”, and more importantly to indicate Leave-Take.

### 4.1.4 Modified Congratulate + Thanks-indicating uses

Another modified speech act-indicating use of *otsukare*-variants includes cases when these forms primarily indicate the speech act Congratulate, without losing their Thanks-indicating value. Example (8) illustrates such a use:

(8) **Setting:** Several colleagues in a company make cacophonic toasts in a restaurant.

1. Colleague 1: 乾杯しますか。
2. Colleague 2: あっ乾杯しようか。
3. Colleague 3: うんうん。先に乾杯しようか。
4. Colleague 4: ね、先にね。
5. Colleague 5: はい。お疲れさまです!
6. Colleague 6: お疲れさまです。
7. Colleague 7: イエー!。
8. Colleague 8: お疲れさまです。
9. Colleague 9: お疲れさまです！今年もよろしくお願いします！

1. Colleague 1: ‘Would you like to make a toast?’
2. Colleague 2: ‘Let’s have a toast.’
3. Colleague 3: ‘Yes! Let’s have a toast first.’
4. Colleague 4: ‘Yup. Let’s have it first.’
5. Colleague 5: ‘Yes.’ *Otsukaresamadesu!*
6. Colleague 6: *Otsukaresama!*
7. Colleague 7: ‘Yay!’
8. Colleague 8: *Otsukaresamadesu!*
9. Colleague 9: *Otsukaresamadesu!‘I look forward to having such a wonderful time this year, too!’

This mimetic Modified Congratulate + Thanks-indicating use of *otsukare*-variants transpire to conventionally occur in parties.
4.1.5 Altered Sympathise-indicating uses

We also identified a few altered speech act-indicating cases where otsukare-variants lose their default Thanks-indicating role, exclusively indicating Sympathise. Example (9) illustrates such a case:

(9) Setting: A chat between highschool student about a class assignment.

1. Student 1: LGBT。うん。うちは偏見みたいな。
2. Student 2: うーん。
3. Student 3: うーん。
4. Student 1: xxは人種差別でyyが。
5. Student 2: うーん。
6. Student 3: うん。
7. Student 1: おう痴漢冤罪だったの。
8. Student 2: お疲れさまです。

Here, Student 1 complains to her friends about a difficult assignment in class. In turn 8, one of her friends uses the otsukare-variant otsukaresamadesu to realise Sympathise.

4.2 Gokurou-variants

Table 5 overviews the various speech act-indicating uses of gokurou-variants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech act-indicating functions of gokurou-variants</th>
<th>Number of speech act-indicating uses (n out of 100 examples)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Default Thanks</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified Sympathise + Thanks and altered Sympathise</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified Leave-Take + Thanks</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4.2.1 Default Thanks-indicating uses

As Table 5 shows, gokou-variants most frequently indicate the speech act Thanks. The following examples illustrate this use:

(10) Setting: An interaction between a guest and a waiter in an elegant restaurant.

1. Guest: 去年はびっくりした。
2. Waiter: へー。
3. Guest: そうゆう世界があって。
4. Waiter: すいません、失礼いたします。そっちもお下げしましょう…
5. Guest: はいありがとうございます。
6. Waiter: 失礼いたします。
7. Guest: ご苦労さまね。
1. Guest: ‘Last year was a shock.’
2. Waiter ‘Ah.’
3. Guest: ‘It was such a time.’
4. Waiter: ‘Excuse me, sorry, but may I take away the plate? …’
5. Guest: ‘Yes, thanks.’
6. Waiter: ‘Excuse me’ [for taking the plate].

This interaction occurs as the guest keeps on relentlessly talking to the waiter who appears to be keen on taking his plate without offending him. The guest finally allows the waiter to move on and realises a Thanks by uttering the gokou-variant gokusamane.

(11) Setting: An employee of a company is praised by the manager in a meeting, with other colleagues watching the scene.

1. Manager: Xさんはあの休みの日に電話しても、すぐツーコールかスリーコール出てくるから。
2. Praised employee: うん裏められたのかな。
3. Manager: うん。
4. Other colleagues: その顔。あの顔。(laughter)うーん。
5. Manager: はいご苦労さん。
6. Another colleague: あの顔。
7. Praised employee: ありがとう。
1. Manager: ‘Mr. X responds phone calls even during his leave days – he would even answer two or three calls.’
2. Praised employee: ‘Hum, was it a compliment?’
3. Manager: ‘Uhu.’
4. Other colleagues: ‘Look at that face. That face.’ (laughter). ‘Hah.’
6. Another colleague: ‘That face.’
7. Praised employee: ‘Thank you.’
In turn 2, the praised employee pretends that he is surprised as a form of in-group humour, implying that he has no private life. His reaction triggers laughter from his colleagues, and in turn 5 the manager confirms the praise by uttering gokurousan, clearly indicating the speech act Thanks (for the employee’s hard work).

### 4.2.2 Modified Sympathise + Thanks-indicating uses and altered Sympathise-indicating uses

As Table 5 shows, gokurou-variants are also relatively frequently used in a modified way, to simultaneously indicate the speech acts Sympathise and Thanks, often by superiors towards their inferiors. Example (12) illustrates this use of gokurou-variants:

(12) Setting: A YouTube video featuring a Japanese mafia (so-called Yakuza) person who visits the house of his boss after being released from prison.

1. Boss’ wife: ゆせたなぁ、ちょっと。しんどかったやろ。こんにちは。
2. Yakuza: はい。はい。
3. Boss’ wife: 長い間、ご苦労はんでした。
4. Yakuza: ありがとうございます。

1. Boss’ wife: ‘You got slim, a bit. It must have been tough for you.’ Gokurousan ‘Get back to normal and keep on doing your great work.’
2. Yakuza: ‘Yes, yes.’ (bowing repeatedly)

(The wife takes out food she ritually cooked for the subordinate of her husband.)

4. Yakuza: ‘Thank you very much.’ (bowing)

This type of ritual interaction can be frequently observed in our data – in such cases, gokurou-variants are used as a ritual Sympathise, without losing their Thanks-indicating function. In ritual contexts like the one featured in example (12), gokurou-variants may be preferred over simpler Thanks-indicating expressions like arigatou exactly due to their underlying Sympathise-indicating function – it may not be a coincidence that it is the subordinate gang member who utters the Thanks-form arigatou-gozaimasu in turn 4.

Along with such ritual uses, gokurou-variants are also used in an altered speech act-indicating way to exclusively indicate Sympathise in an ironic way, as in example (13):
(13) Setting: Interaction between two male colleagues in a company.

1. Colleague 1: 昨夜はちょっとプロダクション関係と始末をつけなきゃいけない件があって、飲んじまったんで。
2. Colleague 2: ほぉ、そりゃ御苦労さんなこったね。

1. Colleague 1: ‘Last night there was a production-related issue I had to settle, so I had to drink.’
2. Colleague 2: ‘Woo, that’s’ gokurosan.

Here Colleague 2 uses gokurosan in a clearly ironic manner.

4.2.3 Modified Leave-Take + Thanks-indicating uses

Gokouro-variants can indicate the speech act Leave-Take without losing their Thanks-indicating function. Extract (14), which is the continuation of (6) above, illustrates this use:

(14) Setting: A lower-ranking female civil servant wishes to leave the office:

1. Female employee: おつかれさまでした。
2. Male employee: あ、でも。
3. Female employee: ごくろうさまでした。
4. Male employee: うん。
1. Female employee: Otsukaresamadeshita.
3. Female employee: Gokurousamadeshita.

After uttering otsukaresamadeshita, the female interactant also utters gokurousamadeshita to simultaneously announce her leave and indicate Thanks to her colleague. Example (15) also illustrates such a use of a gokouro-variant:
Setting: Interaction between business partners at the door of a restaurant after a work lunch.

1. Partner 1: 'Shall we go?'
2. Partner 2: 'Well, thank you for the meal.'
3. Partner 1: 'Ah, gokurousan.'
4. Partner 2: 'Well then, as we discussed, please.'
5. Partner 1: 'Yes, please come and visit us on the thirteenth.'

As part of attempting to close the interaction, the host who aims to sell a product to his business partner utters gokurousan in turn 3, in order to indicate that the interaction is about to end. This gokuru-variant not only indicates a Leave-take but also ritually acknowledges the other’s time and effort to come to the restaurant.

### 4.3 Xinku-variants

Table 6 overviews the various speech act-indicating uses of xinku-variants in our Chinese data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech act-indicating functions of xinku-variants</th>
<th>Number of speech act-indicating uses (n out of 100 examples)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Default Thanks</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified Greet + Thanks</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified Request + Thanks</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.3.1 Default Thanks-indicating uses

Example (16) illustrates a case when xinku-le fulfils its default Thanks-indicating function: In turn 3, the student first utters the common Chinese thanking form xiexie 谢谢 and then utters xinku-le to realise the speech act Thanks. The most likely reason why xinku-le follows xiexie is that through this second expression the student can also respectfully acknowledge the “hard work” that training in the gym involves for the academic.
Setting: An academic and a student talk are chatting in a gym.

1. Student: 我平时也经常练瑜伽喔。
2. Academic: 好! 很好! 这么丰盛!
3. Student: 谢谢教授! 辛苦了教授!

1. Student: ‘I also often practice yoga.’
2. Academic: ‘Good! Great! That’s marvellous!’

Example (17) illustrates another case in which xinku-le is used in a ritual way, in order to acknowledge the recipients’ hard work: In turn 2, one of the guests utters zhe shi yuanfen 这是缘分 (‘Destiny united you’), and in turn 3 the groom responds with xinku-le to realise Thanks and ritually acknowledge the “hard work” of all those present in the party. “Hard work” can either refer to the effort of family and friends who helped the groom and bride to come together or their contribution to the engagement party.

(17) Setting: An engagement party

1. Groom: 大家今天能坐在这里，吃我们两个人的订婚酒。
2. Guest: 这是缘分!
3. Groom: 大家都辛苦了!
4. Bride: 雪莲先干为敬! (Empties the cup)
5. Groom: 你慢点。
6. Bride: 呛死了!
7. Groom: 吃点菜。
1. Groom: ‘It’s great that we are together today, celebrating our engagement with a meal.’
2. Guest: ‘Destiny united you!’
3. Groom: ‘Everyone all’ xinku-le!
4. Bride: ‘Let me empty a cup first!’ (Empties the cup)
5. Groom: ‘Slow, take care.’
6. Bride: ‘Woo, it’s killing me!’
7. Groom: ‘Eat something on it.’
4.3.2 Modified Greet + Thanks-indicating uses

*Xinku* can also indicate the speech act Greet, without losing its Thanks-indicating capacity. The following examples illustrate this use: In both cases, *xinku-le* indicates both the speech act Greet and the default Thanks. The use of this form is of particular interest in example (19) where one of the hosts first utters the simple Greet form *zaoshang-hao* addressed to the viewers of the TV programme, and then *xinku-le* addressed to the two guests. This dual use shows the difference between simple greets and the modified Greet + Thanks-indicating use of *xinku-le*: by Greeting the professors with *xinku-le* the host also ritually acknowledges their “hard work” for accepting his invitation to participate in the programme.

(18) Setting: An actor is greeted by his team member after he leaves the stage:

1. Staff member: 'Wow, Weishao', *xinku-le, xinku-le!* ‘You were acting great. Come, come, come, come quick! It’s awesome that you are in this movie, it will sell like hell!’
2. Actor: ‘You guys are the ones who made the good shots.’

(19) Setting: A TV show where the hosts interview two university professors.

1. Zhan Jiang: ‘Hello, everyone! Welcome to the discussion!’
2. Gao Bo: ‘Good morning! Professors, you’ *xinku-le*.

4.3.3 Modified Request + Thanks-indicating uses

Example (20) represents the relatively infrequent case in our Chinese data where *xinku-le* simultaneously indicates the speech acts Request and Thanks: In turn 4, the manager’s *xinku-le* not only indicates the default Thanks, but also simultaneously realises a Request. Here *xinku-le* refers to a future act: since Thanks is a non-future-related speech act by default (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), it is clear that a future-related use of thanking involves a sense of pressure on the recipient to deliver the goods about which Thanks is to be expressed.
Setting: Interaction in a company.

1. Vice manager: 發完成接口程序的解決方案, 不可以有任何疏漏。
2. Manager: 好! 那我想知道 你们有信心吗?
3. Employees (in echo): 有!
4. Manager: 好!大家辛苦了。現在是凌晨四点, 我们还有五个小时的时间,请大家抓紧。

1. Vice manager: ‘Let’s find a solution to complete the interface program. There must be no mistakes.’
2. Manager: ‘Good! So, are you confident?’
3. Employees (in echo): ‘Yes!’
4. Manager: ‘Good! Everyone’ xinku-le. ‘It’s 4am. We have 5 hours. Please hurry.’

4.4 Feixin

Table 7 overviews the various speech act-indicating uses of feixin-variants in our Chinese data:

Table 7: Speech act-indicating uses of feixin-variants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech act-indicating functions of feixin-variants</th>
<th>Number of speech act-indicating uses (n out of 100 examples)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Default Thanks</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified Request + Thanks</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4.1 Default Thanks-indicating uses

Example (21) illustrates a case when a feixin-variant fulfils its default Thanks-indicating function: In turn 2, the speaker uses the feixin-variant rang … feixin-le to indicate the speech act Thanks. This form may be preferred over pragmatically “heavy” thanking forms such as ganxie 感谢 because feixin – even more than xinku – is associated with the “hard work” of the other.

(21) Setting: Interaction in company management.

1. Colleague 1: 为您这个案子，我们局子里的兄弟，可没少费力啊！忙了几天几夜！
2. Colleague 2: 是的，是的，让老总们费心了。
1. Colleague 1: ‘We’ve been working very hard on this case for you! They have been busy for a few days and nights!’
2. Manager 2: ‘Absolutely, absolutely, I made you and other managers’ feixin-le.'
Example (22) also shows such a Thanks-indicating use of a *feixin*-variant: Here the second speaker first utters the simple Thank-form *xiexie* and then the *feixin*-variant *feixin-le*, in order to acknowledge the extra work that helping him may cost the other.

(22) Setting: A person asks his friend to help him find out information regarding a programme at the university to which he wishes to transfer.

1. Friend1: 可以帮你问问，因为我就是这个学校的研究生。
2. Friend2: 我是教育，经济与管理专业，教育学相关专业都是可以调剂的，谢谢你，费心了！

1. Friend1: ‘I can help you to ask because I graduated at that school.’
2. Friend2: ‘I have background in education, economics and management, the education related majors can transfer. I would like to say thank you,’ *feixin-le*.

### 4.4.2 Modified Request + Thanks-indicating uses

The following examples illustrate cases when *feixin*-variants are used regarding a future-related event, i.e., they simultaneously indicate Thanks and Request:

(23) Setting: Interaction between colleagues.

1. Colleague A: 新搬来几位南方人，我看不像搞传销的，我再观察一段吧。
2. Colleague B: 好，吕姐你看多费心了。
1. Colleague A: ‘A couple of new southerners have moved in. They don’t seem to be pyramid schemers. I’ll keep an eye on them for a while.’
2. Colleague B: ‘Great, Elder Sister Lü, you’ *duo-feixin-le*.

(24) Setting: A teacher talking to a friend.

1. Teacher: 临走时，他爸爸将几盒茶叶和一公斤月饼硬塞给我，“孩子调皮不听话，费心了。”我断然拒绝了。
1. Teacher: ‘Before leaving, his father wanted to give me a few boxes of tea and a kilogram of moon cakes, saying “My child is naughty and disobedient, *feixin-le*. ” I flatly refused.’

Example (24) is of particular interest: here the father of a child wished to bribe the speaker, by first offering gifts, then denigrating his child with the negatively valanced speech act Opine, and finally uttering a *feixin*-variant. *Feixin* here does not simply indicate Thanks but, more importantly, the speech act Request – this implied meaning is demonstrated by the fact that the other refuses the implied Request.
4.5 Comparison between the Japanese and Chinese corpora

Our study of the Japanese and Chinese expression-clusters has pointed to various pragmatic similarities:

– Both the Japanese and Chinese expression-groups afford modified speech act-indication, so they cannot simply be defined as “thanking expressions”.

– All the four expressions studied can co-occur with “simpler” Thanks-indicating expressions like arigatou in Japanese and xiexie in Chinese. This tendency points to the added pragmatic meaning of these expressions as forms for ritually acknowledging the other’s hard work beyond what one could achieve with an “ordinary” thank you.

– By default, all the expressions are frequented in ritual scenarios. Due to this ritual use, they often indicate politeness, but realizing politeness is certainly not their only function, as we could see in ironic uses of gokurou-variants. Furthermore, as example (24) shows, the use of such honorifics – in particular gokurou and feixin – can also trigger offence.

– Our study has shown that the Japanese and Chinese expression-groups examined operate in an interesting parallel: the otsukare-variants and xinku-variants afford more diverse modified speech act uses than the gokurou- and feixin-variants. This may relate to the fact that speakers of Japanese and Chinese often find gokurou- and feixin-variants “awkward” to use. We can therefore argue that in Japanese and Chinese (and perhaps other East Asian languages) there is a comparable set of honorifics, which are worth studying and which may not have contrastive equivalents in “Western” linguacultures. This outcome should, of course, not be interpreted in the context of the infamous “East/West dichotomy”!

– As concerns the binary distinction of “honorific-rich” languages such as Japanese and “non-honorific-rich” languages like Chinese, the comparative analysis of our data has shown that this distinction simply cannot be upheld.

5 Conclusions

We have challenged the binary notion that the pragmatic features of expressions in Japanese, which is “rich” in honorifics, are different from the features of honorifics in Chinese, which lacks this “richness”. This binary view continues to influence politeness research, in particular with reference to Japanese and Korean. We have contributed to previous criticisms of this binary view by showing that there is a noteworthy group of honorifics which works in a comparable fashion in Japanese and Chinese. This finding may be replicable for other comparable honorific groups in these languages. Such groups could be identified in different ways:
Following the present paper’s line of research, it would be relevant to compare other expression groups indicating different speech acts (e.g., *arigatou* ありがとう and *doumo arigatou* どうもありがとう in Japanese versus *xiexie* 谢谢 and *ganxie* 感谢 in Chinese), indicating the speech act Thanks by default;

It would also be relevant to identify comparable honorific groups according to sociolinguistic parameters, such as gender (e.g., *ojyousan* お嬢さん and *ojyousama* お嬢様 in Japanese versus *xiaomeinü* 小美女 ‘little beautiful girl’ and *qianjin* 千金 lit. ‘thousand gold’ in Chinese, all referring to the recipient’s daughter in different relationships); and

It would also be relevant to identify honorific groups which are relevant in certain interactional situations (e.g., *kashikomarimashita* かしこまりました in Japanese versus *zunming* 遵命 in Chinese, indicating the receipt of a Request realised by a higher-ranking interactant to a lower ranking one).

We have proposed a tripartite framework through which one can study the pragmatic use of honorifics through the lens of speech acts both quantitatively and qualitatively. This model builds on the seminal work of Agha (1998, 2006, 2012), interaction ritual theory (Kádár 2017, 2023) and the finite and interactional typology of speech acts we outlined in Edmondson and House (1981), Edmondson et al. (2023), House and Kádár (2023). The model enabled us to tease out pragmatic similarities between honorifics in the languages compared and various of their politeness-relevant uses.

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