

Revisiting the Binary View of Honorifics in Politeness Research

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In the present paper, I revisit the popular assumption that languages like Japanese and Korean are ‘rich’ in honorifics, while others such as Chinese and European languages lack this ‘richness’. This binary view has long been present in politeness research, often coinciding with the assumption that politeness in languages with a complex honorific system is crucially different from politeness in languages with no comparably rich honorific repertoires. I 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, I 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.