

# Acquisition of Japanese Honorific Expressions by Native Chinese Speakers with Low, Middle and High Japanese Abilities

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## 1. Introduction

Since the Japanese language has systematic honorific expressions, it is almost impossible to carry out a conversation without their use (Nishida, 1987; Kikuchi, 1997). Unlike Japanese, Chinese lacks systematic honorific expressions (Ho, 1999). Thus, once one takes the position of mother-tongue effects upon the second language, it is expected that native Chinese speakers learning the Japanese language face difficulties acquiring honorific expressions in Japanese.

Japanese honorific expressions are generally classified into three types: exalted, humble, and polite (Kikuchi, 1997; Minami, 1987; Oishi, 1975; Tsujimura, 1967). To illustrate this, we took as an example the non-honorific expression meaning ‘The head of the department did me a favor by visiting the president at his home, *Butyoo-ga watasi-no kawarini syatyoo-no zitaku-o hoomonsite kureta*. This example was further modified to show respect to the listener without any consideration towards either ‘the head of the department’ or ‘the president’ as in *Butyoo-ga watasi-no kawarini syatyoo-no zitaku-o hoomonsite kuremasita*. This sentence expresses respect to the listener by

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**Table 1** Examples of Japanese Honorific Expressions

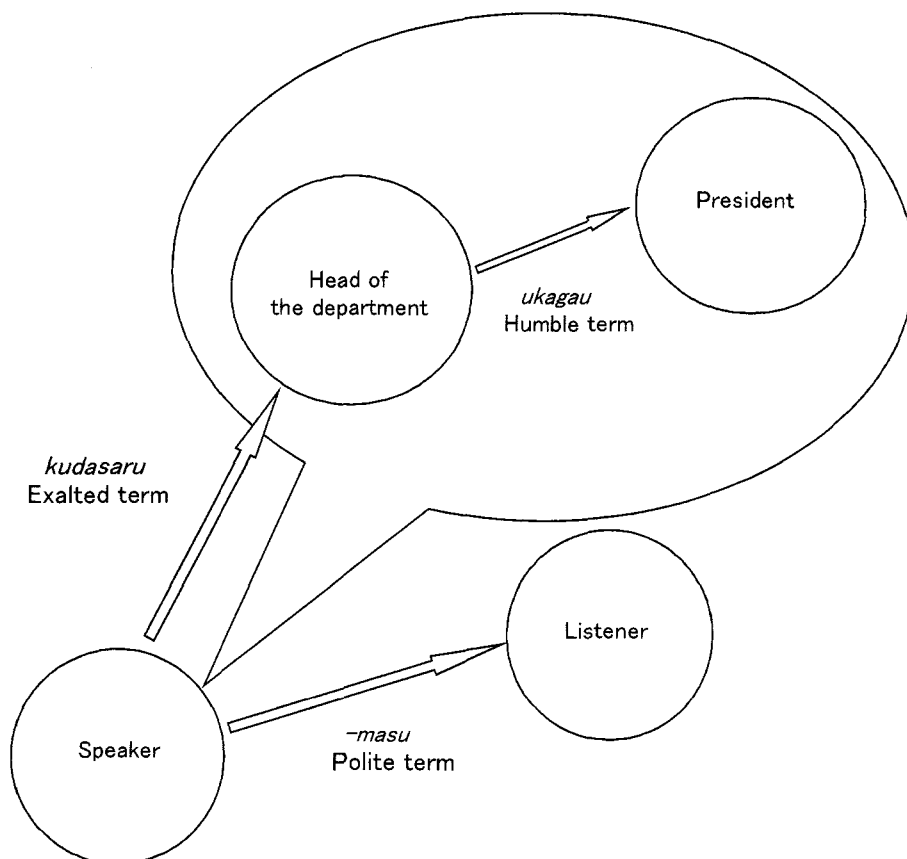
Non-honorific expression	<i>Butyoo-ga watasi-no kawarini syatyoo-no zitaku-o hoomonsite kureta.</i> The head of the department did me a favor by visiting the president at his home.
with polite terms	<i>Butyoo-ga watasi-no kawarini syatyoo-no zitaku-o hoomonsite kure <u>masita</u>.</i> The head of the department did me a favor by visiting the president at his home.
with both exalted and polite terms	<i>Butyoo-ga watasi-no kawarini syatyoo-no zitaku-o hoomonsite <u>kudasai</u> masita.</i> The head of the department did me a favor by visiting the president at his home.
with exalted, humble and polite terms	<i>Butyoo-ga watasi-no kawarini syatyoo-no zitaku-e <u>ukagatte</u> <u>kudasai</u> masita.</i> The head of the department did me a favor by visiting the president at his home.

*Note:* Underlined parts in the sentences are honorific terms.

using an auxiliary verb *masu* as indicated by the underlined part of the sentence. In addition to being polite to the listener, when one wishes to show respect to the head of the department, the verb *kureru* can be changed to the exalted verb *kudasaru*. The sentence would then become *Butyoo-ga watasi-no kawarini syatyoo-no zitaku-o hoomonsite kudasai masita*. Furthermore, as shown in Table 1, if one wishes to express respect to the president by lowering the status of the head of the department in the sentence, using a humble term *ukagau*, one could say *Butyoo-ga watasi-no kawarini syatyoo-no zitaku-e ukagatte kudasai masita*.

All human relations related to polite expressions are summarized in Figure 1 (taken from Miyaoka & Tamaoka, 2001). The arrowheads in the figure indicate the directions of politeness. Thus, the speaker shows respect directly to the listener by using the polite term *masu*, and directly to the head of the department by using the exalted term *kudasaru*, while indirectly to the president in the sentence by humbling the head of the department with the humble term *ukagau*. As such, honorific expressions in Japanese are very complicated since the three types of modified honorific expressions are used together in accordance with the relationship between the speaker, the listener and the person(s) mentioned. Understanding all these situations and related expressions requires a sound understanding of Japanese human relations.

In contrast, Chinese lacks the use of systematic honorific expressions. Ho (1999) reported that modern Chinese had lost a majority of its honorific expressions by the middle of the twentieth century. In Chinese, honorific expressions are formed by one's choice of words. For example, a Japanese standard sentence with a polite term meaning 'I will wait for you here' *Koko-de*



**Figure 1** Diagram of the honorific expression from Fig. 1 with exalted, humble and polite terms (taken from Miyaoka & Tamaoka, 2001, p. 210)

*anata-o matyi masu* can be modified to form an honorific expression with a humble term (plus a polite term) as in *Koko-de anata-o omatyi simasu*. The same standard expression in Chinese, *wo3 zai4 zhe4 li3 deng3 ni3*, can be modified to *wo3 zai4 zhe4 li3 deng3 nin2*, to form an equivalent of Japanese honorific expression. This Chinese expression only altered its second person pronoun from *ni3* to *nin2*. As such, there is a clear difference between Japanese and Chinese honorific expressions: Japanese honorific expressions often require an additional auxiliary verb and/or replacement verb, whereas Chinese can achieve the equivalent expression simply by altering a pronoun.

Given this contrast, it was assumed that the lack of honorific expressions among native Chinese speakers would result in some difficulties in acquiring

Japanese honorific expressions. Judging from the fact that the Korean language makes use of systematic honorific expressions, it was assumed that compared with Korean native speakers Chinese native speakers might have more difficulties in acquiring Japanese honorific expressions. However in the case of very advanced students the opposite result was found. There was no significant difference between the scores of the honorific expression test of Chinese native speakers and Korean native speakers once they reached a very advanced level of Japanese efficiency (Miyaoaka & Tamaoka, 2002). If it is true that native Chinese speakers with an advanced level of Japanese efficiency are able to acquire the knowledge of Japanese honorific expressions as much as Korean native speakers, then the question arises as to how native Chinese speakers acquire these expressions. To illustrate the acquiring pattern, the present study tested a variety of honorific expressions to three groups of native Chinese speakers with low, middle and high Japanese ability.

## 2. Experiment

### 2.1. Selection of Participants

The participants of the present study consisted of 119 native Chinese speakers (82 females and 37 males). The overall average age was 23 years and 3 months, ranging from 17 years and 4 months to 39 years and 11 months. Korean Chinese who spoke the Korean language as a first language as well as the Chinese language were not included. All participants spoke Chinese as the first language. The average length of time learning Japanese was 3 years and 7 months with a wide range of difference from 7 months to 18 years and 6 months.

The Japanese ability test, which was administered to the 119 native Chinese speakers consisted of 50 questions; 20 concerning particles, 20 concerning verbs, adjectives, and the adjectival nominal and 10 concerning the use of adverbs. In this test, the participants were asked to write one Hiragana in the blank space indicated by ( ) in a sentence. For example, in the question sentence of *Tori-no yooni sora* ( ) *tonde mitai* (I want to try flying in the sky like a bird), a particle *o* is requested to write in the blank space. Regarding sentences concerning verbs, *Watasi wa syoorai isya-ni na* ( ) *itai* (I want to be a doctor in the future)

was indicated. In this sentence, *ri* as a part of conjugational form of verb *naru* (become) is requested.

This test takes approximately 15 minutes. Out of a maximum score of 50 points the average score on the Japanese ability test for 119 participants was 38.08 with a standard deviation of 8.47. Based on the test scores three Japanese efficiency groups were selected. The high Japanese efficiency group was one standard deviation above the mean (i.e., higher than 46.55) while the low Japanese efficiency group was one standard deviation below the mean (i.e., lower than 29.61). The middle group was selected from plus and minus 2 from the mean (i.e., from 36.08 to 40.08). According to these criteria, 54 participants were selected; 19 for low, 18 for middle, and 17 for high. The average scores on the Japanese ability test of each group was 23.47 points (SD = 4.87) for the low group, 37.83 points (SD = 1.47) for the middle group and 48.24 points (SD = 0.97) for the high group. The overall average on the Japanese ability test of the 54 participants was 36.06 points (SD = 10.70). The present study used these three groups to compare their understanding of honorific expressions.

## 2.2 Participants

Based on the selection procedure explained above 54 participants were selected from 119 native Chinese speakers. There were 19 participants (13 females and 6 males) in the low Japanese efficiency group, 18 participants (15 females and 3 males) in the middle group, and 17 participants (12 females and 5 males) in the high group. The average age of each group was 22 years 0 months for the low group, 23 years and 0 months for the middle group, and 23 years and 1 month for the high group. The average length of Japanese studies was 2 years and 2 months for the low group, 4 years and 4 months for the middle group, and 5 years and 1 month for the high group.

## 2.3. Honorific Expression Test

As explained in the introduction to this paper, there are three different types of honorific expressions: exalted, humble and polite. The present study did not focus on polite terms since they are usually found in honorific expressions whether exalted or humble. Sixty incorrect sentences, including honorific

terms, were used for stimulus items — 36 with exalted terms and 24 with humble terms. The number of sentences was not equal with regards to those having exalted terms and those containing humble terms because exalted terms are found in a wider variety of honorific expressions than humble terms. Twenty correct sentences were also included as dummy items. Thus, participants were presented with 80 sentences at random on paper. Participants were required to correct the errors in the sentences. Honorific expressions were made exalted by adding an exalted auxiliary verb of *-reru*, *-rareru*, *o-ninaru* or by replacing existing verbs with honorific verbs such as *irassaru* for *iru* meaning ‘to be’ and *mesiagaru* for *taberu* meaning ‘to eat’. Honorific expressions were made humble by adding the humble auxiliary verb of *o-suru* or by using humble verbs such as *moosiageru* for *iu* meaning ‘to say/tell’.

## 2.4. Procedure

The 80 stimulus items chosen included both correct and incorrect sentences. The stimulus items were indicated with an underline. Participants were asked to correct the stimulus items after identifying the incorrect items within the sentences. In the case that these items were judged to be incorrect, participants were required to correct the stimulus items. In the present study, the method of error correction was used to ensure the reliability of the results. Participants were permitted to complete the task at their own pace. In addition, all words used in the sentences were easily understood and frequently used, so all participants in the present study would not have any difficulty understanding them. People referred to in the sentences were the participant, the participant’s father, Prof. Yamada and/or Prof. Sato. In the sentences, the participant talked to Professor Yamada or to Professor Sato, for whom honorific expressions were expected to be used. When the subject in the sentence referred to his/her own father, honorific expressions were not expected to be used.

As shown in Table 2, sentences with exalted and humble terms were classified into three types according to the change required to make them correct: (1) grammatical changes, (2) honorific terms referring to oneself and

**Table 2** Examples of incorrect sentences in the present study

Category of incorrect usage	Object of politeness	Number of sentences	Listener	Examples of incorrect sentences
Grammatical changes made to produce exalted terms	2nd person	6	Prof. Yamada	<i>Yamada sensei, eki -made takusii-ni onorareninarimasu-ka</i> Mr. Yamada, will you go to the station by taxi ?
	3rd person	6	Prof. Sato	<i>Yamada sensei-wa eki-made oarukareninarimasu</i> Mr. Yamada will walk to the station.
* Exalted terms used for oneself/family members	1st person	6	Prof. Yamada	<i>Watasi-wa ki noo sanjikan hon-o oyomininarimasita</i> I read a book for three hours yesterday.
	3rd person	6	Prof. Yamada	<i>Watasi-no titi-wa kuruma-o kau koto-o okimeninarimasita</i> My father decided to buy a car.
Exalted terms used for others	2nd person	6	Prof. Yamada	<i>Yamada sensei, kesa koohii-o nomimasita-ka</i> Mr. Yamada, did you drink coffee this morning?
	3rd person	6	Prof. Sato	<i>Sono syasi n-wa yamda sensei-ga torimasita</i> Mr. Yamada took that picture.
Grammatical changes made to produce humble terms	2nd person	4	Prof. Yamada	<i>Watasi-wa kinoo yamadasurei-kara sono hon-o itadakimoosimasita</i> I was given that book by Prof. Yamada yesterday.
	3rd person	4	Prof. Yamada	<i>Watasi-no titi-wa satoosensei-kara hon-o itadakaremasita</i> My father was given a book by Prof. Sato.
* Humble terms used for oneself/family members	1st person	4	Prof. Yamada	<i>Yamada sensei-wa ki noo watasi-ni denwa-o okakesimasi ta-ka</i> Prof. Yamada, did you telephone me yesterday?
	3rd person	4	Prof. Yamada	<i>Satoo sensei-wa kinoo watasi-no titi-ni hon-o sasiagetasoodesu</i> Prof. Sato gave a book to my father yesterday.
Humble terms used for others	2nd person	4	Prof. Yamada	<i>Kinoo-wa oisii keeki-o moraimasite arigatoogozaimasita</i> Thank you for giving me such a delicious cake yesterday.
	3rd person	4	Prof. Yamada	<i>Watasi-no titi-wa satoosensei-ni tegami-o dasimasita</i> My father sent a letter to Prof. Sato.
Total		60		

Note 1: Underlined parts in the sentences are incorrect.

Note 2: The category of exalted terms used for oneself/family members marked by an “\*” is never used in Japanese.

family members, and (3) honorific terms referring to others. The first group was created to examine the acquisition of honorific expressions related to grammatical rules. The second group was created to examine the acquisition of the rule that exalted terms cannot be used for the first person in any case or for family members when one talks to others. The third group was used to examine the acquisition of appropriate usage of honorific terms in reference to others (apart from family members).

Each group consisted of two ‘sub-groups’ according to who the object of politeness was — the speaker/listener or the subject in the sentence. For example, the sentence *Yamada sensei, eki-made takusii-ni onorareninarimasu-ka* meaning ‘Prof. Yamada, will you go to the station by taxi?’ shows the object of politeness as being the listener. In this same category, a sentence *Yamada sensei-wa eki-made oarukareninarimasu* meaning ‘Prof. Yamada will walk to the station’ shows the object of politeness as being the person (subject) in the sentence. These two types of sentences show correct understanding of human relations but are incorrect in their grammatical structure (underlined parts). In the category related to expressions concerning oneself and family members the sentence *Watasi-wa kinoo sanzikan hon-o oyomininarimasita* meaning ‘I read a book for three hours yesterday’ shows the object of politeness as being the speaker of the sentence. In the sentence, *Watasi-no titi-wa kuruma-o kau koto-o okimeninarimasita* meaning ‘My father decided to buy a car’, the object of politeness is the person (subject) in the sentence. The underlined parts of these sentences are grammatically correct; however, they are incorrect according to the rule that states that exalted expressions cannot be used to refer to the speaker or the speaker’s family members. As for the category of expressions containing exalted terms referring to others, an example of the object of politeness being the listener is a sentence such as *Yamada sensei, kesa koohii-o nomimasita-ka* meaning ‘Prof. Yamada, did you have coffee this morning?’ An example of the object of politeness being the person in the sentence is the sentence *Sono sasin-wa Yamada sensei-ga torimasita* meaning ‘That picture was taken by Prof. Yamada’. These two types of sentences are inappropriate from the viewpoint of being polite, since the types of verbs chosen (underlined parts) are not exalted. In such situations, Prof. Yamada should be

referred to by using exalted terms. Grammatically speaking, however, these sentences are correct. Incorrect sentences using humble terms were also created in the same way as shown in Table. 2.

## 2.5. Materials and Scoring

Scoring ranged from 0 to 2 points according to how well the stimulus items were corrected. When participants could correct the stimulus items perfectly, the highest score of 2 points was awarded. When the stimulus items were partially corrected, one point was given. Participants received the score of zero points when they were unable to identify or correct the incorrect items. We calculated only the incorrect items because all the correct items were dummy items. The descriptions on the correct items were ignored.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Analysis for Scores on the Exalted Terms (Sonkei-go) Test

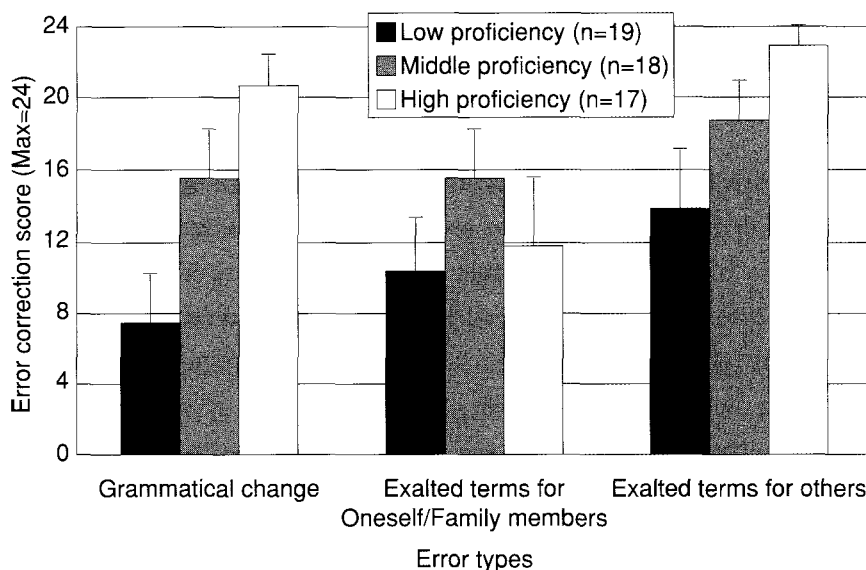
The means of the scores and the standard deviations for the exalted terms test are shown in Table 3 and Figure 2. A 3 (Japanese ability; high, middle and low)  $\times$  3 (error type; grammatical changes, exalted terms for oneself/family members and exalted terms used for others)  $\times$  2 (object of politeness; the first/second person and the third person) analysis of variance (ANOVA) repeating the last two variables was performed on the scores of the exalted terms test. The results indicated a significant main effect for the between-subject variable of Japanese ability [ $F(2,51)=24.99, p<.001$ ], suggesting that the higher the Japanese efficiency, the better the participants acquire expressions of exalted terms ( $M=9.24$  for high,  $M=8.29$  for middle, and  $M=5.22$  for low). In addition, There was also a significant main effect for the within-subject variable of error types [ $F(2,102)=32.01, p<.001$ ]. Since the difficulty of verbs required to correct mistakes were matched across three error types, three conditions were compared using orthogonal contrasts. The results showed that these three error types differed from each other, in that native Chinese speakers had the most difficulty dealing with exalted terms pertaining to oneself/family members ( $M=6.26$ ), less difficulty with grammatical change ( $M=7.28$ ), and the least difficulty when dealing with the exalted terms for others ( $M=9.21$ ). The

**Table 3** Mean scores for the exalted terms test

Japanese language proficiency	Number of Participants	Grammatical change		Exalted terms for Oneself/Family members		Exalted terms for others	
		1st/2nd	3rd	1st/2nd	3rd	1st/2nd	3rd
Low	19	4.05 (2.76)	3.37 (2.79)	6.00 (2.67)	4.26 (3.53)	7.21 (3.60)	6.42 (3.36)
Middle	18	8.00 (2.57)	7.56 (2.89)	7.83 (2.60)	7.61 (2.77)	9.11 (2.40)	9.61 (2.06)
High	17	10.59 (1.54)	10.12 (1.93)	6.24 (3.13)	5.59 (4.29)	11.35 (1.17)	11.53 (1.18)

Note1: Maximum score is 12 points in each category.

Note2: Figures in parentheses are the standard deviations.



**Figure 2** Mean error correction scores of the high, middle and low Japanese proficiencies for the exalted terms test

between-subject variable of the object of politeness [ $F(1,51) = 6.50, p < .05$ ] showed significant main effects. The sentences in the object of politeness to third person ( $M = 7.34$ ) were harder to correct than those to the first/second person ( $M = 7.82$ ).

There was a significant correlation between Japanese efficiency and error types [ $F(4,102) = 11.97, p < .001$ ]. Other correlations were not significant. Thus, the Japanese efficiency levels were compared in each condition of error

types by multiple comparisons. Concerning the grammatical change, the results showed significant differences among low ( $M = 7.42$ ), middle ( $M = 15.56$ ) and high efficiency groups ( $M = 20.71$ ) with the maximum score for this category being 24 points. The acquisition of exalted terms developed according to the knowledge of grammar rules. As for exalted terms for oneself/family members, there was only a significant difference between low ( $M = 10.26$ ) and middle groups ( $M = 15.44$ ). However, there was no significant difference between low ( $M = 10.26$ ) and high ( $M = 11.83$ ), and between middle ( $M = 15.44$ ) and high ( $M = 11.83$ ). This result showed that the acquisition of exalted terms for oneself/family members does not advance according to Japanese efficiency. Regarding exalted terms for others, there were significant differences among the low ( $M = 13.63$ ), middle ( $M = 18.72$ ) and high groups ( $M = 22.88$ ). This correlation shows that the acquisition of exalted terms is developed in accordance with the level of Japanese language ability.

### **3.2. Analysis for Scores on the Humble Terms (Kenjoo-go) Test**

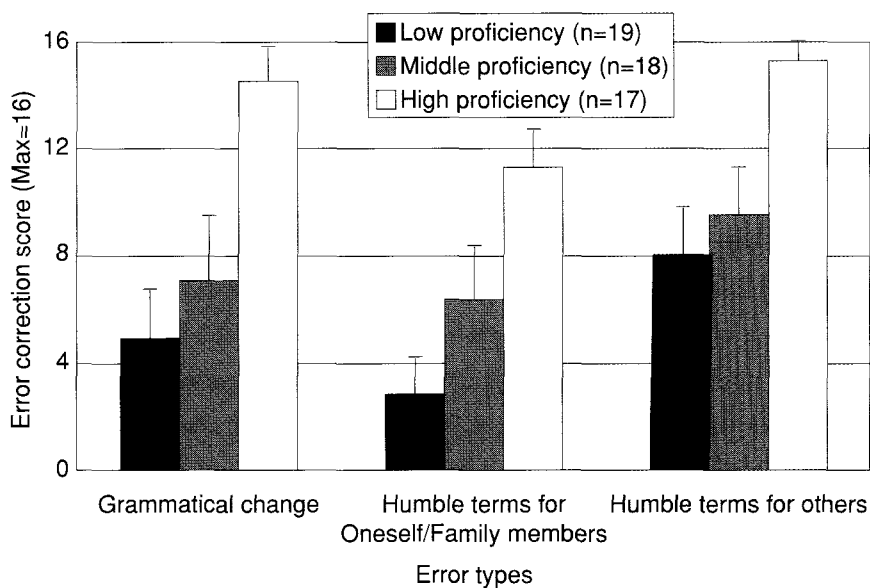
The means of the scores and the standard deviations for the humble terms test are shown in Table 4 and Figure 3. Likewise, a 3 (Japanese efficiency; high, middle and low)  $\times$  3 (error type; grammatical changes, humble terms for oneself/family members and humble terms used for others)  $\times$  2 (object of politeness; the first/second person and the third person) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the scores of the humble terms test. The results indicated a significant main effect for the between-subject variable of Japanese efficiency [ $F(2,51) = 69.65, p < .001$ ], suggesting the higher the Japanese efficiency, the better expressions of humble terms are acquired ( $M = 6.83$  for high,  $M = 3.82$  for middle, and  $M = 2.61$  for low). In addition, there was also a significant main effect for the within-subject variable of error types [ $F(2,102) = 37.30, p < .001$ ]. Since the difficulty of verbs required to correct mistakes were matched across three error types, three conditions were compared using orthogonal contrasts. The results showed that these three error types differed from each other, indicating that native Chinese speakers had the most difficulty dealing with humble terms pertaining to oneself/family members ( $M = 3.40$ ), lesser difficulty with grammatical change ( $M = 4.41$ ) and

**Table 4** Mean scores for the humble terms test

Japanese language proficiency	Number of Participants	Grammatical change		Humble terms for Oneself/Family members		Humble terms for others	
		1st/2nd	3rd	1st/2nd	3rd	1st/2nd	3rd
Low	19	2.37 (1.80)	2.58 (1.80)	2.05 (1.75)	0.68 (1.11)	4.42 (1.98)	3.53 (1.61)
Middle	18	3.78 (2.46)	3.28 (2.37)	3.56 (1.92)	2.83 (1.98)	5.22 (1.77)	4.22 (1.80)
High	17	7.41 (1.18)	7.06 (1.39)	6.59 (1.37)	4.65 (2.06)	7.94 (0.24)	7.29 (1.21)

Note 1: Maximum score is 8 points in each category.

Note 2: Figures in parentheses are the standard deviations.

**Figure 3** Mean error correction scores of the high, middle and low Japanese proficiencies for the humble terms test

the least difficulty dealing with humble terms for others ( $M = 5.44$ ). The between-subject variable of the object of politeness [ $F(1,51) = 36.39, p < .001$ ] showed significant main effects. The sentences in the object of politeness to third person ( $M = 4.01$ ) were more difficult to correct than those to the first/second person ( $M = 4.82$ ).

There was a significant interaction between error types and the object of politeness [ $F(2,102) = 5.03, p < .01$ ]. Other interactions were not significant.

Since there was no interaction concerning Japanese efficiency, the pattern of the acquisition of humble terms was the same among the three groups; high, middle and low. However, since there was a main effect for the within-subject variable of error types, the Japanese efficiency levels were compared in each condition of error types by multiple comparisons to investigate the difference of the acquisition by the level of Japanese efficiency. Concerning grammatical change, there were significant differences between low ( $M = 4.95$ ; the maximum score of this category was 16 points) and high ( $M = 14.47$ ) and between middle ( $M = 7.06$ ) and high. However, there was no significant difference between low and middle. As for the humble terms for oneself/family members, there were significant differences among low ( $M = 2.74$ ), middle ( $M = 6.39$ ), and high ( $M = 11.24$ ). Regarding exalted terms for others, there was a significant difference between low ( $M = 7.95$ ) and high ( $M = 15.24$ ), and between middle ( $M = 9.44$ ) and high. There was no significant difference between low and middle.

#### **4. General Discussion**

The results indicated that as native Chinese speakers become more proficient in Japanese the acquisition level of Japanese honorific expressions also improves. In the present study three groups with low, middle and high Japanese ability displayed different patterns of honorific expression acquisition concerning the exalted and humble terms respectively

Concerning the exalted terms, the differences in the correction scores between low and middle were larger than those between middle and high in the case of the error types. Also, there was no difference between middle and high in the exalted terms for oneself/family members. These results form the basis for two suggestions. First, the acquisition of exalted terms progressed especially in the level from low to middle. In other words, apart from the exalted terms concerning oneself/family members, these terms are not difficult for the learners with low level Japanese efficiency. Second, the exalted terms for oneself/family members are difficult even for the Japanese learners at the high efficiency level. This result is congruent with an earlier study of Miyaoka and Tamaoka (2001) for Chinese native speakers with a very advanced Japanese language ability. These authors found that the exalted terms for

oneself/family members were more difficult than those of the exalted terms for others. In a later study, Miyaoka and Tamaoka (2002) also indicate a similar tendency in the samples of native Chinese speakers that were pair-matched (i.e., matched with age, gender and Japanese ability) with native Korean speakers. In fact, even native Japanese speakers have some personal differences in terms of talking strategies to family members. In standard Japanese, to use exalted terms for family members as the third person in the presence of others is impolite because the family members are raised and consequently the listener as the second person is made lower. For example, a standard Japanese sentence *Syujin-mo kondo-no ryokoo-o tanosimi-ni site irassaimas*, meaning 'My husband is also looking forward to this trip.' is incorrect because the exalted term (underlined) is used for the action of family members as the third person. In addition, in standard Japanese exalted terms have the function of creating distance mentally as well as they raise the status of the person who is referred to in exalted terms. Therefore, to use exalted terms for one's family members implies a sense of estrangement for the intimate person (Bunkacho, 1996). On the other hand, in certain Japanese dialects such as the Kansai, Kyushu, Nagano dialects, etc. it is grammatically correct to use exalted terms for family members in the third person (Bunkacho, 1996). For instance, a sentence in the Kansai dialect *Syujin-mo kondo-no ryokoo-o tanosimi-ni site harimas* which has the same meaning of the standard Japanese sentence mentioned above is considered correct (Bunkacho, 1996). This is because the use of exalted terms of this dialect has a sense of intimacy and politeness rather than estrangement. Furthermore, concerning the use of exalted terms, the politeness levels of these dialects are not as high as standard Japanese (Bunkacho, 1996).

In this way, the usage of exalted terms for family members includes some variations and anomalies even in Japanese. This fact suggests the function of exalted terms for family members is quite complex. In addition, from the viewpoint of functionality exalted terms used for family members are different from those used for others. Therefore, exalted terms for family members must be difficult to acquire for Chinese regardless of Japanese efficiency level.

In the humble terms test, there were no differences between native Chinese

speakers with the low and middle Japanese language proficiency levels in the scores of the grammatical change and the humble terms for the others. Chinese speakers between the low and middle language level did not differ in the acquisition of humble terms at a relatively low level. This result indicates that the usage of humble terms is difficult for native Chinese speakers with low and middle Japanese level. When using humble expressions, which Backhouse (1994) called ‘object-honorific forms’, the person to be respected exists as the object of sentences. For example, in the sentence of *watasi-wa sensei-ni hon-o sasiageru* meaning ‘I will give a teacher a book’, the subject of a humble verb *sasiageru* is ‘I’, but the person to be respected is ‘a teacher’. In this case, the subject of the sentence is different from the person to be respected in the sentence. On the contrary, a subject and a person to be respected are the same in the case of an exalted verb (e.g., *irassaru* ‘to go’, *goran’ninaru* ‘to see’ and *mesiagaru* ‘to eat or to drink’). Due to the grammatical and human-relational complexity involved in the expression of humble terms, their use cannot be fully mastered by native Chinese speakers until they reach an advanced level of Japanese language proficiency.

### Note

In this paper, including references, an alphabetic description of Japanese names followed the commonly used Hepburn style. As the Hepburn style does not distinguish between long vowels and short vowels, for example, the proper name of ‘Bunkacho’ is pronounced phonemically /bunkatyoR/ with a long vowel at the end, this paper has used the spelling of ‘Bunkacho’, not ‘Bunkachoo’. However, to represent precise sounds, Japanese titles of research papers which include long vowels are shown by repeating the same vowels twice, such as ‘oo’.

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