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What Metaphors do in Japanese Polite Expressions A Theory of Honorific Principles

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Politeness may be characterized as a mere concept residing in our brain with no particular iconic representations of any sort. To express it, then, interlocutors have no alternative but to rely on symbols or more specifically metaphors: linguistic forms (e.g. 'please,' 'sir,' 'excuse me but') and non-linguistic forms of all kinds including body language, such as kowtow in the Forbidden City, formal salutes of Boy Scouts, the hat-tip on the streets of London, gun salutes, the half mast rituals in the US armed forces and the like.

Japanese speakers rely on rich words and idioms from lexicon, as English speakers do, but they also rely on grammatically encoded politeness expressions (often referred to as 'honorifics'). The Japanese honorifics, notoriously complex, have been under vigorous scrutiny and been revealed as having three distinct spheres where honorifics operate. To date, however, Japanese scholars have been confined in the taxonomic realm and have failed to tap into the metaphoric nature of the honorific expression.

In this report, as a radical departure, I argue that Japanese honorifics are governed by a small set of fundamental principles based on a single premise: a superior person in honorifics is a model, but a taboo model. In this view, all honorific expressions are reduced to manifestations of 'systemic' metaphors: 'envelope metaphor,' 'emergence metaphor,' and 'servitude metaphor,' which are projected from the principal set governing the entire gamut of the Japanese honorific system.