

A Study on Honorifics in Business Letters

by **Seizo Murakami**

Prologue

Perhaps the Japanese language is most developed and complicated in the use of honorifics (*keigo* or *teineigo*) chiefly because the Japanese lived for hundreds of years on a superior-subordinate basis under the feudal system.

So Japanese often say that there are few honorific terms in English if any. But there are honorific expressions in the English language, which we should often use in letters addressed to our seniors or prospective but not intimate customers, though the younger generation in this country frequently forget to use honorific terms both in Japanese and in English when they should use them.

Honorific expression is often closely connected with the 'you-consideration' diction especially in business letters as shown below.

The writer has not yet read any books on honorific English study except a brief reference to it in some magazines or books. Moreover, a certain English linguist told the writer that he did not know any special book written on this subject published in America or perhaps in England.

Yet the writer has often noticed its significance while teaching business English or English composition in class. The examples shown below are only part of what the writer took note of in his classes, so they are far from being complete as a study on English honorifics.

Of course, friendly informal letters would be shorter and even better

nowadays when simplified writing is generally more valued. But when the reader is in a superior position, or when you write an apology or refusal, you must use honorific, politer sentences, even though your letter will be longer.

UNDERSTATEMENT

instead of conclusive statement

may include most of the connotation of 'honorific expression'. Dartnell says, "Understatement is often very much more effective than exaggeration or high pressure copy. Wild claims and glittering generalities sink more sales letters than perhaps any other faults." (Dartnell Business Letter Deskbook p. 189) Yet honorific expression is not always equal to understatement, though it may include a sort of it in most cases. For instance, "I am not in a position to accept your offer." is an honorific expression and politer than to say "I cannot accept your offer," or "I am unable to accept your offer." But the former is not necessarily understatement in the strict sense of the words.

To the writer himself, honorific terms seem to imply only a word or a group of a few words, while "understatement" covers the whole sentence or at least a mass of many words. However, he intends to deal with both in similar meaning here.

EXAMPLES OF HONORIFIC EXPRESSIONS

N.B. In the following examples, a cross put before the sentence means less polite, while a circle before the sentence means the polite form.

1. By using "I should think" or "I should say" or "We may say"
 - × The figures you specified for the job are utterly unreasonable.
 - We should think the figures specified for the job are not very reasonable.
 - × At this time when inflation is continuously accelerating in every market, we cannot make any better offer than this one
 - In view of the continuing inflation in every market, I should say this would be the very best offer we could make.

2. “We would like to inform you; We wish to inform you; We are pleased to inform you; We are glad to inform you” are politer than to say “We inform you; We advise you, though a certain scholar said in a 1975 issue of “Business English” that the former expressions are padding. The writer’s opinion is different from his in the light of ‘politeness,’ as you easily see in the following examples:

× What do you want us to do next?

○ What would you like us to do next?

Yet in the above case, “We would like to suggest that—; We wish to suggest that—; or “May we suggest to do—?” are still politer.

In the above examples, “We are pleased to do—” is quite good, but “We have the pleasure of doing; We take pleasure in doing” are rather trite nowadays except in case of writing in letters of formal invitations or greetings. Still politer: If you feel you would like to be considered for vacancies at our firm; (much politer than to say “If you wish to find a position at our firm) if you feel ours is the kind of situation which you are seeking, then please complete and return the application and personal statement as soon as possible. (Dartnell p.162)

N.B. The writer wonders if it is necessary for the firm to write such a polite letter in reply to an applicant seeking for a position at their own firm.

3. By using “I wonder if—” Please notice the gradation from less polite to polite form.

a) × Please do me a favor.

Would you do me a favor?

○ I wonder if you could do me a favor.

b) How about having a cup of coffee?

Won’t you have a cup of coffee?

○ Would you like to have a cup of coffee now?

○ I wonder if you would like to have a cup of coffee.

c) × Please help us.

× Can you help us?

Could you help us? (“could” here means a sort of honorific.)

○ I wonder if you could help us.

4. By using “seem to do; seem that—”

a) × What’s the problem?

○ What seems to be the problem?

b) × What you mentioned in your letter of May 10 is wrong.

○ It seems that what you mentioned in May 10 is not quite correct.

○ I am afraid what was mentioned in your letter of May 10 may not be quite correct.

c) × We wonder why you have not answered us in reply to our two letters written on June 10 and June 20.

○ We do not seem to have heard from you in reply to our two letters of June 10 and June 20.

d) × Regarding the shortage in the L/C amount, we have made further study and find that the cause was your disregarding the fractions of unit prices.

○ Upon further study we have found that the cause of the shortage in L/C amount seems to lie in the manner of handling the fractions under one dollar of unit prices. (B.E. July 1976 issue by Prof. Haneda)

N.B. Mr. Haneda says the first sentence would be softened by inserting ‘it seems or if we are not mistaken’ which serves as a buffer.

5. By using “might” as a sort of understatement or polite form. This usage is mostly used in interrogative sentences, though not always.

a) As a polite alternative to “may”.

Might I ask who is calling? (Webster III)

b) “When did he say he’d leave for Europe?” “I don’t know. It might be a good idea to call him and find out.” (NHK Radio Conversa-

tion Sept. 1967 issue)

- c) We hear that you have recently raised the prices of your products, but can you sell this item at the old price, since we hear you still have a large stock?
- We understand that the prices of most of your products have recently been revised. Yet might we ask you to supply this item at the old price, if you still have some stock?

6. By using "Would you mind doing——?"

- Shut the door please.
- Would you mind shutting the door?

7. By using the passive voice

To avoid the harshness of the imperative, or the indelicacy of the verb "must", you should use the passive. The effect gains in tact what it loses in vigor.

- a) You must not take time off for a coffee or makeup break until 10:30.
- Do not take time off for a coffee or makeup break until 10:30.
- Time for a coffee or makeup break should not be taken until 10:30.

Michael E. Adelstein in his Contemporary Business Writing at PP. 175, 176 says as follows:

"To avoid the taint of a command, some requests are softened by the passive as you see in the following examples:

- b) We require you to attend the labor-management conference about fringe benefit.
- You are requested to attend the labor-management conference about fringe benefit."
- c) You must clearly understand that this rebate is quite exceptional.
- It must be clearly understood that this rebate is quite exceptional.
(B.E. July 1976)
- d) You caused the damage in transit.
- The damages were caused in transit.

8. By using the subjunctive mood

a) × Your prices are much too high for us to do business with you.

○ We would be willing (or We would very much like) to do business with you if only your prices were more competitive. (BE. July, 1976)

b) × Please send us a list of some reliable importers there who are interested in this particular line.

○ We should be much obliged if you would send us a list of some reliable importers there who may be interested in this particular line.

9. By using both the passive voice and the subjunctive mood.

× The damage, we are afraid, is attributable to negligence on your part.

× Negligence on your part, we are afraid, is apparently the blame for the damage.

○ Perhaps if it could have been handled more carefully, this damage would have been avoided. We believe you will be more careful in the future.

10. We should avoid negative words such as impossible; your fault; you forget; you failed; you neglected; you are to blame; we must refuse; we cannot, etc. We must instead use positive words as often as possible.

a) × We are sorry we cannot tell you the exact time of shipment since you failed to advise us of the details of your requirements.

○ As regards the time of shipment we are unable to indicate a definite date since we have no exact knowledge of your requirements.

○ We shall be only too glad to inform you of the exact time of shipment if you would let us have the right knowledge of your requirements.

b) On the un-negative (Adelstein p.193)

The un-negative occasionally troubles readers, but its main limitation is its weakness. Yet in a few situations, the un-negative tactfully suggests a middle ground:

Your offer of May 9 was not unattractive.

This statement delicately implies some reservation about the offer, but also conveys interest in it. The writer indicates that he is tempted but not enthusiastically; so he hopes to negotiate further.

Because clarity and vigor are usually desirable, writers should rely on positive statements, eliminating as many negatives as possible. The advice is simple to remember:

Think and write positively.

11. Effective Letters

Strictly speaking, the following two letters (quoted from Dartnell pp. 101, 102) do not contain honorific words but as a whole both are remarkably effective and encouraging or induce the readers to direct action because they are written from the standpoint or psychology of the readers themselves. The first one, the year-end thank-you letter to a prompt-paying customer, even with a small packet of salt stapled to it.

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Dear Sir,

In these days when one so often has to write:—

“Your account is overdue”

or

“please pay now”

or

“Dear Sir, unless”

or similar, it is both refreshing and encouraging to reflect on those unsung heroes who pay their account regularly month after month after month.

As you well know, you are in this select category and I feel that it is

time we said "THANK YOU" for your regular contribution. It is you and "the like of you" who enable us to stay in business and pay our creditors promptly in return.

There are doubtless scores of "dunning" letters going out each day, and we feel that we should do something to correct the balance by sending this "thank you" for your regular prompt payments.

The heading at the top really expresses our sentiments!

Yours gratefully,
WYLEYS LIMITED
C.H. Massingham
Managing Director

On the contrary, the following are collection letters addressed to customers whose payments are far overdue sent by the same corporation. They have been proved consistently successful.

AT WYLEYS NEXT BOARD MEETING
ON MONDAY

TO CONSIDER IMMEDIATE ACTION ON THE FOLLOWING
WHO SEEM TO HAVE FORGOTTEN TO RESPOND TO OUR
RECENT LETTERS:—

MR. A.
MR. B.
MR. C.
MR. D.
MR. JACKSON
MR. X.
MR. Y.
MR. Z.

Please send me quickly the kind of answer that will remove your name from the list!

C.H. Massingham

POSTSCRIPT

Most Americans are not interested in honorific expressions. For instance, if we ask them the difference between "May I help you", and "Can I help you?," they perhaps shrug their shoulders, though the latter sentence is less polite. However, even if they are rather indifferent to honorific expressions, it is non the less necessary or important to use that expression in many cases, especially in international business correspondence as you have already seen in the above examples.