

IMPERIAL HONORIFICS AS AN INDEX OF SOCIAL CHANGE

IN MODERN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Japanese imperial honorifics—honorifics of highest deference reserved for the emperor and his family—provide an ideal case to study complexities of language ideologies and their relation to sociopolitical realities. A dominant view is that the use of imperial honorifics remained constant from the Meiji Period (1868-1912) to Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, after which they disappeared from use. This historical sociolinguistic study reveals a substantially more complex reality, based on analysis of yearly articles on the emperor's birthday in *The Asahi* and other newspapers from 1872 to 2008. The study traces five major changes in use of imperial honorifics: (1) a dramatic increase in 1877 when suppression of the Satsuma Rebellion stabilized the Meiji government; (2) an increase in Japan's war years from 1927 to 1945; (3) a chaotically varying decline in 1946 and 1947 during the Allied Occupation; (4) a surge in use before and after Emperor Hirohito's death in 1989, and (5) a discontinuation of verbal imperial

honorifics in *The Asahi* in 1993, though some newspapers continue their use up to the present.

Explanations for shifts emerge from complex interactions among two language ideologies (Irvine & Gal 2000) and the pragmatic goals of newspaper editors and publishers. From 1868 onward, a nationalistic traditionalist ideology iconized imperial honorifics as symbols of the emperor's unique status. An orthogonal language ideology which valued language modernization had indirect effects on imperial honorific use through support for kanji reduction. Finally, newspapers' interests in enlarging readership, and responding to both language ideologies, add another layer of explanation for increases and decreases in use of imperial honorifics.

A case study of chaotic shifts taking place during the Occupation reveals that shifts in newspaper use of imperial honorifics then were not due to the Occupation Civil Censorship Detachment but rather to independent decision-making of Asahi reporters. Data include original documents concerning national language policy, censor-reviewed articles, newspapers' in-house editorial policies, censorship policies of the Police Bureau of Home Ministry and Occupation CCD, as well as interviews conducted with several WWII-era occupation censors and 62 elderly Japanese in greater Tokyo, Toyama, and Okinawa.