Style shifts in Japanese voice actor events

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1 Introduction

Speech style is an exceptionally significant aspect of social linguistics that affects the conversation of everyday life, which, in Japanese, is administered by the use of addressee honorifics. Previous literature has quantitatively suggested that it is common to use different speech styles in a single conversation; however, it remains unanswered whether the distribution of plain vs addressee honorific forms may be generated by the speakers randomly using the AH form and the plain form in their conversations. This study addresses the question by introducing speech data from Japanese voice actor events.

1.1 Addressee honorifics

Addressee honorifics refer to honorific morphemes that express the social status of the hearer relative to the speaker. (Comrie, 1976) In Japanese, addressee honorifics most commonly appear as the suffix *masu* after verbs and the copula form *desu* after nouns and adjectives. In contrast, the non-honorific plain form appears as no additional suffix appended after the predicate. When speakers of Japanese produce an utterance, they must choose one of the *masu* or plain form at the end of a complete clause. As exemplified by examples (1a) and (1b), as the two sentences have different forms after the main predicate, i.e., *masu* form in (1a) vs. plain form in (1b), they differ in social meaning, even though the referential meaning they carry is completely identical. (Cook, 2011) The *masu* form is often used in formal and polite situations; the plain form, in informal and intimate situations. (Cook, 1997)

(1a) sensei-ga   hon-o   yomi-masu. (masu form)
      teacher-SUB   book-OBJ   read
      'The teacher reads a book.'
(1b) sensei-ga   hon-o   yom-u. (plain form)
      teacher-SUB   book-OBJ   read
      'The teacher reads a book.'

1.2 Previous Literature

The addressee honorific form, called *teineitai* 'polite form' in Japanese, has long been considered to indicate politeness to the addressee. (Comrie, 1976; Ide, 1989; Martin, 1964) In contrast, the plain form is referred to as *jōtai* 'normal form' in Japanese and considered not to indicate such politeness. However, more recent literature has revealed that the use of different speech styles is not limited to showing politeness. A study on the use of the addressee honorific form used by caregivers and children in interaction at home suggested that the addressee honorific form may index the presentation of a "public self" identity. (Cook, 1997) A similar study on video game commentary monologues backs up this proposal while presenting a more fine-grained

classification of the functions of the addressee form. (Christensen & Chen, 2022) It was assumed in their work that a "default" form should exist, as determined by the broad conversation context, e.g., the plain form in parent-child conversations and game commentary monologues, such that the "marked" use of a non-default form, e.g., the addressee honorific form, would serve specific functions that would not be conveyed if the default form is used. However, their analyses mostly consist of subjective speculations of how each style shift occurrence functions and lack sufficient objective and quantitative results to support their observations.

On the other hand, there is also previous literature focusing on quantitative analysis to investigate style shifts. By examining private conversations where the interlocutors have imbalanced social status, Okamoto observed that speakers do not consistently use the addressee honorific form all the time, and they switch between the plain form and the addressee honorific form. (Okamoto, 2010) It may be noted, however, that some of the speakers exhibited nearly 50%-50% distributions of the plain and addressee honorific forms. It remains unclear whether the decision to use either the plain form or the addressee honorific form is made randomly by the speakers, which potentially leads to the reported well-balanced distribution. The current study addresses this unanswered question by leveraging quantitative analysis to provide more statistically substantiated insights.

1.3 Voice actor events

More importantly, this study uses recordings from voice actor events as the primary data source. Voice actor events, commonly held at anime conventions, are organized gatherings where voice actors engage directly with audiences through panel discussions and live performances. Besides facilitating fan interaction and promoting commercial goods, voice actor events offer a unique site for examining language use, particularly the deployment of honorifics, within a performative and semi-public context. Using honorifics in such settings can reveal subtle negotiations of social distance, professional seniority, and mutual familiarity, especially in cases where seniority in the industry does not align neatly with age or popularity. As voice actors navigate these complex relationships on stage, their linguistic choices become socially meaningful performances of deference, solidarity, or playful subversion. Consequently, these events serve as fertile ground for investigating how honorifics function beyond grammar, as socially embedded tools of identity construction and power negotiation.

With the growing popularity of subcultures globally, particularly Japanese anime, comics, and game subcultures, they have also become more frequently alluded to in the academic field. An increasing number of papers have been published to discuss the underlying psychological and cultural implications behind phenomena related to such subcultures in psychology and sociology. However, such a trend has not been observed in linguistics, especially social linguistics. Hence, this study also reveals the possibility of using such materials for academic research.

1.4 Research questions

The objective of the study is to investigate data from voice actor events and use quantitative analysis methods to answer the question: Do voice actors randomly choose between the plain form or the addressee honorific form, regardless of the conversation context?

2 Methods

2.1 Data Source & Subjects

The data used in the study were sourced from a live streaming YouTube program series of a multimedia project based around all-female bands whose members are also voice actresses. Starting in 2020, the series mainly updates on a weekly basis. Each episode is about an hour long and features voice actresses from the project, ranging from 2 to 5 voice actresses for most of the episodes. Each episode is usually divided into different sections where the featured voice actresses play games, react to newly released goods and products in the project, or explicitly advertise upcoming concerts and events on behalf of the project.

Due to the complicated nature of handling and interpreting communication when there are more than two speakers, this study only focuses on episodes uploaded before April 1, 2025, that feature only two voice actresses, with a particular focus on episodes featuring two voice actresses from a pre-selected band within the project. Furthermore, only a routine dice-rolling storytelling section is highlighted in this study. In this section, one of the voice actors would introduce the section, after which the featured voice actresses take turns rolling a dice of conversation topics and sharing their thoughts/experiences on the thrown topic. After a couple of rounds of dice rolling and storytelling, the voice actor who introduces the section would also conclude the section. An illustration of the structure of the section is presented in Figure 1. There are two main reasons why we choose to focus on this section: 1) in contrast to other advertising sections, this storytelling section is significantly less scripted and less directly related to the interests of the project, so it is reasonable to assume that a large proportion of recorded speech in this section is impromptu and spontaneous; 2) for another thing, the predictable well-structuredness of the section allows for a more consistent and structured analysis workflow, which allows scaling larger sample sizes easier.

All these selection criteria distill the final corpus to a collection of sections from three episodes, with about half an hour of footage. The episodes feature 3 voice actresses, whose background information is presented in Table 1. In episode #1, HA is more senior than KH in terms of age, yet KH is more senior than HA professionally, as she entered the voice actor industry earlier. Hence, the two voice actresses have an imbalanced hierarchical relationship, although the direction of which is not clearly observed. Meanwhile, for episodes #2 and #3, the two featured voice actresses have approximately the same age and number of years as voice actresses, so their peer relationship is strongly defined. Therefore, a comparison between episode #1 and the other

two episodes would allow us to understand how the presence of hierarchy between the voice actresses is related to their frequency of using addressee honorific forms (Section 2.2).

2.2 Analysis methodology

As justified in the previous section, the videos of the dice-rolling storytelling section from the selected episodes were recorded. Transcriptions were obtained using TurboScribe, an AI-powered transcription service, and then were checked manually to ensure alignment with human transcription. Occurrences of the addressee honorific form, including any of their variants, i.e., the past-tense forms *mashita* and *deshita*, the negative form *masen*, and the volitional forms *mashō* and *deshō*, and the plain form, i.e., any articulation at the end of a complete clause that does not include the addressee honorific form, are manually marked for each corpus. Only occurrences in main clauses and subordinate clauses succeeded by conjunctive particles, including *kara*, *kedo/keredo/keredomo*, *ga*, *node*, *shi*, are considered. The selected subordinate clause markers were considered due to the flexibility of speech style that could occur before them, in contrast to more constrained segments, including the conjunctive particle *te* as well as relative clauses (i.e., noun-modifying subordinate clauses) and quotative clauses.

We first conducted a quantitative analysis to understand the default form in different contexts. We grouped the occurrences of the plain and addressee honorific form by section type and speaker status and compared the proportion of the two forms across different combinations of the two factors. Section type is categorized into four categories: introduction/conclusion, dice rolling, storytelling, and interludes (i.e., interruptive segments that do not belong to either of the previous three categories). Speaker status is categorized into two roles: the presenter (i.e., the speaker making the introduction and conclusion, the speaker rolling the dice in a dice rolling section, and the speaker mostly sharing their stories and experiences in the storytelling section) and the commenter (i.e., the other speaker who mostly makes comments on the presenter's speech and asks follow-up questions); yet in interludes such roles are not distinguished and all speakers are analyzed together. The default form for a specific section type and speaker status is defined as the speech form that dominates the other form (i.e., occurring for more than 50% of the time) in all occurrences in the specific setting.

To further investigate how frequencies of speech styles and the default form vary across contextual factors, we compared the frequencies of addressing on the graphic form across 1) different hierarchical relationships presented in the video; 2) the portion of each section, which is defined as the percentage progress into the section, with a particular focus on the storytelling sections due to their large sample size; and 3) the speech-producing voice-actor.

Next, we switch gears to a more case-specific qualitative approach to understand the functions of style shifts. After the default form for each section is determined, style shifts were identified as occurrences that do not conform to the default form. The functions of the style shifts were annotated manually and summarized.

3 Results

3.1 Quantitative

The results are shown in Figures 2 and 3 and Table 2. Across all episodes, only the presenter in the introduction and conclusion sections is defaulted to speak in the addressee honorific form, producing 82.8% of the time. In all other contextual settings, the plain form is produced more than the addressee honorific form, hence the default form. In all three section types, presenters use the addressee honorific form more frequently than the commenters.
(Introduction/Conclusion: 82.1% vs. 0%; Dice roll: 48.8% vs. 28.9%; Storytelling: 21.4% vs. 13.1%) This difference is aligned with Cook's model that addressee honorific forms index the presentation of a more disciplined public self. (Cook, 1997) Compared to the commentor, whose role is to give comments and represent a more spontaneous character, the presenter, being the main speaker to make announcements and share stories, would see more directly to the audience of the program and hence identify more as a public presenter, who might use more addressee honorific forms by Cook's model.

For a presenter, they use the addressee honorific form most often in the introduction and conclusion sections, followed by dice-roll, and finally storytelling (82.1% vs. 48.8% vs. 21.4%). This gradient phenomenon is aligned with Christensen's observation that the addressee honorific form can index announcement functions. (Christensen & Chen, 2022) As introduction and conclusion sections inherently contain more announcements, it is more likely that the presenter, who makes most of the announcements, deliberately chooses to use the addressee honorific form. In contrast, the storytelling section provides an introspective motivation for the presenter to reflect on their experiences, so it is more likely that their spontaneous and impromptu speech ends in the plain form. Similarly, for a commenter, the addressee honorific form is used more frequently in dice-roll sections than storytelling sections (28.9% vs. 13.1%). The exception is the introduction and conclusion, where the commenters did not produce any addressee honorific forms. The reason is that in such sections, the commenter barely speaks anything, except chiming in to reiterate the presenter's announcement, mostly when introducing the title of the section. The use of plain form may function as highlighting the contents, which will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.2.2.

3.1.1 Comparison across hierarchy

The results from comparing utterances featuring a hierarchical relationship and those featuring a peer relationship are presented in Figure 2(b)(c). Trends observed in the previous part are still present in each individual group. For all three sections of introduction/conclusion, dice rolling and storytelling, speakers ubiquitously use more addressee honorific forms when there is a hierarchical relationship inferred from differences in age and work experience. Such observations are aligned with the widely acknowledged politeness indication function. (Ide, 1989; Martin, 1964). In cases where a social hierarchy may be observed, one of the voice actresses, HA, produced more addressee honorific forms than her counterpart, KH (34.2% vs.

24.0%). Yet, due to small sample size, it cannot be claimed conclusively whether the cause is that deference due to juniority in work experience outweighs seniority in age in this specific context, or personal preferences in style usage, or both.

3.1.2 Comparison during the progression of the storytelling section

As shown in Figure 3, the trend of how the proportion of addressee honorific forms changes with the progression of the storytelling section roughly follows a parabolic curve, staying high on the two ends and low in the middle. This indicates that, regardless of other contextual factors, speakers are more likely to use the addressee honorific form at the beginning and end of each storytelling section. This observation again aligns with Cook's indexicality model. (Cook, 1997) At the beginning of each storytelling section, both the presenter and commenter have a strong awareness of their presentational purpose and hence stick more closely to a "public self" identity. Yet, as the storytelling progresses and maybe after a couple of rounds of back-and-forth question-and-answer, it is more likely that both speakers will get immersed in a conversation between themselves and switch their identity from a public presenter to a private conversation partner. Hence, given the intimacy of the relationship assumed by their new identity, the plain form occurs more frequently. Finally, near the end of the storytelling section, both speakers pull themselves out of the conversational atmosphere and intend to conclude the section, hence switching back to the presentational mode and using more addressee honorific forms.

3.1.3 Comparison across speakers

The results from comparing proportions of addressee honorific forms for different speakers are shown in Table 2. HA has the highest proportion of addressee honorific form utterances (24.3%), followed by KH (24.0%) and lastly MK (17.4%). This difference roughly aligns with the observation from comparing across the presence of hierarchy, i.e., KH only featured in the episode featuring a hierarchical relationship, MK only featured in episodes without such a hierarchy, and HA featured in all episodes. Hence, it may be concluded that interpersonal variability in speech style preferences does not significantly outweigh that due to hierarchical relationship, but the effects of interpersonal variability may not be further quantified given the current small sample size.

3.2 Qualitative

A table of summary statistics for style shift occurrences across different episodes and section types is presented in Table 3. A selection of the most commonly occurring patterns of style shift functions observed in the data is presented in this section. Most of the functions identified are aligned with previous studies. (Christensen & Chen, 2022; Cook, 1997)

3.2.1 Presentation

The presentation function accounts for 63 out of 148 (42.6%) style shifts observed, making it the most frequent style shift pattern observed in our data. All the identified occurrences take place in the storytelling sections and are all occurrences of the addressee honorific form in contexts

where the plain form is the default form. This function aligns well with Cook's indexicality model (Cook, 1997), where the use of addressee honorific forms indexes the identity of a public self and may further index the presentational role that the speaker takes, as they share their stories with other voice actors as well as the audience watching the program. Consider the following excerpt at the beginning of a storytelling section, where voice actress HA talks about the topic "one thing that you feel happy about recently" and recounts her experience and emotions of putting out her futon (i.e., a Japanese heavy quilt) and being able to stay warm and cozy in the winter. As shown in the excerpt, she frequently switches to the addressee honorific form at the end of main and subordinate clauses, which conveys her role as a presenter and storyteller to the audience.

(2)   HA: samu-ku nat-te ki-te anou toutou ofuton-o-ne atataka-i ofuton-ni kae-tan-**desu**-yo. fuyuyou-no-ne. fuwauwa-no ofuton-ni kae-tan-**desu**-kedo, nanka atataka-i ofuton-de ner-eru-tte shi'awase-da-na-tte nanka aratame-te omot-ta. nankakou yappa-sa futon kae-ru-to-sa nankakou karada-no atatama-ri kata ondo-ga joushou-suru-janai. watashi-ga atataka-i futon-ni tsutsum-arer-u-tte shi'awase-da-na-te-iu nanka meccha chiisa-na shi'awase **deshita**.

"As it gets colder, umm finally [I] changed [from a thinner futon] to a futon, a warm futon. [One] for winter use. As I changed to the fluffy futon, I like once again thought that umm being able to sleep in a warm futon is such happiness. Also like, if [you] change the futon, like [it's] the way of getting [your] body warm, the temperature [inside the futon] would go up, right? It was a umm very small happiness [to be in the situation where I would] say 'it [feels so] happy to be covered by the warm futon.'"

3.2.2   Announcement

The announcement function accounts for 31.8% of style shifts observed and occurs most often in dice rolling sections when speakers switch the addressee honorific form in contexts where the plain form is the default form. Similar to Christensen's analysis, the switch of addressee honorific forms in these situations calls for the audience's attention and highlights the information to announce, e.g., the speakers' current feelings or future actions. (Christensen & Chen, 2022)

Two of the most common contexts where the addressee honorific form occurs to index announcement in the dice rolling section include 1) the presenter in the dice roll section announces that they are about to roll the dice; and 2) the commenter in the dice roll section announces that the resulting topic is determined, after checking the rolled dice. In excerpt (3), HA's switch to the addressee honorific form when announcing the start of the dice rolling section and her future action to roll the dice is a perfect example of how such style shifts may be used in announcements. The appearance of the addressee honorific form starkly contrasts with the plain form in surrounding contexts and indexes the role of an announcer that HA has taken, thereby highlighting the information she presents. In a similar fashion, KH highlights her role as an announcer and the information that the topic has been determined by switching to the addressee honorific form in the second line in excerpt (3).

(3)   HA: saikoro-no jikan **desu**. yat-te iki-**masu**-wa-yo. jaa [KH]-ni kyacchi-shi-te mora-ou.

"It is time to roll the dice. I am going to do [this]. Then let's let [KH] catch [the dice] for me."

…

KH: de-**mashita**. deden. marumaru-no aki.

"[The rolled topic] is out. Ta-da. An autumn of something something."

The announcement function also appears in the storytelling section, which occurs in a wider variety of contexts. In the following segment, MK announces the conversation topic and then contextualizes their upcoming conversation by providing an analogy to pillow talk, and HA chimes in to agree with MK's judgment and announces that the following conversation will resemble a "dream talk," which is interpreted as identical to pillow talk. Similar to the previous example, the use of addressee honorific forms highlights HA's role as an announcer and draws the audience's attention to the content of her announcement.

(4)   MK: kore-wa "saikin mi-ta yume". to-iu koto-de are-ne.

"This is 'a dream [you] recently had'. So [it's] that [sort of conversation that we are gonna do], right?"

HA: doriimu tooku-**desu**-ne.

"A 'dream talk,' right?"

MK: ne.

"Right."

The announcement function also appears in the introduction section and shows a very distinctive pattern: i.e., it appears in the use of the plain form in the introduction section when the presenter announces the title of the entire dice-rolling storytelling section. Recall from the overall quantitative analysis that the default form in this context is the addressee honorific form, so switching to the plain form is considered a marked style shift. The following snippet provides a perfect example of how the function is manifested in our data. MK uses the plain form (which, in this case, is surfaced as the absence of a copula) to introduce the section title, highlighting her role as an announcer and the content of her announcement (i.e., the section title) as well. As a side note, notice that the commenter (exemplified by HA in excerpt (5)) also uses the plain form to achieve the announcement function. As this context accounts for all identified speech made by the commenters in the introduction and conclusion sections, the plain form is hence identified as the default form for the setting (see Section 3.1).

(5)   MK: mazu-wa kochira-no koonaa-wo o-todoke-shimasu. [Section title] **(plain)**.

"First we present this section. [Section title]."

HA: [Section title].

"[Section title]."

3.2.3 Formulaic expressions

The use of addressee honorifics in formulaic expression accounts for 12 out of 148 (8.1%) style shifts. These occurrences usually occur in formulaic expressions including *onegaishimasu* ("please", "please take care of [something]", "looking forward to working with you", "I'll leave it to you", etc.; the exact translation of which depending on the context), *sumimasen* ("sorry") and *arigatou gozaimasu* ("thank you"), which by today have largely been conventionalized fossilized and can mainly be used as independent chunks. The following excerpts (6)-(8) provide examples of how these conventionalized formulaic expressions appear as style shifts in the data. In excerpt (6), HA first announces that the crew members will catch the dice for them, and then uses the expression *onegaishimasu* to address the crew, which is often used during the start of collaborations (and hence the provided translation). In the context of excerpt (7), MK zoned out and missed the cue to start her part, so she is apologizing for her mistake, where she uses the expression *suimasen* (an alternative for *sumimasen* "sorry") for her apology. Lastly, in excerpt (8), KH expresses her gratitude for a complimentary comment by HA, using the expression *arigatou gozaimasu* ("thank you").

(6)   HA: sutaffu-san-ga kyacchi-shi-te kureru-rashii. (to crew) o-nega-i-shi-**masu**.

It seems like the crew will help catch [the dice] for us. Looking forward to working with you."

(7)   MK: a sui-**masen**. gomen. gomennasai.

"Oh I'm sorry. Sorry. My apologies."

(8)   KH: arigat-ou gozai-**masu**.

"Right."

3.2.4 Showing discipline

Accounting for 7.4% of style shift functions, the presentation of one's discipline is more directly aligned with Cook's model. Similar to how children and parents may use the addressee honorific form to index the identity of a disciplined self, the voice actors in our data also used the addressee honorific forms for similar purposes. Consider the following excerpt, where the voice actresses are discussing their recommended way of killing time, and KH expressed that she does not have much free time to kill. HA wishes that KH rest well in her free time, in a parent-like manner to poke fun at her, and KH replies that she did make sure to sleep. In this situation, KH's use of the addressee honorific form indexes her identity as a disciplined self that sticks to a regular sleeping schedule, thereby showing her discipline.

(4)   HA: ne hima-na toki-wa shikkari yasun-de kudasa-i-ne.

"Right. Please rest well during [your] free time, okay?"

KH: ne-**masu** jan chanto.

"[I did] make sure to sleep."

HA: hai ne-te kudasa-i.

"Okay okay, please sleep [well]."

4   Discussion & Conclusion

Our quantitative and qualitative analyses have shown that Japanese speakers do not make the choice between the plain form and the addressee honorific form at random. Their decision is largely related to contextual factors, e.g., the existence of social hierarchy, the progress in a storytelling section, in a voice actor event. The functions of style shift mostly align with previous literature.

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the current sample size of three episodes may not be substantial enough, and subsequent work could focus on including more data to validate the conclusions of our study. Also, the analysis methods used in the current study are very simplistic. By applying more advanced statistical modelling techniques, one may be able to better account for the influence of complicated contextual factors and yield more generalizable insights.

5   Appendix

The excerpted videos, containing the dice-rolling storytelling section of each episode, along with their transcriptions of the videos, may be found at the following link:
https://duke.box.com/s/mankq0wb70n9fp1ej2d06jhl6cv5bsve.

6   References

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Table 1. Summary of voice actor background information and relationship with each other in each episode.

Episode	Voice actress 1 (CV1)	Voice actress 2 (CV2)	Hierarchy
1	HA 23 yrs old, became voice actor in 2021	KH 21 yrs old, became voice actor in 2017	CV1 is senior in age, CV2 is senior in work experience
2	HA Same as HA in episode 1	MK 23 yrs old, became voice actor in 2020	Peer
3	HA Same as HA in episode 1 (24 yrs old)	MK Same as MK in episode 2 (24 yrs old)	Peer

Table 2. Summary of the proportion of addressee honorific forms for each voice actress featured in the data.

Voice actress	HA	KH	MK
Plain	277 (75.7%)	98 (76.0%)	218 (82.6%)
Addressee honorific	89 (24.3%)	31 (24.0%)	46 (17.4%)
Total	366 (100.0%)	129 (100.0%)	264 (100.0%)

Table 3. Summary of proportion of style shift function patterns across episodes and section types.

	Presentation	Announcement	Formula	Discipline	Other
Total	63 (42.6%)	47 (31.8%)	12 (8.1%)	11 (7.4%)	15 (10.1%)
Episode					
Episode #1	40	21	3	6	5
Episode #2	15	21	7	2	7
Episode #3	8	5	2	3	3
Section type					
Introduction/ Conclusion	0	3	0	0	2
Dice roll	0	26	4	0	1
Storytelling	63	17	7	9	12
Interlude	0	1	1	2	0

Figure 1. Illustration of the overall structure of the dice-rolling storytelling section.
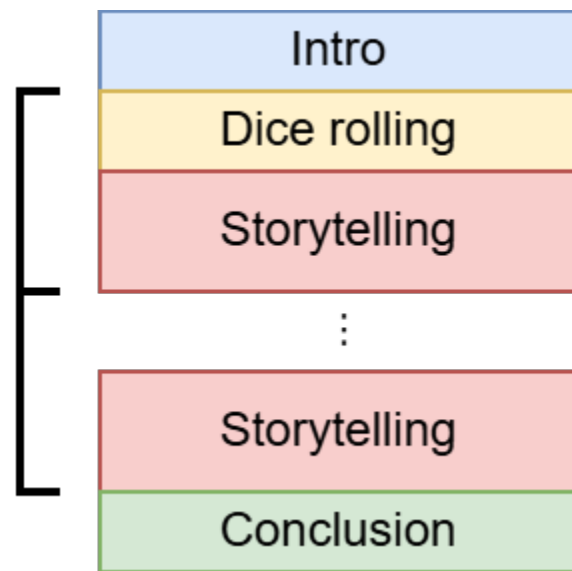
Figure 2. Proportion of addressee honorific forms in different sections and speaker types. The horizontal axis indicates different section types, and the vertical axis shows the proportion of addressee honorific forms over all sections of the same type. The error bars indicate the standard error of the estimated proportion. Different colors code whether the articulator is the presenter/commenter of the section, or indicate both speakers exclusively for interlude sections. (a) The overall results. (b) The results for episodes where hierarchy is present. (c) The results for episodes where hierarchy is absent.
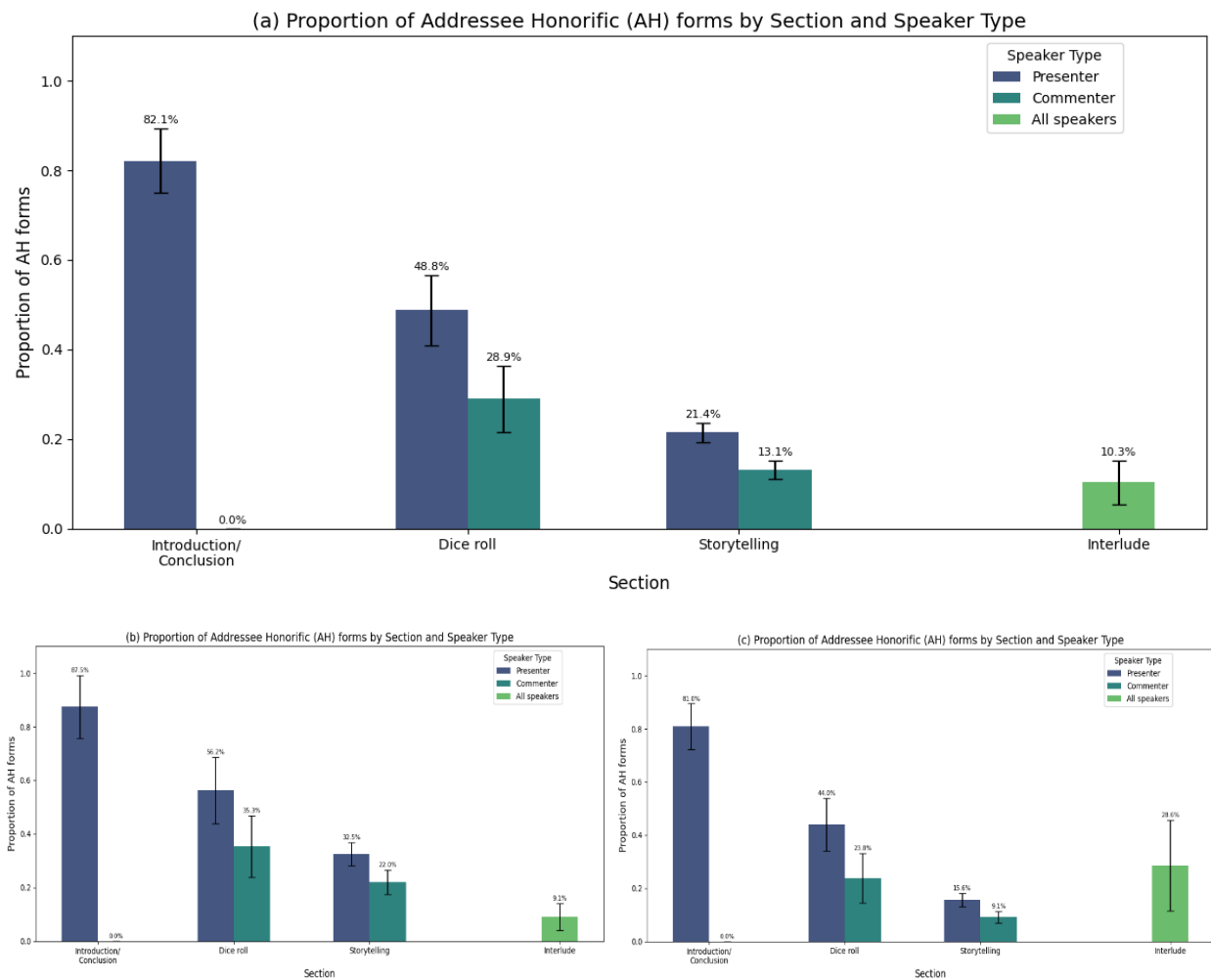
Figure 3. Proportion of addressee honorific (AH) forms along with the progression of the storytelling section. The horizontal axis indicates the progress in the storytelling on a percentage scale, and the vertical axis shows the proportion of addressee honorific forms. The line represents the calculated proportion, while the shaded region indicates the standard error.