

**TO BE RESPECTFUL IN MANDING:  
Where does Maninka honorific vocabulary come from?**

Among the most important contributions of David Conrad into Mande studies is his effort to discover the world of Guinean Maninka for the Western scholars after the decades of Secou Touré's blockade. He was among the first historians and anthropologists who got into touch with the "School of Nko" and undertook an important effort to make accessible the treasury of knowledge of Sulemana Kante and his followers to the academic world [Conrad 2001].

Celebrating David, it is time to remember that there is a special register in the Maninka language to address respected people, and a honorific vocabulary. And it is Sulemana Kante who, to my knowledge, was the first to list the honorific terms [Kantè 1962/1992, 381-382]. In the entry *mábònya* 'to respect', we find 72 such terms and expressions provided with their "neutral" equivalents.<sup>1</sup>

Those words are intended to replace "usual" words when one is addressing elders, teachers, Muslim clerics, or when speaking about objects regarded as sacral. For example, one should not say *Ñ báda Kùraná` sà̀n* 'I've bought Coran', it should be rather said *Ñ báda Kùraná` kùnmbó*. The majority of those words are names of body parts and, on the other hand, verbs for most elementary human actions: birth and death, change of position of one's body, movement, speech and perception, and some others.

Here is a complete list. Each honorific term is provided with a corresponding neutral term (following a dash) and with an English translation.

*sála* – *kũn* 'head'

*kóla* – *já* 'eye'

*kìné* – *nún* 'nose'

*kìnɛjí* – *sàsá* 'snot'

*kára* – *dá* 'mouth'

*sélu* – *ně̀n* 'tongue'

*kébe* – *ɲín* 'tooth'

*kíme* – *kán* 'neck'

*wéle* – *tólo* 'ear'

*sàranún* – *kúma* 'speech'

*débe* – *kónɔ* 'stomach'

*fúndi* – *jùsú* 'heart'

*kòdokó* – *kó* 'back'

*kóninni* – *dáwunni* 'eating'

*lávèlélí* – *ménni* 'hearing'

*móyi* – *dén sòdɔn* 'birth'

*móyifen* – *dén* 'child'

*móyibaa* – *ná ní fã̀, wála sòdɔnbáa hámanɛ wólobaa* 'parents'

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<sup>1</sup> This list is not necessarily exhaustive; I am aware of at least one term that is not included, *jàlamída* 'urinate'. However, in this paper I shall limit myself to this list.

*kàṅṅ* – *bólo* ‘hand, arm’  
*tòndá* – *sě̀n* ‘foot, leg’  
*tèelá* – *báda* ‘navel’  
*fánfàn* – *jèdè* ‘self’  
*débéma* – *kónoma* ‘pregnant’  
*dùlá* – *hàlálá, tá* ‘property’  
*gbídi* – *jùgbólo, jũ* ‘posteriors’  
*fáto, fátoli* – *sàya* ‘die, death’  
*séne, séneli* – *nǎ* ‘to come, coming’  
*sénema* – *táama* ‘journey’  
*sólomin* – *ní* ‘soul’  
*fùré* – *sũ* ‘dead body, corpse’  
*nàminṅṅon* – *mòsò* ‘wife’  
*sótii* – *cè* ‘husband’  
*lámori* – *cè* ‘husband’  
*jónni* – *kòlí* ‘washing’  
*bélenni* – *láli* ‘lying down’  
*fóyi, foyili* – *bó* ‘go out’  
*tóloli* – *lòlí* ‘standing up’  
*màjíí, nòmólí* – *sìí* ‘sit down, sitting’  
*lákimeyalí* – *fàanin tá* ‘dressing up’  
*tòloyíla* – *lòyíla* ‘position’  
*sálamakali* – *sànní* ‘buying’  
*sálamabò* – *kùnmabólí* ‘buying’  
*sómayeleman* – *sàya* ‘death’  
*sèduyalí* – *fàalí* ‘killing’  
*í ní sùbélen* – *í ní lálí, í ní sòomá* ‘Good morning’  
*dálili* – *fólí* ‘talking’  
*bánki* – *yidakali, lánkenemaya* ‘showing’

### **Verbs:**

*séne* – *nà* ‘to come’  
*sénema* – *táama* ‘to walk’  
*fóyi* – *bó* ‘to get out’  
*tòlo* – *lò* ‘to stand up’  
*nòmò, májii* – *sìi* ‘to sit down’  
*dáli* – *fó* ‘to tell’  
*bánki* – *fó, yída* ‘to say, to declare’  
*bélen* – *lá* ‘to lie down’  
*kónin* – *dáwun* ‘to eat’

*à kíme – à kán* ‘on it’  
*kíya – dí* ‘to give’ (?)  
*jón – kò* ‘to wash’  
*sàranún – kúma* ‘to speak’  
*sálamakà – sà̀n* (elsewhere: *fè̀re*) ‘to buy’ (or ‘to sell’)  
*kùnmabó – sà̀n* ‘to buy’  
*sálamadòn – fè̀re* ‘to sell’  
*kùnmádòn – fè̀re* ‘to sell’  
*fúndi – móne* ‘to grow angry’  
*lákimeya – fà̀nín` tà* ‘to dress oneself’  
*lávélé – lámén* ‘to listen’  
*wélemalò – tólomalò* ‘to listen’  
*lákòɲoma – tà, kòndɔn tée` lá* ‘to take; to shake hand’  
*móyi – dén` sòdɔn* ‘to give birth’  
*sèeduyá – fà̀a* ‘to kill’

What is the origin of these words? Before trying to answer this question, we should first sort them.

First of all, it turns out that the verbs are, in fact, represented twice: first, as verbal nouns (with the suffix *-li/-ni*), then as proper verbs. If we eliminate the duplicates, the list grows considerably shorter.

After sorting out the duplicates, we find out that a considerable part of the list consists of the words whose etymology is quite transparent. There is a number of terms derived from other honorific terms according to regular derivation patterns of Maninka. Most often, they follow the models of the corresponding “neutral” terms, and express the same meaning: *kìne-jí* ‘snot’ (cf. *nún-jí* ‘nose-water’), *móyi-baa* ‘parent’ (*sòdɔn-báa* “give birth – agent”), *débe-ma* ‘pregnant’ (cf. *kónɔ-ma* “stomach – ornative suffix”), *séne-ma* ‘walk’ (cf. *táa-ma* “go – verbal suffix”), *tòlɔ-yíla* ‘position’ (cf. *lò-yíla* “stand – place”), *sálamabó* ‘to buy’ (cf. *kùn-ma-bó* ‘head-prefix-exit’; however, it is indicated elsewhere that the latter term is also honorific, cf. [Kantè 1962/1992, 277]), *wélemalò* ‘to listen’ (cf. *tolomalò* “ear-prefix-stand”). There is a single case of divergence of meanings between a honorific term and the corresponding neutral term: *sálamakà* ‘to sell’ (or ‘to buy’, or both ‘buy’ and ‘sell’?) corresponds to *kùnmákà* ‘to ransom’.

Some honorific roots enter into derived forms which have no direct correspondences with neutral roots: *lávélé* ‘listen’ (“causative prefix – ear”; *\*látólo* does not exist), *lákòɲoma* ‘to take; to shake hand’ (“causative prefix – hand – verbal suffix”; *\*lábóloma* does not exist); *móyifen* ‘child’ (“give birth – thing”; *\*sòdɔnfén* does not exist); *sùbélen* ‘a morning greeting’ (“night – lie down”, with a change of tone from high to low, to be explained; *\*sùlá* does not exist).

There are two honorific words formed by composition of roots which do not belong to the honorific list: *májii* ‘to sit down’ (attenuative prefix – ‘go down’), *kùnmabó* ‘to buy’ (“head – prefix – exit”), *kùnmadòn* ‘to sell’ (“head – prefix – enter”).

At the next step of our analysis, let us single out several words whose etymology is not quite evident from the viewpoint of the modern Maninka of Kanakan, but it can be easily clarified if we refer to the data of other Manding languages: *sótii* ‘husband’ comes, most probably, from

Bamana *sótigi* ‘head of the family’ (in Maninka *só* means ‘village, town, city’, and not ‘house’), *lákimeya* ‘dress oneself’ is probably derived from the Bamana verb *kíime* ‘to evaluate’; *sómayeleman* ‘death’ (word-to-word: “house change”) also comes from Bamana. These words are not attested in other Maninka dictionaries (especially into [Ellenberger et al, n.d.]). I assume, they were introduced by Sulemana Kantè, that would be very much in line with his “pan-Manding” policy of introduction of words from different Manding variants into his “leterate Nko” language. As for *fánfan* ‘self’, it comes from the West Manding (Mandinka or Jakhanka) word *fáŋ* ‘self’. It should be mentioned that a single form *fán* ‘self’ also exists in Maninka, although it is less current than *yèré/jèré*. Of West Manding origin is, most probably, the verb *fóyi* ‘to get out’ (Maninka): in Gambian Mandinka we find a neutral term *fúnti*, *fínti* ‘to get out’, and in Pakao Mandinka the same verb is used as an euphemism: *fúnti* ‘go to WC’ (about a Muslim cleric). There is also a form in Jula of Odienné *fùdì* ‘to get out suddenly’ (not marked in Braconnier’s dictionary as honorific). The correspondence between internal consonants in these words is not quite regular, but we can assume, at least hypothetically, their common origin.

Finally, there is one word, *bélen* ‘to lie down; to die’<sup>2</sup> which probably comes from the verb *bélen* ‘to moor’: a semantic shift “to moor” > “to lie down” or “to die” seems quite plausible, even if these words were considered as homonyms from the viewpoint of the modern language.

After sorting out the honorific terms whose origin is thus clarified, we remain with about 30 words which have no evident etymology at the Manding level. Further on, I shall refer to them as the “core honorific vocabulary”.

It should be mentioned that a respectful register of speech and a honorific vocabulary exist not only in the Maninka of Guinea. In the West Sudan area, they are also attested, to my knowledge:

- in Jula of Odienné (NW of Côte-d’Ivoire), see [Braconnier 1989];
- in Mandinka of Senegambia. Honorific terms are included into most important dictionaries, [Creissels et al. 1982; W.E.C. 1995]. I also collected a list of such terms during my field trip to Pakao in September-October 2007.<sup>3</sup> My list differs from what we find in the dictionaries only in some small details. According to my informants, those words are used when addressing Muslim clerics;
- in Pulaar of Futa-Djallon. My main sources have been [Bettison 2004] and [Zoubko 1996].

This register may exist in other languages of the area too, but the data is missing. It is interesting to mention that some honorific terms are attested in Bamana (*débe* ‘stomach’, *fáatu* ~ *fátu* ‘to die’, *fùré* ‘corpse’, *báŋge* ‘to give birth, to be born’), however, they are much less numerous than in Maninka, and they do not seem to be organized into a particular register of speech. If we remember that islamization of Bamana was relatively recent, and that the honorific vocabulary is used by Maninka and Mandinka primarily for Muslim cleric, this situation becomes understandable.

It turns out that in Jula of Odienné, about 2/3 of the Maninka “core honorific vocabulary” are attested. In Mandinka, this vocabulary is much poorer, but nearly all Mandinka terms (with the only exception of *kèñee* ‘to sleep’) also have their correspondences in Maninka. Even in Pulaar of Futa-Djallon, a language of Atlantic family, there are several terms which come back to the same roots as the Maninka terms. The comparative data are represented in the table below.

Explanations to the table:

<sup>2</sup> My informants provided a form *béle* as well.

<sup>3</sup> I am thankful to Cornelia Giesing for her invaluable help during that trip.

The terms are given in the alphabetic order of the Maninka forms. The semantics of terms is indicated in the column “Meaning” (by default, it is the semantics of a Maninka term). If the sense of a term in Jula or in Mandinka is different from what is indicated in the column “Meaning”, those senses are adduced in the corresponding case. If a Maninka honorific term corresponds to a Jula, Mandinka or Pulaar word that is not marked in the dictionaries as “respectful” (or the likes), the latter is provided with a note (neutr.). If Mandinka, Jula or Pulaar has a honorific term for the same notion as in Maninka, but this term is represented by a different stem, it is given in brackets. In the “Mandinka” column, words which are attested only in [Creissles et al. 1982] are marked as DC; those which come from [W.E.C. 1995] have a MD index. Unmarked forms are found in both dictionaries. Pulaar verbs are given in the nominalized form (class NGAL).

Meaning	Maninka	Jula of Odienné	Mandinka	Mandinka (Pakao)	Pulaar FJ
to show, to explain, to speak	<i>bánki</i>	<i>bànkè</i> ‘give birth’; ‘declare’ (neutr.)	<i>bánkee</i> ‘say, declare; publish’	<i>báncee</i> ‘speak, talk’	
to speak	<i>dáli</i>	<i>dàri</i> (of God)	<i>dáali</i> DC ‘tell prophecies’		
stomach	<i>débe</i>	<i>dèbè</i>			
property	<i>dùlá</i>				
to understand	<i>fâamún</i> (?)	<i>fâmu</i> (neutr.)		<i>fâhamu</i>	
to die	<i>fáto</i>	<i>fâtò</i>			
heart; grow angry	<i>fúndi</i>		<i>fúndu</i> ‘spirit, mind’, ‘heart’	<i>fúndu</i> ‘spirit, mind’	<i>fondo</i>
corpse	<i>fùré</i>		<i>fùree</i> (neutr.?)		<i>furee</i>
behind, buttocks	<i>gbídi</i>	<i>gbiri</i> (neutr.?)		<i>(siirán)</i>	<i>(toolorde)</i>
to wash (esp. a dead body)	<i>jón</i>	<i>jòn</i>			
mouth	<i>kára</i>	<i>kàra</i>			<i>karaho</i>
tooth	<i>kébe</i>				
to sleep			<i>kèeñee</i>	<i>kèeñee</i>	<i>(huylagol)</i>
neck	<i>kíme</i>				
nose	<i>kìné</i>				<i>kine</i> (neutr.)
to give (?)	<i>kíya</i>				
back	<i>kòdokó</i>				
eye	<i>kóla</i>		<i>kúluma</i>	<i>kúlumu, kúluma</i>	
to eat	<i>kónin</i>	<i>kònin</i>	<i>kóni</i> DC	<i>kóni</i>	<i>(neemagol)</i>
hand, arm	<i>kòjón</i>	<i>kójón</i>	<i>kòjono</i> DC, <i>konji</i> MD	<i>kònji</i>	<i>(sookeewo)</i>
husband	<i>lámori</i>				
to give birth	<i>móyi</i>	<i>mòri, mòì</i>	<i>múki</i> ‘to brood’ (neutr.)	<i>múci</i>	<i>(dapugol, jibingol)</i>

wife	<i>nàminjón</i>				
to sit down	<i>nòmó</i>	<i>nómó</i>	<i>nòmo</i>	<i>nòmo</i>	( <i>toolagol</i> ), cf. <i>nomoran</i> ‘pants’ (resp.)
head	<i>sála</i>	<i>sàra</i>	–; <i>salalaa</i> MD ‘hat’	<i>sàla; salaala</i> ‘hat’	<i>sala</i>
speech; to speak	<i>sàranún</i>	<i>sárándú,</i> <i>sárándù</i>			
to kill	<i>sèeduyá</i>	<i>séidíyá</i>			
tongue	<i>sélu</i>	<i>sélù</i>			
to come	<i>séne</i>	<i>sènè, sènèmà</i>	<i>séne</i> ‘to travel’	<i>séne</i> ‘to go; to come’	<i>seenagol</i>
soul	<i>sólómin</i>	<i>sòròmè, sórómè</i>	<i>sòndome</i> (neutr.)		
navel	<i>tèelá</i>				
foot, leg	<i>tòndá</i>	<i>tóná</i>	<i>tùndu</i> DC, <i>tundi</i> MD	<i>tùndu</i>	<i>tunndawal</i>
to stand; to get up	<i>tòlól</i>				( <i>banagol</i> )
ear	<i>wéle</i>	<i>wèrè</i>			

#### Comments

1. Tonal difference between Maninka and Jula forms is systemic: Jula of Odienné is one of the Manding variants with “inverted tones”.

2. Correspondence *k* (Mandinka of Gambia) : *c* (Pakao Mandinka) is regular. More precisely, in Pakao we observe an optional palatalization of *k* in the position before a front vowel.

The question of the origin of the “core honorific vocabulary” remains. As far as those words do not transparent inner structure from the viewpoint of Manding languages, and, on the other hand, the respectful register of speech is undoubtedly connected with Islam, let us look for their sources in other languages which could have served as vectors of this religion.

The first candidate is Arabic. There are, effectively, some honorific words which seem to come from Arabic. Here they are:

*dáli* ‘to speak’ (of God) – Arabic *دَلَّ* *dalla* ‘to show, to indicate’,

*fâamún* ‘to understand’ in Maninka, *fâhamu* in Pakao Mandinka (not attested in both DC and MD) – Arabic *fahima*. I am not sure that this word belongs to the honorific register of speech in both languages, although, certainly, it is a part of the islamic vocabulary: in [Kantè 1962/1992] *fâamún* is interpreted as *kà kó lón sònomé` dó* ‘to know matter in one’s heart’, and in Pakao Mandinka it is opposed to the “everyday” word *kálamùta* ‘understand’,

*fâto* ‘to die’ – Arabic *fa:ta* ‘pass over’,

*sèeduyá* (Maninka), *séidíyá* (Jula of Odienné) ‘to kill’ is obviously a denominative verb from *shahi:d* ‘martyr’.

The second candidate is the language of the ancient Wagadu, Soninke.<sup>4</sup> Although the military rulers of the Ancient Ghana, according to the notes of Arabic travelers, were heathens, it is indubitable that islamization of Soninke dates back to a very early period, and Soninke merchants brought the religion into many regions of West Sudan. For instance, principal “marabout families” of Kankan trace their origin to Soninke.

First of all, we find in Soninke the same stems of Arabic origin: *daali* ‘speak’ (of God), *faamu* ‘to understand’, *faati* ‘to die’ (respectful form; the final *-i* might be an intransitive suffix, typical of Soninke). It is very probable that the corresponding forms in Manding were borrowed from Arabic via Soninke.

There are also some other Manding honorific terms which can be traced back to original Soninke words:

*bánki* ‘to show; to explain; to speak; to be born’ (Maninka) – Soninke *bange* ‘to appear; to be born; to be published’. This stem is also attested in many other languages of the region: Bamana *bánge*, *bángi*, Xasonka *bánge*, Bozo-Tieyaxo *bange*, Pulaar-Futa Djallon *bangingol* ‘to manifest; to prove’ [Bettison 2004, 15], *bannga* ‘to appear’ (of a spot); ‘to be expressed; to realize itself’; ‘to be, to find place’ [Zoubko 1996, 52]; Songhay-Gao *bangay* ‘to appear; to come into the world’ [Haïdara et al., 1992], Songhay-Tombuktu (Koyra Chiini) *bangey* ‘to appear, to become visible’ [Heath 1998, 39]. An argument for the Soninke origin of this word seems to be existence in this language of a causative form *bangandi* ‘to create’ which indicates that the final vowel of the stem is rather *-a*. So, the final *-e* in Soninke can be regarded as the intransitive suffix. It is the intransitive form that was borrowed by the majority of the languages of the region,

*dùlá* ‘property’ – Soninke *duuda* ‘personal property’,

*fùré* ‘corpse’ – Soninke *furu* ‘cadaver’; the form with the article is *fure*. Final *-e* is very typical of nouns borrowed from Soninke into Manding languages, because the majority of Soninke nouns usually appear in singular with the article *-e*. A respectful term *fure* ‘corpse’ is also attested in Susu, where it may have been borrowed from Maninka, although it may as well be an ancient borrowing from Soninke (or even a term ascending independently to the proto-language level),

*kòdokó* ‘back’ in Maninka may be a combination of the Soninke stem *xoodo* ‘lower back, waist’ with the Manding stem *kó* ‘back’,

*sólómin* ‘soul’ (forms *sóndome*, *sólome*, *sólomi* are also current in Maninka) – Soninke *sondomme* ‘heart’ (without the article: *sondoN*). Apart from the languages whose forms are given in the table, this stem is also attested in Bamana (*sònnéme* ‘intention, will, good will’), in Xasonka (*sòndomme* ‘heart as container of emotions, of will’), in Mogofin (*sòndǒ* ‘liver’), in Susu (*sondon* ‘heart’), in Jallonke (*sòndón* ‘heart’ [Creissels 1988]), in Bozo-Tieyaxo (*sɔnɔn* ‘soul’). The form of the word (the final *-e*; the presence of *-m-*) testifies for the Soninke origin of this word in Maninka, Mandinka, Xasonka, Jula and Bamana (at the same time, in Susu, Jallonke, Mogofin it may ascend directly to the Proto-West-Mande root, independently from Soninke).

So, the input of Soninke into the honorific vocabulary of Maninka (and other Manding languages) is important, but still, it does not reach 30% of the list (even if we count the Arabic words which were borrowed, most probably, via Soninke).

Songhay is the language of another great medieval Muslim empire of West Sudan, and we could suppose that at least some honorific words could have their origin in Songhay. However,

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<sup>4</sup> Data from [Smeltzer and Smeltzer 2001].

this hypothesis has not been substantiated: in the available dictionaries [Haïdara et al. 1992; Heath 1998], I have not found forms which could be regarded as prototypes for the honorific terms in Maninka. This seems to be in line with the fact that the direction of cultural influence was rather from Soninke and Manding towards Songhay, than in the other sense.

A great role in the consolidation of Islam in West Sudan belongs to Fulbe who created their theocratic political organisms in 18 and 19 centuries, carried out many jihads and spread a network of Muslim schools.

It turns out that one honorific word in Maninka (not attested in Jula of Odienné or Mandinka), *kìné* ‘nose’, comes from Pulaar: the stem *kine* (a neutral term) appears in many local variants of Pular/Fulfulde up to the North Cameroon, therefore the direction of borrowing could not be from Maninka to Pular. However, as we can see from the table above, many other terms, most probably, were borrowed by Pulaar from Manding, which is confirmed by their absence in other Pular/Fulfulde variants outside Futa Djallon: *fondo* ‘heart; intention; decision’, *furee* ‘corpse’, *karaho* ‘mouth’, *nomoran* ‘pants’ (from Maninka honorific term *nòmó* + Manding instrumental suffix *-lan/-ran*), *sala* ‘head’, *salaala* ‘hat’, *seenagol* ‘to travel’, *tundawal* ‘foot, leg’.

An important number of Manding loans in the honorific vocabulary of Pulaar may indicate the emergence of this style of speech under a strong Manding influence. However, at the later stage, its evolution in Pulaar continued independently: there are words for many notions different from what we find in Maninka or Mandinka (they are given in the table in brackets), and there are also terms for the notions which are not attested in the honorific vocabulary of Maninka or Mandinka: *wajimbiŋgol* ‘to have pity’, *jiyaadó* ‘slave’, *tinugol* ‘to see, to look’, *yaccagol* ‘to be in hurry’, *sonnaajo* ‘woman’, *seddiđo* ‘married woman’, *yummaajo* ‘mother’, *tindugol* ‘meet’, *lewne* ‘urine’.

Finally, a minor source of honorific terms in Manding languages may have been Susu. There is a verb *xóli* ‘to eat’ marked in [Friedländer, n.d.] as “terme poli”, which may serve a source for *kónin* ‘to eat’ in Maninka, Mandinka and Jula. The Maninka respectful terms *nàminŋón* ‘wife’ and *lámori* ‘husband’ ascend to the Susu respectful terms *nàmijónxó* and *móri* ‘husband’ (probably, *lámori* has incorporated the Maninka possessive marker *lá*, which may be a calque from Susu: in Susu, unlike Maninka, the term for “husband” requires a possessive marker *xá/má*: *ń má móri* ‘my husband’). To my knowledge, the respectful terms for wife and husband are not known to the majority of Maninka; I suppose, their borrowing from was an initiative of Sulemana Kante.

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Let us try to sum up the analysis.

The honorific vocabulary in Manding languages, in its core part, seems to be an ancient phenomenon. Most probably, it dates back to the Ancient Mali era; otherwise, we could not expect such a high degree of similarity between Maninka and Mandinka. Its establishment was most probably tightly connected with islamization; the absence of an elaborated honorific vocabulary in the Bamana language can be therefore explained through the long history of the Bamana resistance to Islam. Quite logically, there is a noticeable input into the honorific vocabulary from the Soninke language and from the Arabic language (mainly, via Soninke). There were also influences from the languages of neighboring Muslim ethnic groups, Fulbe and Susu, although their input was much less tangible. At the later stage, many new honorific terms were created in Maninka of Guinea through derivation (from both honorific and neutral words).

I have to conclude that the origin of the major part of the honorific vocabulary remains unexplained. So far, we can advance here only speculative suggestions. However, this fact does not prevent me from using this vocabulary in an appropriate occasion:



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