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Author(s): Peter Sells and Masayo Iida

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Subject and Object Honorification in Japanese

Peter Sells and Masayo Iida
Stanford University and Hewlett-Packard Labs

Introduction

Since the pioneering work of Harada (1976), the honorific system of Japanese has received comparatively little attention in the theoretical literature. Our purpose in this paper is to show that the system of honorification of the arguments of verbs has some very interesting and important consequences for linguistic theory.

1. Honorification

There are two kinds of honorification that we will consider in this paper, honorification of subjects, and honorification of non-subjects (which we will refer to as ‘object honorification’). There are other kinds of ‘performative’ honorification in the language, such as honorification of addressee (Harada (1976)), which we will not consider at all.

1.1. Subject Honorification

For subjects which are considered honorable, Japanese allows optional expression of a ‘subject honorific’ (hereafter: SH) form, productively formed around the verb stem as indicated by the underlined forms in (1). Where possible, we will use single underlines to indicate subject honorific forms, and double underlines to indicate object honorific forms.

- (1) Subject Honorification: ‘o+V+ni naru’
- a. sensee-ga Tanaka-san-o mati-mas-u
teacher-NOM Tanaka-ACC wait.for-POL-PRES
‘The teacher waits for Tanaka.’
 - b. sensee-ga Tanaka-san-o o-mati-ni nari-mas-u
teacher-NOM Tanaka-ACC wait.for.SH-POL-PRES
‘The teacher waits for Tanaka.’

This SH form *o-mati-ni naru* alternates with other SH expressions, as shown in (2).

- (2) a. sensee-ga Tanaka-san-o mat-are-mas-u
teacher-NOM Tanaka-ACC wait.for.SH-POL-PRES
‘The teacher waits for Tanaka.’
- b. sensee-ga Tanaka-san-o o-mati-desu
teacher-NOM Tanaka-ACC wait.for.SH.POL.PRES
‘The teacher waits for Tanaka.’

The form in (2)a exhibits the use of the passive morpheme as an SH marker. In (b), *desu* is a form of the copula, which is also used as an SH marker. A few verbs have suppletive SH forms, discussed below.

1.2. Object Honorification

For honorific non-subjects there are productive ‘object honorific’ (hereafter: OH) forms, illustrated in (3).

(3) Object Honorification:

- a. 'o+V+suru'
Tanaka-san-ga sensee-o o-mati-si-mas-u
Tanaka-NOM teacher-ACC wait.for.OH-POL-PRES
'Tanaka waits for the teacher.'
- b. 'o+V+moosi ageru'
Tanaka-san-ga sensee-o o-mati-moosi age-mas-u
Tanaka-NOM teacher-ACC wait.for.OH-POL-PRES
'Tanaka waits for the teacher.'

For convenience, we will refer to the forms in (3) as ‘object honorific’, even though what really is honored is, in principle, any single non-subject argument (Harada (1976)), and usually it is the one highest on the thematic hierarchy.

The OH form in (a) is formed with the verb *suru*, which as a main verb means 'do'. In principle, any related form of *suru* can be used to express OH.

1.3. Structures

There are two basically identical structures that are used in the honorific forms. One is lexical compounding (such as *o-mati-suru*), and the other involves a phrasal collocation resulting in a complex verb. We will not argue for this distinction here, although it is crucial in a wider understanding of the properties of the general structures that Japanese has.

The structure we assume for the OH form *o-mati-suru* is shown in (4).

Following standard assumptions, we assume that *mati* is a noun zero-derived from a verb stem. The ‘honorific’ prefix *o-* attaches to nouns, and indicates that something in the context is honored. However, the presence of *o-* is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for honorification of any particular argument, as illustrated in the following subsection; morphosyntactically, it just contributes some formal feature, which we will call ‘[+O]’ (see also Suzuki (1989)). Thus, a form like *suru* in its OH use will select for a noun with the [+O] specification.

For an SH form like *o-mati-ni naru*, the selection of *naru* is essentially similar. In all its uses, *naru* (lit. 'become') selects for an N' marked with the particle *-ni*, illustrated below in (6). In its honorific use, it also requires the feature [+O].

(5)

- (6) a. sensee-ga *genki/genki-ni nar-u
teacher-NOM *healthy/healthy-DAT become-PRES
'The teacher becomes healthy.'
- b. Tanaka-ga *sensee/sensee-ni nar-u
Tanaka-NOM *teacher/teacher-DAT become-PRES
'Tanaka becomes a teacher.'

The distinction between these two types of structures does not interact with our account of honorification.

1.4. The Honorific Prefix

In most of the honorific forms that Japanese has, the whole form begins with the honorific prefix *o-* (sometimes *go-*). This form indicates that something in the context is honored, but it does not indicate which particular individual that might be; often this is pragmatically determined, as in (7), which involves not so much honorification as merely politeness.

- (7) o-benkyoo-si-mas-yoo!
HON-study-do-POL-let's
'Let's study!'

In the next examples, in (8), nominalized verb stems modify other nouns; the honorific prefix indicates that some argument of the stem is honored, but there is no necessary restriction as to which.

- (8) a. sensee-ga o-mati-no kata
 teacher-NOM HON-wait.for-GEN person
 'the person who the teacher waits for' (SH)
- b. sensee-o o-mati-no kata
 teacher-ACC HON-wait.for-GEN person
 'the person who waits for the teacher' (OH)
- c. sensee-ga o-mesiagari-no unagi
 teacher-NOM HON-eat.SH-GEN eel
 'the eel which the teacher eats' (SH)
- d. sensee-ni o-niai-no kata
 teacher-DAT HON-suit-GEN person
 'a person who suits the teacher' (OH)

We will not attempt to provide an analysis of these particular cases in this paper. However, it is clear that [+O] does not indicate the honored argument itself. In the context of the examples of verbal honorification that we will consider, we will assume that the presence of *o-* provides the formal feature [+O], and that other properties of the construction determine exactly which argument is honored.

2. Interactions

In this section we would like to look at various interactions of multiple instances of the marking of honorification.

2.1. Doubled Honorification

Our first point concerns the verb *suru* ('do') which appears in (9) (as *simasu*). The verb *suru* has an irregular SH honorific form *nasaru*, which blocks the expected **o-si-ni naru*.

- (9) sensee-ga tennisu-o si-mas-u
 teacher-NOM tennis-ACC do-POL-PRES
 'The teacher plays tennis.'
- (10) a. sensee-ga tennisu-o nasari-mas-u
 teacher-NOM tennis-ACC do.SH-POL-PRES
 'The teacher plays tennis.'
- b. *sensee-ga tennisu-o o-si-ni nari-mas-u
 teacher-NOM tennis-ACC do.SH-POL-PRES
 'The teacher plays tennis.'

For future reference, some of the various forms of *suru* are shown in (11)a. Some other irregular SH forms are shown in (11)b.

- (11) a. Forms of *suru* ('do'):
Plain	<i>suru</i>
Honor. Subj.	<i>nasaru</i>
Humble Subj.	<i>itasu</i>
Potential	<i>dekiru</i>
Causative	<i>saseru</i>

- b. Irregular SH forms:
do	<i>nasaru</i>
eat	<i>mesiagaru</i>
give	<i>kudasaru</i>

With these irregular forms, honorification may be 'doubled', as seen in (12).

- (12) a. sensee-ga tennis-o o-nasari-ni nari-mas-u
 teacher-NOM tennis-ACC do.SH.SH-POL-PRES
 'The teacher plays tennis.'
- b. sensee-ga unagi-o o-mesiagari-ni nari-mas-u
 teacher-NOM eel-ACC eat.SH.SH-POL-PRES
 'The teacher eats eel.'

This illustrates the fact that honorification is informationally specified by forms, and that the relevant information can 'unify'. This fact would be problematic for any syntactic theory that posits an honorification 'node' in the syntactic structure, for there would appear to be two. Subject honorification has been taken to be a reflection of subject-verb agreement in languages like Japanese and Korean, and undoubtedly it is the closest thing to agreement that these languages. In current Government-Binding approaches, the idea would be that Agr (or perhaps Hon) would be one of the 'functional categories' of the clausal structure (Ahn and Yoon (1989)). The fact that honorification is marked in two places would be quite puzzling under this view.

Instead, it seems quite clear that the phenomenon of double marking indicates the need for the view that words and constructions carry information, which must ultimately be compatible, as is standard in unification-based approaches, such as HPSG or LFG.

2.2. Multiple Honorification

Our second point concerns the fact that, for many speakers, honorification may be also multiplied: the form *o-mati-moosi age-ni naru* shown in (13) is a form which simultaneously honors both the subject and the object.

- (13) sensee-wa Tanaka-si-o o-mati-moosi age-ni nari-mas-u
 teacher-TOP Dr. Tanaka-ACC wait.for.OH.SH-POL-PRES
 'The teacher waits for Dr. Tanaka.'

There is some variation on examples like this: some speakers reject it. For them, it is only possible to honor one argument of the verb (as honoring two involves

placing one referent 'above' the other). However, many speakers find this form grammatically and pragmatically perfect. Note that the order within the complex verb is stem-OH-SH.

Significantly, the other order of SH and OH markers is completely unacceptable, to all speakers, shown in (14).

- (14) *sensee-wa Tanaka-si-o o-mati-ni nari-moosi age-mas-u
 teacher-TOP Dr. Tanaka-ACC wait.for.SH.OH-POL-PRES
 'The teacher waits for Dr. Tanaka.'

One might think that this would just be a random fact about the particular SH and OH heads used in these examples. Interestingly, this is not true. Other types of honorific heads show exactly the same properties, illustrated in (15).

- (15) a. sensee-ga Yamada-san-o o-mati-itas-are-masi-ta
 teacher-NOM Yamada-ACC wait.for-OH-SH-POL-PAST
 'The teacher waited for Mr. Yamada.'
- b. *sensee-ga Yamada-san-o o-mati-are-itasi-masi-ta
 teacher-NOM Yamada-ACC wait.for-SH-OH-POL-PAST
 'The teacher waited for Mr. Yamada.'
- c. sensee-ga Yamada-san-ni hon-o o-sasiage-ni nari-masi-ta
 teacher-NOM Yamada-DAT book-ACC give.OH-SH-POL-PAST
 'The teacher gave a book to Mr. Yamada.'
- d. sensee-wa Tanaka-si-o o-mati-moosi age desu
 teacher-TOP Dr. Tanaka-ACC wait.for-OH-SH.PRES
 'The teacher waits for Dr. Tanaka.'

An account of honorification must therefore explain the fact that, if multiple honorification is to be acceptable, the OH head must be 'closer' to the verb stem than the SH head, regardless of whether they are lexically or phrasally attached.

We believe that the facts here derive from a more general property of Japanese. Our hypothesis is that all SH heads are (intransitive) Raising predicates (i.e., have non-thematic subjects), while all OH heads are (transitive) Control predicates (i.e., have thematic subjects). Japanese has a general constraint which blocks Control predicates from appearing outside of Raising predicates (Kuno (1983), Nishigauchi and Takahashi (1990), Isoda (1990)). For example, the Control predicate *oeru* ('finish') must appear inside of subject honorification—in (16)b, it appears outside, and the example is bad.

- (16) a. sensee-ga hon-o o-yomi-oe-ni nari-masi-ta (Control-Raising)
 teacher-NOM book-ACC read-finish-SH-POL-PRES
 'The teacher finished reading the book.'
- b. *sensee-ga hon-o o-yomi-ni nari-oe-masi-ta (Raising-Control)
 teacher-NOM book-ACC read-SH-finish-POL-PRES
 'The teacher finished reading the book.'

Kuno (1983) notes data like this, and expresses the generalization that transitive verbs cannot appear outside of intransitive verbs. We believe that this is better understood in terms of the difference between Control and Raising. A similar contrast shows up in the next examples with *kakeru* ('to be about to do') being the Raising predicate.

- (17) a. ?Taroo-wa yatto tabe-oe-kake-te-ir-u (Control-Raising)
 Taroo-TOP finally eat-finish-almost-GER-be-PRES
 'Taroo is finally about to finish eating.'
- b. *Taroo-wa yatto tabe-kake-oe-te-ir-u (Raising-Control)
 Taroo-TOP finally eat-almost-finish-GER-be-PRES
 'Taroo is finally about to finish eating.'

While the (a) example is somewhat odd, due to the strangeness of the situation described, there is a clear contrast with the (b) example, which is totally unacceptable.

In fact, this property even holds in English.¹

- (18) a. John seemed to be trying to be quiet.
 b. *John was trying to seem to be quiet.

A natural explanation for this phenomenon would lie in the semantics of Control—the controlled argument must be able to bring about the situation described (Sag and Pollard (1991)); yet the subject argument of a Raising predicate clearly lacks this property.

We believe that it is quite plausible that all SH heads in Japanese are Raising predicates (such as *desu* and *-ni naru*). They are clearly intransitive, and Kuno (1983) suggests that *-ni naru* might be a Raising predicate.

On the other hand, it is equally plausible that all OH heads are Control predicates (such as *suru* and *moosi ageru*, which both mean 'do', basically). Under such assumptions, the facts in (15) and (16) are explained by whatever explains (17) and (18), namely, properties of the semantics of Control.

2.3. Blocked Multiple Honorification

Consider now the following attempted 'derivation' of a multiple honorific form. As we have seen, the form *o-mati-suru* honors the object. Also, *nasaru* is the subject-honorific form of *suru*, and so putting these two together as *o-mati-nasaru* ought to be multiple honorification. Significantly, this is not the case; this form is grammatical but is subject-honorific only (and thus a variant of *o-mati-ni naru*, etc.).

¹ We do not take examples like *John tried to appear unruffled* as counterevidence to this generalization. Bare adjectives after *appear* can be 'coerced' into a semi-agentive form, as in (*Make sure you*) *appear busy when the boss comes in*. However, it seems that Japanese lacks such 'coercion' (Sells (1991)).

- (19) sensee-ga Tanaka-san-o o-mati-nasari-mas-u
 teacher-NOM Tanaka-ACC wait.for.SH.(?OH)-POL-PRES
 'The teacher waits for Tanaka.' (SH only)

This example could not be acceptable if it were an object honorific form, as Tanaka is not superior to the speaker.

How does this come about? We hypothesize that information about honorification derives from two sources: constructional (e.g., *o+V-stem+suru*) or from lexical specification (e.g., *nasaru*). That is to say, *suru* itself is not an honorific verb, but this construction with *suru* in it is an honorific construction. On the other hand, *nasaru* means that the subject is honored, as an inherent lexical property. The fact that in *o-mati-nasaru* the honorification is not multiplied shows that lexical information 'shuts off' possible concomitant constructional information. Interestingly, other non-honorific forms of *suru* such as *dekiru* ('can do') and *itasu* ('humbly do') do not block constructional honorification, as seen in the OH forms in (20).

- (20) a. Tanaka-san-ga sensee-o o-mati-deki-mas-u
 Tanaka-NOM teacher-ACC wait.for.OH.can-POL-PRES
 'Tanaka can wait for the teacher.'
- b. Tanaka-san-ga sensee-o o-mati-itasi-mas-u
 Tanaka-NOM teacher-ACC wait.for.OH.humble-POL-PRES
 'Tanaka (humbly) waits for the teacher.'

3. A Lexical Account of Honorification

We will present an analysis of this data in the broad terms of an information-based theory, such as HPSG (Pollard and Sag (1987)).

3.1. Pure and Deverbal Nominal Compounds

Our account of the blocked multiple honorification with *nasaru* requires a much closer look at the properties of *suru* and *nasaru* and the structures in which they appear.

For the verbs themselves, the only relevant difference in their properties which we assume is given in (21), and is uncontroversial.

- (21) The verb *nasaru* has all the same properties as *suru*; in addition, *nasaru* is lexically marked as SH.

These two verbs have essentially the same distribution, the only difference being the fact of blocked multiple honorification with *nasaru*.²

Outside of their use as main verbs, the various forms of *suru* appear in structures where they are 'light verbs' (Grimshaw and Mester (1988)), or are phrasally compounded with either pure nominals or deverbal nominals; the first three uses are illustrated in (22). The fourth type is the OH use, as in (3)b.

² Of course, *nasaru* also blocks potential productive SH forms of *suru*. We assume that this is by some kind of 'Elsewhere Principle', which is tangential to our concerns here. Han (1991) provides an account of a similar kind of lexical blocking effect with regard to suppletive subject honorific forms in Korean.

- (22) a. kodomo-ga sensee-ni tanom-are-ta yoo-ni su-ru (main)
 child-NOM teacher-DAT ask-PASS-PAST like do-PRES
 'The child does as asked by the teacher.'
- b. gakusee-ga nihongo-no kenkyuu-o su-ru ('light verb')
 student-NOM Japanese-GEN research-ACC do-PRES
 'The student researches (does research of) Japanese.'
- c. gakusee-ga nihongo-o kenkyuu-su-ru (nominal compound)
 student-NOM Japanese-ACC research-do-PRES
 'The student researches Japanese.'

We have seen examples of the (OH) deverbal nominal compound above, with the structure repeated here as (23).

The combination with a pure nominal like *kenkyuu* ('research') (in (22)c above) is apparently quite similar, as seen in (24); Poser (1990) presents a detailed study of such structures.

However, there is one important difference: in (23) *suru* is a Control predicate, while in (24) it is a Raising predicate. The fact that it is a Raising predicate in the latter case can be illustrated by the contrast in (25), which holds for most speakers. The contrast illustrates a difference between the 'light verb' *suru* and the nominal compounding *suru*.

- (25) a. Ya-ga mato-ni meetyuu suru
 arrow-NOM target-DAT hit do-PRES
 'The arrow hits the target.'
- b. *Ya-ga mato-ni meetyuu-o suru
 arrow-NOM target-DAT hit-ACC do-PRES
 'The arrow hits the target.'

In (25)b, *suru* takes a true object in the 'light verb' construction; most speakers do not allow inanimate subjects for this use of *suru*, which is usually explained by categorizing it as a Control verb. That being the case, we are forced to conclude that the *suru* which combines with a pure nominal, as in (25)a, and in the examples at stake here, is a Raising predicate.

Summarizing then, we have the following combinations.

- (26) a. (Hon. Prefix +) Nominal + Raising *suru* (24)
- b. Hon. Prefix + Derived Nominal + Control *suru* (23)
- c. Hon. Prefix + Derived Nominal + Raising *-ni naru* (5)

All forms of the verb *suru* have both the Raising and Control counterparts, including *nasaru*.

3.2. Honorific Forms

Complex verbs like *kenkyuu suru* can be made into SH forms in a variety of ways, shown in (27). Here the honorific prefix takes the form *go-*.

- (27) a. *kenkyuu suru*, non-honorific
- b. *go-kenkyuu-ni naru*, SH
- c. *go-kenkyuu suru*, SH, marginal (see below)
- d. *kenkyuu nasaru*, SH
- e. *go-kenkyuu nasaru*, SH
- f. *go-kenkyuu nasari-ni naru*, doubled SH

The form *go-kenkyuu suru* is somewhat marginal as an SH form, for reasons that we do not fully understand. There are other complications with the pure nominal compounds which may be interfering, which we unfortunately cannot address here. Putting this problem aside, from the outline in (27), it is quite clear how SH is 'licensed', so to speak—there must be at least one morpheme in the structure which is associated with honorification, either the *go-* prefix, or the lexical honorific verb *nasaru*, or both. For simplicity, let us assume that *nasaru* contributes the feature [+O], as a lexical property.

Note that all of these SH forms involve Raising predicates and pure nominal compounds. This recalls the generalization above that all SH forms are Raising predicates. In contrast, compound verbal structures which involve deverbal nominals involve Control predicates, and are OH forms. The generalizations that we have observed about Japanese are summarized in (28).

- (28) Generalizations about Japanese:
 - a. Pure nominals compound with Raising verbs.
 - b. Deverbal nominals compound with Control verbs.
 - c. All SH forms involve Raising verbs, with one exception: *o-V-nasaru*.
 - d. All OH forms involve Control verbs.

These generalizations can be derived from the following principles, which we claim should be part of the lexicon of Japanese. The crucial part is that there are no processes of subject honorification, or object honorification per se; rather, the honorification facts are predictable from other properties of the construction, subject to lexical exceptions. This is quite analogous to the choice of controller in syntactic accounts of Control phenomena (e.g., Bresnan (1982)).

(29) Principles of the Lexicon:

- a. Any verbal structure that is specified as [+O] is an **honorific verbal structure**; one of its arguments is honored. Unless lexically specified, the particular honored argument is determined by (b) and (c).
- b. Any verbal structure which is headed by Raising predicate is a SH verbal structure.
- c. Any verbal structure which is headed by Control predicate is an OH verbal structure.

The patterns that these rules predict are quite simple, and correct, shown in (30).

(30) a. *kenkyuu suru* is a non-honorific form.

- b. *go-kenkyuu-ni naru* is honorific, and as the type of *-ni naru* is Raising, it is SH.
- c. *go-kenkyuu suru* is honorific, and as the type of *suru* is Raising, it is SH.
- d. *(go-)kenkyuu nasaru* is honorific, and must be SH due to lexical information on *nasaru*.
- e. *o-mati-ni naru* is honorific, and as the type of *-ni naru* is Raising, it is SH.
- f. *o-mati suru* is honorific, and as the type of *suru* is Control, it is OH.
- g. *o-mati nasaru* is honorific, and even though the type of *nasaru* is Control, it is SH due to lexical information on *nasaru*.

Using a simplified HPSG notation, the lexical entries for honorific uses of (subject-controlled) Raising and Control verbs are shown in (31).

(31) a. Raising verb:

SUBCAT < [X]_i, Y, N[+O, SUBCAT < [X]_i, Y >] >

default: honor(Sp, *i*)

b. Control verb:

SUBCAT < NP_{*i*}, Y, N[+O, SUBCAT < NP_{*i*}, Y >] >

default: honor(Sp, *j*; XP_{*j*} ∈ Y)

In (a), the Raising verb subcategorizes for a noun with the [+O] feature, and shares a subject (X) and any non-subject arguments (the list Y) with it. Essentially, then, all the nouns arguments are inherited. By default, the subject's index is the referential index of the honored argument. In (b), the Control verb subcategorizes for a noun with the [+O] feature, and shares any non-subject arguments (the list Y) with it. The subject of the verb is coindexed with the unexpressed subject of the noun. By default, the some non-subject's index is the referential index of the honored argument.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have suggested that (29) represents the basic facts to be accounted for, and the way in which that should be achieved. There is only one process of honorification, with its target predictable from the type of verb involved. Why this correlation should exist remains, at this stage, unexplained, and a topic for future research.

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