

Pragmatic constraints on subject-oriented honorifics in Yaeyaman and Japanese *

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Abstract This paper explores cross-linguistic differences in the pragmatic constraints governing the use of subject-oriented honorific verb forms in Japanese and in three varieties of Yaeyaman (Southern Ryukyuan). I show that plural subjects with mixed honorific status give rise to different felicity patterns in these language varieties, and argue that these differences arise from different rankings of competing pragmatic constraints.

Keywords: honorifics, plurals, constraint-based pragmatics, Ryukyuan, Yaeyaman, Japanese

1 Introduction

This paper explores cross-linguistic differences in the pragmatic constraints governing the use of subject-oriented honorific verb forms in Japanese and in three varieties of Yaeyaman (Southern Ryukyuan). Section 2 provides a basic overview of subject honorifics in both languages, and a formalization of the core pragmatic constraints governing their use. In all languages examined, subject-oriented honorifics are felicitously used with verbs whose subjects refer to someone who is older or higher ranked than the speaker, and infelicitous with subjects whose referent is younger or lower ranked than the speaker. This basic contrast is attributed to the requirements made by two pragmatic constraints, one of which militates against underhonorification and the other of which militates against overhonorification. Section 3 turns to cases of plural subjects whose referents are mixed in terms of their honorific status, and therefore make conflicting demands on these two constraints. I show that plural subjects with mixed honorific status give rise to different felicity patterns in different languages, and argue that these differences arise from different

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rankings of competing pragmatic constraints. I then consider plural subjects that include reference to the speaker or addressee, and show that such sentences exhibit felicity patterns that require for their explanation additional constraints that govern honorification of speakers and addressees. I argue that these constraints are ranked differently in the languages examined, and interact with the kind of speech act being performed. I conclude in section 4 by considering the consequences of the data adduced in this paper for existing theories of subject honorification.

2 Subject oriented honorifics

2.1 Empirical overview

Both Japanese and Yaeyaman have verbal forms that signal honorification of the grammatical subject.¹ In Japanese, there are two primary strategies for forming a subject-oriented honorific verb form: (i) addition of the suffix *-(r)are* to the verb, and (ii) the complex verbal construction *o-Verb Root=ni naru*. These two strategies are illustrated by the following example, from Oshima 2019 (in this and all following examples, honorific alternatives are give between curly brackets and separated by a bar):²

- (1) Suzuki-san=ga {kak-u | kak-are-ru | o-kaki=ni naru}.
 Suzuki-Mx=NOM {write-PRS | write-are-PRS | o-write=ni naru}
 “Suzuki will write (it).”

According to Oshima, the three alternative verb forms in (1) signal a three-way contrast in the degree to which “respect” is expressed toward Suzuki, from lowest (the unmarked verbal form *kak-u*) to highest (the complex *o-kaki=ni naru* form). For certain verbs, the highest honorific form is instead marked by suppletion of the verbal root, and sometimes a single suppletive honorific form will cover the meanings of two or more unmarked verb forms. For example, the honorific verb *irassharu* covers the meaning of *iru* “to exist (animate)”, *iku* “go”, and *kuru* “come”:

1 These verbal forms are part of larger systems of honorific marking that exist in both languages. The Japanese system is described in some detail in Hasegawa 2017, Oshima 2019, and Yamada 2019. Subject honorifics exemplify a class of honorific expressions that express a relation between the speaker and the referent of a noun phrase; such honorifics are called “referent honorifics” in Comrie 1976, “propositional honorifics” in Harada 1976, “argument honorifics” in McCready 2019, and “content-oriented markers of politeness” in Portner, Pak & Zanuttini 2019, and contrast with those honorifics that exclusively target the contextually specified addressee or audience.

2 Glossing conventions: EXCL exclusive, FOC focus, HON honorific, HORT hortative, INCL inclusive, NOM nominative, PL plural, POL politeness marker, PRS present, SFP sentence final particle, TOP topic.

- (2) a. Suzuki-san=ga umi=ni **iru/iku/kuru**.
 Suzuki-Mx=NOM ocean=to exist/go/come
 “Suzuki is at / will go to / will come to the ocean.”
- b. Suzuki-san=ga umi=ni **irassharu**.
 Suzuki-Mx=NOM ocean=to exist/go/come.HON
 “Suzuki is at / will go to / will come to the ocean.”
 (+ speaker honors Suzuki)

Yaeyaman verbs exhibit a two-way formal contrast between unmarked verbal forms and subject-oriented honorific verbal forms. As in Japanese, Yaeyaman has a suppletive honorific verb, *ooru* or *waaru*, depending on the variety, that covers the meaning of the honorifically unmarked verbs meaning “exist (animate)”, “go”, and “come”. The subject-oriented honorific form of other verbs in Yaeyaman is created by adding *ooru/waaru*, either as an auxiliary or a suffix, to the unmarked verb form.³

The basic pragmatic contrast in the use of plain and honorific verb forms is illustrated by the following examples from Maezato (here and henceforth, felicity contrasts in honorific alternatives are indicated by **bold face** for felicity and a #hash mark for infelicity):

- (3) a. **abuza**=ndu sunaka=ha {#hatta | **ootta**}.
grandfather=NOM.FOC ocean=to {#went | **went.HON**}
 “That elder man went to the ocean.”
- b. unu **faa**=ndu sunaka=ha {**hatta** | #ootta}.
 that **child**=NOM.FOC ocean=to {**went** | #went.HON}
 “That child went to the ocean.”

The examples in (3), and all other Yaeyaman examples discussed in this paper, were elicited and judged relative to a context where the speaker is understood to be a man in his late 30s.⁴ In example (3a), the subject refers to a village elder, significantly older than the speaker. Age-based seniority is a prominent feature of Yaeyaman society, and probably the primary determinant of honorific usage.⁵ In example (3a),

3 As in Japanese, Yaeyaman has some verbs for which subject-oriented honorification is marked by other suppletive forms; I leave the full description of these forms aside for reasons of space.

4 Full disclosure: the man in question is me.

5 In my own experience, age-based seniority is the most prominent factor in establishing the hierarchical differences on which honorific usage in Yaeyaman is based. Another potential dimension that plays into honorific usage is religious status; gods and ancestors, and those who mediate between gods/ancestors and the community, are accorded high status, including those who take on such status temporarily in the context of religious or ceremonial functions. People who take on particular secular social roles may also receive such status. In my own fieldwork, the dimension underlying judgments of felicity is always age-based, and the way that other dimensions play into the use of honorifics remains to be explored.

failure to use the honorific form is infelicitous, in that it violates norms of language usage and is felt to be socially inappropriate or rude toward the elder. A speaker can of course *choose* to violate this norm, but native speaker consultants consistently correct such sentences with comments to the effect that honorific forms should be used when the subject refers to someone (significantly) older than the speaker. By contrast, the use of the honorific is infelicitous in example (3b), in which the subject refers to a child, and the plain form is instead used.

2.2 Analysis

I will base my analysis on that of Oshima (2019). The basic intuition underlying Oshima’s approach is as follows. First, different verb forms are ranked by the degree to which they honor the subject referent, with the unmarked form indicating no honorification, and one or more marked forms expressing relatively greater degrees of honorification. Second, social norms dictate that speakers should select the form that expresses the maximal degree of honorification that does not exceed the degree warranted by the subject referent.

For the purposes of this paper, I will maintain a relatively neutral stance toward the underlying semantic mechanisms of honorification, and simply define, for a degree d honorific form, the characteristic function of the *appropriately honored set* of entities for that form, given an anchor a and a context c , as follows:

- (4) $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d = \lambda x$. the appropriate degree of honor for a to express to x in c is at least d

The anchor for all the forms considered in this paper, and as far as I know for *all* honorific expressions in Yaeyaman and Japanese, is set to the speaker.⁶ The degree d ranges over the real interval $[0, 1]$, with higher values associated with higher degrees of honorification.⁷

I will discuss how the data presented in this paper fit with this and other theories of honorifics in section 4. The main substantive claim that the discussion so far depends on (and which follows from Oshima’s analysis) is that an honorific’s lexically specified degree serves to set a *lower bound* on the degree of honorification appropriate for members of the appropriately honored set. In other words, the set

⁶ It has been claimed that subject-oriented honorific verb forms in Korean are instead anchored to the addressee (Kim & Sells 2007, citing Han 1991, Ihm, Hong & Chang 1988, Lee & Kuno 1995), but experimental counter-evidence is presented in Lee, Sorin & O’Grady 2017, suggesting that the anchor in Korean is set to the speaker as well.

⁷ Oshima’s own proposal uses the interval $[-1, 1]$, with negative values used to model the meaning of negative honorifics, which serve to *lower* the status of their target. Since I do not consider negative honorifics in this paper, I will only make use of the positive interval $[0, 1]$.

associated with a degree d honorific is the set of entities that deserve *at least* degree d honorification. From this it follows that the appropriately honored set of a higher degree alternative will be a subset of the appropriately honored sets of all lower degree alternatives, for a given anchor and context. This assumption will allow for a particular formulation of the constraints governing competition between competing forms, and giving it up would require a reformulation of those constraints.

In the examples from Yaeyaman in (3), the facts are that (for a speaker in their late 30s) the verbal honorific form is associated with a d for which $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d(x) = 1$ for any village elder x and $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d(x) = 0$ for any child x , at least given the implied context that consultants imagined while providing judgments. Given the literature on honorifics and the discussion thus far, it is clear that the degree of “social superiority” of x relative to y is a primary factor driving the calculation of whether x meets the criteria for a particular degree of honorification, and that in Yaeyaman relative age is an important determinant of social superiority. The factors underlying this determination might differ between languages, and other potential factors might include formality of context, familiarity, and so on, as discussed in particular in [McCready 2019](#). How the “honorific status” of a particular referent in a particular context is to be calculated and compared to the lexically specified honorific level d is an area where semantic and pragmatic issues converge with sociolinguistic ones, and will be left aside for the remainder of this paper.

The next step in capturing the pragmatic intuition outlined above is to define pragmatic constraints that require a speaker to use the maximal degree of honorification that does not go beyond what is warranted by the status of the target of honorification. I will argue that this results from two independent constraints, which I label *UNDERHONOR and *OVERHONOR.

- (5) *UNDERHONOR: Assign a penalty to an utterance u in context c that targets X for honorification by a at degree d , if there exists an honorific variant utterance u' that targets X for honorification by a at degree d' , where $d' > d$ and (the referent of) X includes an x for which $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{d'}(x) = 1$.
- (6) *OVERHONOR: Assign a penalty to an utterance u in context c that targets X for honorification by a at degree d , if (the referent of) X includes an x for which $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d(x) = 0$

The statement of the constraints may look a bit baroque, but the intuition is straightforward: *UNDERHONOR says not to honor someone to a lesser degree than is both warranted and possible, given the resources of the language, while *OVERHONOR says not to honor someone to a higher degree than warranted.⁸ These constraints will operate in a pragmatic system that involves competition between alternative

⁸ The somewhat cumbersome verbiage at the end of these constraints, specifying conditions on an x

utterances, with these and other constraints assigning penalties to the competitors, in the style of Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky 2004/1993).

The competing alternatives that are evaluated by these constraints are otherwise identical “honorific variants”, which building on Oshima 2019 are defined as a set of sentences with identical at-issue content but with differing honorific content, generated by freely substituting honorific variants of any lexical items in those sentences. In order to allow the constraints to evaluate competition between honorifically marked and unmarked (neutral) forms, we require a principle that sets the honorific level of a neutral form to degree 0, as also posited in Oshima 2019. This can be done by either a default interpretation principle, or by associating morphologically unmarked forms with a phonologically null degree 0 honorific morpheme.

Turning back to the data, in Yaeyaman we have a simple contrast between an honorifically neutral (unmarked) form that competes with the subject-oriented honorific verb form *ooru/waaru*. In line with the discussion above, the use conditions of the honorific form will be modeled by the context-sensitive function $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d$, with d representing the lexically determined degree of honorification. For the sake of concreteness, we can let $d = .5$, although this doesn’t have any significance without comparison to other honorifics of different degrees. The neutral verb form will be associated with honorific $d = 0$.

As we have already seen, in Yaeyaman the use of the honorific verb form is felt to be socially obligatory, for a speaker in their 30s, when the subject refers to a village elder (someone significantly older than the speaker), as seen in (3a), and inappropriate when the subject refers to a child (someone significantly younger than the speaker), as seen in (3b). From this, we can posit that $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{0.5}(x) = 1$ for any village elder x , and $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{0.5}(x) = 0$ for any child x , given the kind of context assumed by consultants in the interpretation of these examples. The felicity pattern in (3) falls out directly from this assumption in conjunction with the pressures exerted by *UNDERHONOR and *OVERHONOR. The use of the honorific with a child-referring subject will violate *OVERHONOR, while the unmarked form will violate neither constraint. By contrast, the use of the unmarked form with a subject referring to a village elder will violate *UNDERHONOR, while use of the honorific form will violate neither constraint. This accounts for the contrast in (3a) and (3b).

In Japanese we have two different subject-oriented honorific verb forms, (*r*)*are* and *o*...*ni naru*, which compete with each other and with the unmarked, honorifically neutral form. Following Oshima, I will associate the two honorifically marked forms with the honorific degrees 0.4 and 0.6, respectively, and the neutral form with

that is “included in” the referent of honorific target X, is designed to handle cases of plural subjects, which are taken up in the next section.

degree 0. This gives rise to three distinct kinds of situation:

1. Situations in which neither honorific is appropriate for subject referent x (i.e. $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{0.4}(x) = 0$ and $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{0.6}(x) = 0$).
2. Situations in which *(r)are* is appropriate for subject referent x (i.e. $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{0.4}(x) = 1$ but $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{0.6}(x) = 0$).
3. Situations in which *o...ni naru* is appropriate for subject referent x (i.e. $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{0.4}(x) = 1$ and $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{0.6}(x) = 1$).

Empirically, what we want is the use of either honorific to be blocked in the first kind of situation, the use of *(r)are* to be required in the second kind of situation, and the use of *o...ni naru* to be required in the third kind of situation. This is achieved by the constraints defined above. For situation 1, the use of either honorific form will violate *OVERHONOR, and the unmarked form will violate neither constraint. In situation 2, the unmarked form will violate *UNDERHONOR, while *o...ni naru* will violate *OVERHONOR. The use of *(r)are* violates neither. Finally, in situation 3, the use of either the unmarked form or *(r)are* violates *UNDERHONOR, while the use of *o...ni naru* violates neither constraint.

3 Constraint clashes: Subject honorifics with mixed status plural subjects

In the competitions described in the previous section, the winner was the form that violated *neither* *UNDERHONOR *nor* *OVERHONOR, while the losers all violated one or the other. In this section, I turn to cases where every competitor violates at least one constraint, and argue that in such cases the winner is determined by language-particular rankings of these and other constraints. Such cases are created by using plural subjects of “mixed” honorific status. Schematically, we proceed by creating a plural subject referring to A+B, where sentences with singular subjects referring to A *require* honorification, while sentences with singular subjects referring to B *disallow* honorification. Empirically, the question is whether or not the plural subject A+B will allow for honorification. As will be seen, the answer to this question depends on the language (and sometimes on the individual speaker). Theoretically, accounting for this variation in judgments is achieved by allowing for language-specific (and even individual-specific) rankings of the constraints governing the use of honorifics.

3.1 Third person plural subjects

The first case of constraint conflict is illustrated by the Yaeyaman examples in (7), where the plural subject refers to a village elder and child. Our two constraints

make conflicting demands in such cases. Given that the subject referent includes an elder, *UNDERHONOR will demand that the honorific be used, while the fact that the referent includes a child means that *OVERHONOR will demand that the honorific not be used. So what happens? As the data below show, the answer depends on the variety of Yaeyaman we look at. In Kohama, the sentence is judged infelicitous *with* the honorific form, while in Maezato and Hatoma the sentence is judged infelicitous *without* the honorific form:

(7) “That grandfather and child went to the ocean together.”

a. **Kohama**

unu auci=too unu faa=too futaaŕi in=ge {hattaru |
that grandfather=and that child=and two.people ocean=to {went |
#waattaru }.
#went.HON }

b. **Maezato**

ubuza=tu faa=tu maazon sunaka=ha {#hatta | ootta }.
grandfather=and child=and together ocean=to {#went | went.HON }

c. **Hatoma**

abuzyee=tu maa=ndu maazun=si sunaka=na
grandfather=and grandchild=NOM.FOC together ocean=to
{#giiti-kuuta | ooriti-ootta }.
{#went-returned | went.HON-returned.HON }

In Kohama, the honorific is infelicitous, respecting *OVERHONOR, while in Maezato and Hatoma, the honorific is required, respecting *UNDERHONOR. The divergence in judgments can be derived by different rankings of the two constraints: ranking *OVERHONOR >> *UNDERHONOR predicts that honorific marking should be infelicitous in mixed-subject sentences, as seen in Kohama, while *UNDERHONOR >> *OVERHONOR predicts that such sentences should require honorific marking, as seen in Maezato and Hatoma.

Turning now to Japanese, I will simplify the discussion by henceforth considering only the contrast between the non-honorific (unmarked) verb form and the *o-...ni naru* honorific form.⁹ In Japanese, the judgment is facilitated by the use of nominal

⁹ The distinction between the felicity conditions of the two Japanese honorific forms discussed in the previous section is quite subtle, and it is easier to see the contrast between honorific and non-honorific forms. The conflict in honorific status described here seems not to be resolvable by “averaging out” the honorific statuses with an intermediate form, and limiting the choice to these two options does not seem to pose any substantive problems, except for the existence of “avoidance strategies”, as described below.

suffixes that correlate with honorific status; the suffix *-sama* is used with high-status referents (who are thus naturally understood as warranting honorification) while the suffix *-kun* is used with lower-status referents (who are thus naturally understood as not warranting honorification). The strategy for eliciting judgments mirrors that for Yaeyaman. First, it is established that sentences with subjects referring to A require honorification, while those with subjects referring to B disallow it, as follows:

- (8) a. A-sama=ga umi=ni {#itta | **irasshatta**}.
 A-high.status=NOM ocean=to {#went | **went.HON**}
 “A went to the ocean.”
- b. B-kun=ga umi=ni {**itta** | #irasshatta}.
 B-lower.status=NOM ocean=to {**went** | #went.HON}
 “B went to the ocean.”

Having established this background contrast in felicity, the consultant is then asked which of the two verb forms is acceptable when A and B are conjoined:

- (9) A-sama to B-kun=ga umi=ni {itta | irasshatta}.
 A-high.status and B-lower.status=NOM ocean=to {went | went.HON}
 “A and B went to the ocean.”

Having conducted this test informally with a number of native speakers of Japanese, I have found three distinct kinds of response. There are some speakers who accept the use of the plain form and reject the use of the honorific. These judgments pattern with those of my Kohama consultant, and can be modeled by ranking *OVERHONOR >> *UNDERHONOR. There are other speakers who instead reject the use of the plain form and prefer the use of the honorific. These speakers’ judgments pattern with those of my Maezato and Hatoma consultants, and can be modeled by the opposite ranking, *UNDERHONOR >> *OVERHONOR. This variation in judgments suggests that there is inter-speaker variation in how these constraints are ranked, even within a single language.¹⁰

There is a third group of Japanese speakers who reject both versions of the sentence, and instead offer sentences that avoid the clash altogether. The following are some examples of alternative strategies provided by these speakers:

¹⁰ Alternatively, these different judgments may reflect dialectal differences within Japanese; I have not investigated whether these judgments correlate with dialect. Conversely, the small number of consultants for the Yaeyaman data (1 for Kohama, 2 for Maezato, and 3 for Hatoma) mean that what I have analyzed there as dialectal differences may instead reflect individual differences, although I have not detected any inter-speaker variation among my Maezato and Hatoma consultants. In either case, the two patterns of judgment can be analyzed by the relative ranking of *OVERHONOR and *UNDERHONOR.

- (10) a. A-sama=ga B-kun=to isshoni umi=ni irasshatta.
 A-high.status=NOM B-lower.status=with together ocean=to went.HON
 “A went to the ocean together with B.”
- b. A-sama-tachi=ga umi=ni irasshatta.
 A-high.status-PL=NOM ocean=to went.HON
 “A and their associates went to the ocean.”

The sentence in (10a) avoids the clash by introducing B with a comitative phrase, so that the grammatical subject refers only to A, which in turn licenses the honorific verb form. The sentence in (10b) has a subject that refers to A, and uses the associative plural suffix *tachi* (Nakanishi & Tomioka 2004, Tomioka to appear) to indicate that the associates of A (here, including at least B) also went to the ocean. Interestingly, the speaker who suggested this sentence was unhappy with either version of (9), but accepts the honorific in (10b), suggesting that the associative plural marker does not make the associates of A “visible” to the honorific.

I refer to strategies like those exemplified in (10) as “avoidance strategies”; speakers can adopt these strategies to avoid the violation of either *UNDERHONOR or *OVERHONOR. These strategies are of course available to *all* speakers. The problem is accounting for why *some* speakers seem to *only* permit the avoidance strategy, and judge either version of (9) as deviant. I will not attempt to account for the judgments of this third group of speakers in this paper, but only point to the problems that their existence raises for the theory articulated here. The first issue concerns whether sentences like those in (10) should be treated as honorific variants that enter into the constraint-based competition that I have thus far articulated. If they do, and if their inclusion accounts for the rejection of both versions of (9), then we have to account for why not all speakers of Japanese reject both versions of (9). One possibility is that sentences like those in (10) are competitors, but violate something like a faithfulness constraint, in that they deviate from the (implied) input form that the competitors in (9) are understood as being faithful to. Another possibility is that for these speakers, the grammar simply rules out both versions of (9) in a way that cannot be explained using the kind of violable constraints employed here. I leave this issue unresolved for the time being.

3.2 Constraints on speaker and addressee honorification

Oshima (2019) notes that honorifics are not allowed with first person subjects in Japanese, and attributes this to a constraint banning self-honorification, which I formulate as follows:

- (11) *HONORSELF: Assign a penalty to any utterance *u* containing an honorific of degree $d > 0$ targeting X if (the referent of) X includes the speaker.

Sentences with a plural subject referring to the speaker and a high status third person make conflicting demands on *HONORSELF and *UNDERHONOR. As shown in (12), such examples make the use of the subject honorific infelicitous in Japanese, including for speakers who prefer the honorific in examples like (9) with mixed status third person plural subjects:

- (12) watashi=to A-sama=ga isshoni umi=ni {itta |
 I=and A-higher.status=NOM together ocean=to {went |
 #irasshatta}.
 #went.HON}
 “A and I went to the ocean together.”

The fact that the honorific form in (12) is bad even for those speakers who prefer the honorific form in (9) shows that *HONORSELF outranks *UNDERHONOR for all speakers of Japanese I consulted.

The Yaeyaman data in (13) show the same felicity pattern as in Japanese:

- (13) “We (= that elder man and I) went to the ocean together.”
- a. **Kohama**
 (Data need confirmation, but first impression is that it patterns with other two dialects)
- b. **Maezato**
 bantaa maazon sunaka=na=du {hareta=dara | #ooreta=dara }
 we.EXCL together ocean=to=FOC {went=SFP | #went.HON=SFP }
- c. **Hatoma**
 bantaa maazun=si sunaka=na {giiti-kuuta |
 we.EXCL together ocean=to {went-returned |
 #ooriti-ootta}.
 #went.HON-returned.HON}

Recall that in the Yaeyaman mixed status third person plural subject examples in (7), both Maezato and Hatoma required honorific marking. In (13), however, we see that sentences whose subjects refer to the *speaker* and a high-status elder are *infelicitous* with honorific marking in both of these varieties, with consultants reporting that the infelicity is because such utterances would end up honoring the speaker. Accounting for the data in (13) requires that *HONORSELF outrank *UNDERHONOR in Maezato and Hatoma, since the pressure not to honor oneself conflicts here with the pressure to honor the high-status elder; that is, the mandate to honor those who deserve

honorification is sacrificed to the higher ranked constraint militating against self-honorification.¹¹

The examples in (14) contain plural subjects referring to the speaker and a socially-superior addressee.

- (14) Context: Speaker addressing someone of higher social status.
 “We (= you and I) went together to the ocean.”

a. **Kohama**

bakaa futaaraa kīnu=ya in=ge {hatta=tura |
 we.INCL two.people yesterday=TOP ocean=to {went=SFP |
 #waatta=tura }.
 #went.HON=SFP }

b. **Maezato**

kinoo beeta maazon sunaka=na=du {hareta=dara |
 yesterday we.INCL together ocean=to=FOC {went=SFP |
 #ooreta=dara }.
 #went.HON=SFP }

c. **Hatoma**

kinoo bee futaaru=si sunaka=na {giiti-kuuta |
 yesterday we.INCL two.people ocean=to {went-returned |
 ooriti-ootta }.
 went.HON-returned.HON }

There is a subtle contrast between the data in (14) and what we saw in (13), where the subject referred to the speaker and a socially-superior third person. The felicity pattern in Kohama and Maezato is identical in these two contexts, with consultants reporting that the honorific is infelicitous. In Hatoma, however, the honorific can be optionally used. This contrasts with the pattern for Hatoma in (13), where the use of the honorific is felt to be infelicitous.

The data in (13) was modeled by ranking *HONORSELF over *UNDERHONOR in both Maezato in Hatoma; the contrast between (13c) and (14c) for Hatoma suggests that *HONORSELF is in tension with an additional constraint which requires honorification of socially superior *addressees* (note that this is a more specific version of the broader *UNDERHONOR constraint):

¹¹ I do not at this time have direct positive or negative data for this kind of sentence in Kohama. When asked to translate such sentences, my consultant provided sentences that avoid the problem by saying something like “I went to the ocean with that elder man” or the like, in line with the avoidance strategies discussed above. Further fieldwork is needed to get direct judgments about the corresponding sentences with plural subjects.

- (15) *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR}: Assign a penalty to an utterance u in context c that targets X for honorification by a at degree d , if there exists an honorific variant utterance u' that targets X for honorification by a at degree d' , where $d' > d$ and (the referent of) X includes an x for which $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{d'}(x) = 1$, **and x is an addressee in c .**

In Kohama and Maezato, this constraint is outranked by *HONORSELF, resulting in the same pattern in both (13) and (14): infelicity of the subject honorific, resulting from *HONORSELF \gg *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR}, *UNDERHONOR. Note that this pattern would be accounted for without positing a *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR} constraint, since *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR} penalizes a subset of sentences penalized by *UNDERHONOR. The necessity of *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR} becomes evident only when we look at Hatoma, where the honorific is infelicitous in (13c) but felicitous in (14c). The felicity of *both* the honorific *and* the plain verb form (that is, optional use of the honorific) in (14c) can be modeled by having *HONORSELF and *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR} relatively unranked in Hatoma, while in Kohama and Maezato *HONORSELF \gg *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR}.

Japanese patterns with Kohama and Maezato, with all speakers I have consulted reporting that the honorific form is infelicitous in sentences like the following, addressed to a high-status addressee:

- (16) watashitachi=ga kinoo umi=ni {**ikimashita** | #irasshaimasita}.
 we=NOM yesterday ocean=to {**went.POL** | #went.HON.POL}
 “We (=you and I) went to the ocean yesterday.”

This leads to the conclusion that *HONORSELF outranks *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR} in Japanese.

3.3 Interactions with speech act

The examples in (14) are syntactically declaratives, and pragmatically used to make assertions. The examples in (17) differ minimally from those in (14) in that the verbs appear with hortative mood morphology, and pragmatically are used to make invitations (that is, to suggest to the addressee that they and the speaker take some action).

- (17) Context: Speaker addressing someone of higher social status.
 “Let’s (= you and I) go to the ocean.”

a. Kohama

dii bakaa futaaraa in=ge {(hara) | **waara** }.
 hey we.INCL two.people ocean=to {(go.HORT) | **go.HORT.HON** }

b. **Maezato**

beeta manama=hara sunaka=ha {#hara=ra |
 we.INCL now=from ocean=to {#go.HORT=SFP |
oora=ra }.
go.HORT.HON=SFP }

c. **Hatoma**

bee maazun=si sunaka {#para=di | **oora=di** }.
 we.INCL two.people ocean {#go.HORT=SFP | **go.HORT.HON=SFP** }

As can be seen by comparing (14) and (17), the shift in speech act triggers a shift in the felicity patterns of the (non-)honorific verb forms. Whereas in the assertive sentences in (14) the honorific form was only felicitous in Hatoma, in the invitational sentences in (17), the honorific form is felicitous in all varieties, while the plain form is not.¹² This contrast suggests that there is another dimension involved in deciding how the competing constraints are resolved. It is as if the relative ranking of *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR} and *HONORSELF are switched, depending the speech act of the sentence.

I suggest that the interaction here, with invitational speech acts making a greater demand on honorification of the addressee than assertive speech acts, is related to the fact that invitations are more face-threatening than assertions, and thus require compensatory mechanisms for ameliorating this additional face-threat.¹³ The idea in short goes like this: Invitations are a kind of request, and are thus negative face-threatening acts, in that they impose on the addressee's autonomy (Goffman 1967, Brown & Levinson 1987). This puts additional pressure on the speaker to honor the addressee as a form of negative politeness. This in turn can override the otherwise higher-ranked constraint to avoid self-honorification.

I incorporate this idea into the constraint-based framework adopted here by positing the following constraint, which is a more specific version of *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR} that applies specifically to face-threatening utterances:

- (18) *UNDERHONOR_{ADDR/-FACE}: Assign a penalty to an utterance u in context c that targets X for honorification by a at degree d , if there exists an honorific variant utterance u' that targets X for honorification by a at degree d' , where $d' > d$ and (the referent of) X includes an x for which $\text{HON}_{a,c}^{d'}(x) = 1$, and x is an addressee in c , **and u is a negative face-threatening speech act.**

12 The judgment regarding the infelicity of the plain form in Kohama requires confirmation; in my fieldwork recordings, my consultant seems to avoid the plain form here, but I do not have direct negative evidence (a metajudgment from the speaker that the use of the plain form here is rude or infelicitous) at this time.

13 The approach outlined here was inspired by conversations with Chris Potts and Elin McCready.

With this constraint in place, the contrast between (17) and (14) can be modeled by ranking $*\text{UNDERHONOR}_{\text{ADDR}/\text{-FACE}}$ over $*\text{HONORSELF}$ in all three varieties of Yaeyaman examined. This will force the use of the subject-oriented honorific in sentences with inclusive first-person plural subjects if the utterance is interpreted as performing a negative face-threatening speech act.

The Japanese example in (19) corresponds to the Yaeyaman invitational sentences in (17). The upshot of the example in (19) is that, in contrast to Yaeyaman, Japanese invitational sentences are incompatible with subject-oriented verbal honorific marking.¹⁴

- (19) watashitachi(=mo) isshoni umi=ni {**iki-mashou** |
 we(=also) together ocean=to {**go-POL.HORT** |
 #irasshai-mashou}.
 #go.HON-POL.HORT}
 “Let’s go to the ocean together (too).”

The contrast here is a crisp one: Yaeyaman speakers are quite clear in their judgment that honorific forms must be used in invitations to higher-status addressees, while Japanese speakers uniformly reject the honorific form. This difference can be modeled by having different relative rankings of $*\text{HONORSELF}$ and $*\text{UNDERHONOR}_{\text{ADDR}/\text{-FACE}}$ in the two languages.

$*\text{UNDERHONOR}_{\text{ADDR}/\text{-FACE}}$ is a blunt instrument. It requires us to divide speech acts neatly into those that are negatively face-threatening (invitations) and those that are not (assertions), while in truth such things lie on a spectrum. The bluntness of the instrument employed does not detract from its utility in modeling the data at hand, and so I leave it unsharpened for the purposes of this paper.

3.4 Relativity

A final constraint that Oshima posits in connection with Japanese is what he calls *Relativity*, and defines as follows:

- (20) **RELATIVITY:** In any context, for any micro-level community C such that the speaker belongs to and the audience does not belong to C , the honorific values of the members of C cannot exceed 0. (Oshima 2019: 11)

The observation underlying this constraint is this: in Japanese, there is a contrast in the felicity of honorifics targeting members of one’s in-group (micro-level community) depending on whether the audience are or are not members of that in-group.

¹⁴ It seems a bit unnatural to use a non-null subject in this kind of sentence in default contexts, but it is completely natural if an additive particle is used, as done here.

For example, a person working at some company A would, *when speaking to other employees of A*, normally use honorifics to speak about their boss, but would not do so when speaking to employees of another company B.

In Yaeyaman, this principle seems not to be operative, or at least not in the same way as in Japanese. One of the “micro-level communities” mentioned by Oshima is the speaker’s family. In Japanese, it is infelicitous to use subject honorifics to refer to one’s family members when one is speaking to a non-family member. A conservative speaker of Japanese might, for example, use honorifics in referring to their parents or grandparents when speaking to other members of their own family, but *not* when speaking to non-members. This pattern of usage contrasts sharply with Yaeyaman, where speakers use honorifics targeting their familiar elders (parents, grandparents, etc) regardless of the in-group/out-group status of the audience.

While the intricacies of this principle and its application to different kinds of micro-communities go beyond the scope of this paper, I will suggest that the contrast between Japanese and Yaeyaman can be captured by ranking RELATIVITY >> *UNDERHONOR in Japanese, and *UNDERHONOR >> RELATIVITY in Yaeyaman.

4 Consequences for theories of subject honorification

There are two primary approaches to the formal treatment of subject-oriented honorific verbal morphology in the literature: (i) semantic approaches (Potts & Kawahara 2004, Kim & Sells 2007, McCready 2019, Oshima 2019, Portner et al. 2019, a.o.) and (ii) agreement-based approaches (Harada 1976, Suzuki 1989, Toribio 1990, Hasegawa 2017, a.o.). I take up consequences for these two kinds of approach in order, focusing my attention on semantic approaches.

4.1 Semantic approaches

In semantic approaches to subject honorification, subject-oriented honorific verb morphology contributes semantic content that targets the subject referent for honorification. This class of approaches faces a number of technical questions. One question is the kind of meaning that the honorific contributes. All proposals I am aware of treat the honorific content as a kind of conventional implicature or other non-at-issue meaning. The second question is how the honorific morphology targets the subject referent in a compositional manner. The final question is what the lexical semantics of the honorific morphology actually contributes. This is the issue I focus on here.

The accounts in Potts & Kawahara 2004, Kim & Sells 2007, Oshima 2019, and McCready 2019 all build on the intuition that honorifics should be modeled

continuously.¹⁵ In Potts & Kawahara 2004 and Potts 2007, this intuition is modeled with expressive indices, $\langle a \mathbf{I} b \rangle$, where a, b are entities ($a, b \in D_e$) and \mathbf{I} is either an element (Potts & Kawahara 2004) or subinterval (Potts 2007) of the real number interval $[-1, 1]$. These indices model the expressive/emotive relationship that holds between a and b . As spelled out in Potts 2007, contexts contain a set of such expressive indices, and honorifics function to update these indices, with higher positive values corresponding to higher degrees of positive honorification, and lower negative values to higher degrees of negative or “anti” honorification. Technically, this works by specifying for a given honorific item the particular interval it picks out (the higher and narrower the interval, the more highly honorific the item is).

The analysis in McCready 2019 follows a similar strategy, but uses the interval $[0, 1]$ and anchors the indices on the notion of *register* rather than emotive attitude, giving a number of factors (psychological distance, social distance, and formality of context) that help to determine register. As in Potts 2007, individual lexical items are specified for particular intervals, which model the degree and specificity of honorification (level of register) that particular lexical items convey.

Oshima (2019) uses a speaker-anchored honorific function H which “assigns to individuals honorific values according to their honorability—the degrees of respect that the speaker publicly acknowledge[s] that they deserve”. This function returns values on the interval $[-1, 1]$, and particular honorific lexical items are spelled out using inequalities with a lexically specified degree. For example, the subject oriented honorific verb form (*r*)*are* with subject referent x requires that $H(x) \geq 0.4$, while the *o-...ni naru* form targeting x requires that $H(x) \geq 0.6$. The use of inequalities in Oshima 2019 (which forms the basis of the analysis in this paper) can be mapped onto theories that use intervals, by using intervals with an upper or lower bound of 1 or -1; for example, the requirement that $H(x) \geq 0.6$ can be modeled with the interval $[.6, 1]$ in the theories of Potts 2007 or McCready 2019. Negative values are used to model the contribution of negative honorifics (which serve to lower the status of the honorific referent), and are not relevant for the forms discussed in this paper.

These theories have in common the notion that honorific expressions should be modeled with a continuous interval, differing in what this interval itself represents (emotive stance, register, respect, etc). Under any of these accounts, an honorific serves to specify (whether through conventional implicature, presupposition, or something else) a particular subinterval that characterizes the honorific relationship between two entities (here, the speaker and the subject referent). This is a kind of entailment, and so a context that is inconsistent with that entailment will make the use of the honorific infelicitous. We can thus restate the definition of $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d$ in

15 Potts & Kawahara (2004) cite Cruse 1986 for the idea that expressive meaning should be modeled continuously. Portner et al. (2019) argue against a continuous treatment of honorific meaning; see McCready 2019: 45–47 for a response.

accordance with the particular background theory we are using, and let it characterize the set of entities for which the entailments generated by the corresponding honorific are satisfied (or satisfiable), given the context of utterance.

Within this general framework, the issue raised by the data in this paper boils down to deciding which plural entities $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d$ will be true of. The evidence adduced in this paper shows that $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d$ is not distributive, because if it were then $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d(A+B)$ would only be true in case both $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d(A)$ and $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d(B)$ were true. But we have seen many cases in which this condition fails. A weaker existential condition, requiring only that $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d$ hold of one of the atoms for it to hold of the entire plurality, is also insufficient, since there are many cases (for example, assertions with subjects referring to the speaker and an honored third person) where such a weaker condition would incorrectly predict that the honorific should be felicitous.

Instead, the question of which plural entities should be included in the set characterized by $\text{HON}_{a,c}^d$ is irreducibly pragmatic, and moreover varies from language to language. The competing constraints outlined in this paper, or something else of a similar character, are indispensable in calculating the honorific status of plural entities from the honorific status of their atoms.

4.2 Agreement-based approaches

Agreement-based approaches to subject-oriented honorific verb forms argue that honorific verbal morphology reflects syntactic agreement between the verb and a subject NP that bears an honorific feature [+hon]. A number of arguments against this kind of approach are given in [Kim & Sells 2007](#), and I will not rehash the debate here.¹⁶ Under an agreement-based approach, the issue with plural subjects amounts to the question of which plural subject NPs should be given a [+hon] feature. Trivially, such analyses predict that felicity judgments for such sentences reflect the availability or unavailability of this feature, but leave the reason for this (un)availability unexplained. Any agreement-based approach must ultimately account for which plural subject NPs are to be assigned the [+hon] feature. The data adduced in this paper show, from the perspective of an agreement-based analysis, that the availability of this feature depends on what appear to be irreducibly pragmatic factors, and is moreover subject to significant cross-linguistic variation. If the [+hon] feature is interpreted on plural subject NPs in such a way that it targets the entire plurality for honorification, then the issue amounts in the end to much the same issue facing semantic approaches.

¹⁶ Much of this literature is focused on Korean, the description of whose behavior in the kinds of contexts discussed in this paper awaits further research.

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