

SUBJECT HONORIFICATION IN  
 JAPANESE  
*Kenichi Namai*  
*Waseda University*

### 1 Introduction

In the generative grammar literature, Japanese, which does not seem to exhibit overt agreement (e.g., Shibatani 1990), is nevertheless taken to show the same kind of agreement that is explicitly marked in many European languages, which is now characteristically explained by way of feature checking (Chomsky 1993, 1995); let us informally call this type of agreement *syntactic agreement*. One phenomenon in Japanese that directly suggests the existence of syntactic agreement is *subject honorification* (e.g., Harada 1976), examples of which are given in (1) (from Kuno 1973:20).

- (1) a. Gakusei-ga Mary-o matu.  
 student-NOM Mary-ACC wait  
 'The student waits for Mary.'  
 b. Sensei-ga Mary-o *o-mati* ni naru.  
 teacher-NOM Mary-ACC honorific-wait-ing -ly become  
 'The teacher waits for Mary.'

This phenomenon “involves the conversion of the verb into the *o V-ni naru* form” (Shibatani 1990:283),<sup>1</sup> and it is said to take place only when the “subject is an SSS [a person socially superior to the speaker]” (Harada 1976:514). Therefore, the verb *matu* ‘wait’ is realized as *o-mati ni naru* in (1b), since the subject *sensei* ‘teacher’ is an SSS; it remains as is in (1a), where the subject *gakusei* ‘student’ is a noun whose referent is not usually entitled to special respect.<sup>2</sup>

Harada (1976:517) tries to capture this by positing a “syntactic feature . . . [+Subject Honorific]” or [+SH], clearly assuming that subject honorification is a syntactic agreement phenomenon between a subject with [+SH] and its predicate. Translating this analysis into minimalist terms, Ura (1993:387), following the insight of Toribio (1990), specifically claims that “[subject] honorification in Japanese is a solid mark of feature-checking between AgrS and ‘subject.’”

However, a closer look at this phenomenon leads us to suspect that it is not the same as the syntactic agreement that plays a crucial role in the current generative literature. In this squib, drawing on several empirical facts about subject honorification in Japanese, I will show that it is implausible to analyze this phenomenon as a kind of syntactic agreement.

I thank the anonymous *LI* reviewers for their comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this squib.

<sup>1</sup> But the *ni naru* part is a “further complication” (Harada 1976), and it becomes relevant only when the predicate is a verb phrase. When the predicate is not VP, only the honorific prefix *o-* comes into play. See Harada 1976: 503–505 for more explanation.

<sup>2</sup> As a reviewer points out, whether or not a given subject counts as an SSS is pragmatically determined. However, once the subject is considered as an SSS, it is said to syntactically trigger on its predicate the subject-honorific agreement in question. Harada’s [+SH] feature account, to which we now turn, concerns itself with this second part of the phenomenon of subject honorification.

## 2 Arguments against the Syntactic Analysis

In this section I present four arguments revealing weaknesses in the analysis that treats subject honorification as a syntactic agreement phenomenon.

### 2.1 Adverbials

First, subject honorification can trigger agreement even on an adverbial. In (2), for example, the subject *sensei* ‘teacher’ is assumed to have the syntactic [+SH] feature; accordingly, the verb *yameta* ‘resigned’ is realized as *o-yame ni natta* in this example.

- (2) Sensei-ga go-seisiki-ni o-yame ni natta.  
 teacher-NOM officially resigned  
 ‘The teacher officially resigned.’

Notice here that the adverbial *seisiki-ni* ‘officially’ also gets an honorific mark *go-*, which is a variant of *o-* (Harada 1976:504). To capture this in the minimalist framework, we would have to posit feature checking between the adverbial and the subject noun phrase. However, in light of the fact that an adverbial and a noun do not combine,<sup>3</sup> this step would be illegitimate, a fact that weakens the basic motivation for regarding subject honorification as a syntactic agreement phenomenon.

### 2.2 Failure to Check [+SH]: Evidence from Reciprocals

Second, the allegedly syntactic feature [+SH] of a subject does not seem to cause derivational crash even when the predicate does not get the honorific mark and hence fails to perform the relevant feature checking with the subject.

Following Chomsky (1986), let us assume that anaphors are like NP-traces in that they share all agreement features with their antecedents. Then, the grammaticality of (3) follows straightforwardly.

- (3) [Osamu to Akira]<sub>i</sub>-ga [otagai<sub>i</sub>-ga kyougisita  
 Osamu and Akira-NOM each.other-NOM discussed  
 koto]-o mitometa.  
 fact-ACC admitted  
 ‘Lit. Osamu and Akira admitted that each other discussed.  
 (i.e., Osamu and Akira admitted that they’d talked.)’

<sup>3</sup> In fact, what is official in (2) is not the teacher, but the teacher’s resignation. Hence, the kind of analysis suggested by a reviewer in (i), which contains a bracketed small clause, seems semantically unjustified.

(i) Sensei<sub>i</sub>-ga [PRO<sub>i</sub> go-seisiki-ni] o-yame-ni natta.  
 official

I thank the reviewer for drawing my attention to this hypothetical analysis, which led to refinement of the example sentence.

In this example the reciprocal *otagai* must share with the subject *Osamu to Akira* all agreement features, including the (plural) number feature. This is clear from the contrast between (4a) and (4b).

- (4) a. Osamu to Akira-ga kyougisita.  
 Osamu and Akira-NOM discussed  
 ‘Lit. Osamu and Akira discussed. (i.e., Osamu and Akira talked.)’  
 b. \*Osamu-ga kyougisita.  
 ‘Lit. Osamu discussed. (i.e., \*Osamu talked to each other.)’

The verb *kyougisuru* ‘discuss’ is a verb of ‘‘symmetry’’ (Masuoka and Takubo 1992) or ‘‘reciprocation’’ (Levin 1993) and requires a plural subject when it is used intransitively. Hence, (4a), where the subject is plural, is fine, whereas (4b), where the subject is singular, is ill formed under the intended intransitive reading.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we have a solid reason to follow Chomsky in assuming that the reciprocal in the grammatical sentence in (3) must share with *Osamu to Akira* all features of the matrix subject, including the number feature.

Now, consider the following example:

- (5) [A sensei to B sensei]<sub>i</sub>-ga [otagai-ga  
 A teacher and B teacher-NOM each.other-NOM  
 kyougisita koto]-o o-mitome ni natta.  
 discussed fact-ACC admitted  
 ‘Lit. Teacher A and Teacher B admitted that each other  
 discussed. (i.e., Teacher A and Teacher B admitted that  
 they’d talked.)’

Notice in this fully grammatical sentence that the verb in the embedded clause does not have the honorific mark although the verb in the matrix clause does. This means that unlike the [+SH] feature of the matrix subject, that of the embedded reciprocal subject fails to be checked, which then should lead the derivation to crash, contrary to fact. This observation thus constitutes an empirical difficulty for the feature-checking analysis of subject honorification, again suggesting the implausibility of the syntactic analysis.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The sentence is grammatical with an implicit interlocutor.

(i) Osamu-ga pro kyougisita.  
 Osamu-NOM pro(-with) discussed  
 ‘Osamu talked (with somebody).’

<sup>5</sup> One cannot argue that subject honorification is a phenomenon observed only in matrix clauses, since the following sentence, where honorification takes place even in the embedded clause, is perfectly grammatical as well:

(i) [A sensei to B sensei]<sub>i</sub>-ga [otagai-ga go-kyougi ni natta  
 A teacher and B teacher-NOM each.other-NOM discussed  
 koto]-o o-mitome ni natta.  
 fact-ACC admitted

## 2.3 Coordination

Third, consider the coordination structure in (6).

- (6) C sensei-ga wakaku-te utokusii.  
 C teacher-NOM young-and beautiful  
 ‘Teacher C is young and beautiful.’

In the predicate of this sentence, two adjectives are coordinated.<sup>6</sup> What is interesting about this sentence is that when subject honorification takes place, the honorific mark need not appear on the two adjectives simultaneously.

- (7) a. C sensei-ga wakaku-te o-utokusii.  
 b. C sensei-ga o-wakaku-te utokusii.  
 c. C sensei-ga o-wakaku-te o-utokusii.

If the presence of the honorific prefix were to be explained by feature checking, only (7c), where both adjectives are prefixed by *o-*, would be considered grammatical; however, (7a–b) are equally grammatical, where only one adjective checks [+SH], the other one failing to do so. This should cause derivational crash, but the resulting sentences are

---

‘Lit. Teacher A and Teacher B admitted that each other discussed. (i.e., Teacher A and Teacher B admitted that they’d talked to each other.)’

A reviewer claims, however, that what is needed for sentences like (i) and (5) may be ‘‘a syntactic mechanism that optionally deletes a [+SH] marking on an embedded verb if its subject is coreferential with the main clause [+SH] subject.’’ What is postulated to delete by this mechanism is a syntactic [+SH] marking, but not the semantic feature associated with it; thus, it is theoretically possible to interpret the embedded subject in (5) with the intended honorification.

But resorting to this kind of optionality seems ad hoc at best, since it does not appear to follow from anything in the grammar of Japanese, nor does it seem to be a linguistic primitive in itself. Besides, honorific marking in only the embedded clause is also possible, as shown in (ii).

- (ii) [A sensei to B sensei]<sub>i</sub>-ga [otagai-ga go-kyougi ni natta koto]-o mitometa.

If we explained this by devising another ad hoc mechanism that would optionally delete the [+SH] marking on the matrix verb on condition that a coreferential relation held between the subjects of the matrix and embedded clauses, what would happen when the two mechanisms optionally deleted the [+SH] marking on both matrix and embedded verbs simultaneously, as in (iii)?

- (iii) [A sensei to B sensei]<sub>i</sub>-ga [otagai-ga kyoushita koto]-o mitometa.

The semantic features associated with honorification would theoretically survive to LF, but (iii) is never interpreted as an honorific sentence. If one were to posit that simultaneous deletion was somehow blocked, one would then have to ask why and how, further complicating the explanation and quite possibly making it even more ad hoc. Hence, the suggested optional [+SH] deletion analysis seems too problematic to be adopted.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the *te* attached to the first adjective, I assume, following Morita (1980), that it is equivalent to the coordinative conjunction *sosite* ‘and’.

well formed. This state of affairs clearly contrasts with the following English examples:

- (8) a. \*Money come and goes.  
 b. \*Money comes and go.  
 c. Money comes and goes.

Here only (8c), where both verbs have the agreement mark *-s*, is grammatical.

Thus, coordination facts also cast doubt on the validity of the feature-checking analysis of subject honorification.

#### 2.4 Lexical Gaps

Finally, if subject honorification were a syntactic agreement phenomenon, we would expect to see its mark on any predicate whose subject is assumed to have the [+SH] feature. However, this expectation is not met.

First, observe that the following sentences with adjectival predicates are well formed:

- (9) a. Sensei-ga o-hade/go-kenkou/o-zyoubu da.  
 teacher-NOM flashy/healthy/tough be  
 'The teacher is flashy/healthy/tough.'  
 b. Sensei-ga o-katai/o-isogasii/o-yasasii.  
 teacher-NOM strict/busy/gentle  
 'The teacher is strict/busy/gentle.'

(9a) contains so-called *na*-adjectives, and (9b) *i*-adjectives; all the adjectival predicates receive the honorific prefix, seemingly realizing the syntactic subject honorification agreement. However, quite a few adjectives cannot receive this "agreement" mark.

- (10) a. Sensei-ga \*o-yuumei/\*o-kodoku/\*o-muti da.  
 teacher-NOM famous/lonely/ignorant be  
 'The teacher is famous/lonely/ignorant.'  
 b. Sensei-ga \*o-tadasii/\*o-okuyukasii/\*o-awatadasii.  
 teacher-NOM right/graceful/hurried  
 'The teacher is right/graceful/hurried.'

In fact, the list of the adjectives that do not take the honorific prefix is very long.<sup>7</sup> Since there do not seem to be any "suppletive forms"

<sup>7</sup> Examples of the *na*-adjectives and *i*-adjectives that do not seem to take the honorific prefix are given in (i) and (ii).

- (i) *na*-adjectives: aho 'foolish', aimai 'ambiguous', gouin 'forcible', idai 'great', nonki 'carefree', oogesa 'exaggerated', rokotu 'blunt', uchouten 'overjoyed', youti 'childish', yutaka 'wealthy', etc.  
 (ii) *i*-adjectives: abunai 'dangerous', hanabanasii 'glorious', hitosii 'equivalent', ikenai 'bad', itizirusii 'remarkable', monosugoi 'awful', namamekasii 'voluptuous', nayamasii 'sexy', oisii 'delicious', omosiroi 'funny', etc.

(Harada 1976:519–522) for adjectives that indicate honorification,<sup>8</sup> adjectives like the ones in (10) raise a difficult question for the syntactic analysis of subject honorification. That is, if subject honorification were truly a syntactic agreement, why wouldn't it be realized in sentences like the ones in (10), which seem to be semantically faultless?<sup>9</sup> Thus, these lexical gaps constitute yet another empirical difficulty for the syntactic analysis of subject honorification.

### 3 Conclusion

As we have seen, facts about adverbials, reciprocals, coordination, and lexical gaps all point to the difficulty of maintaining the syntactic feature-checking analysis of subject honorification. I thus conclude that we should drop this analysis and look for a better one from a different perspective.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> As for verbs, Harada (1976:520) gives *ide* (as in *o-ide ni naru*) and *ossyaru* as suppletive forms of *iku* 'go' and *iu* 'say', respectively.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, the sentences in question are all fine without the honorific prefix.

- (i) a. Sensei-ga yuumei/kodoku/muti da.  
 teacher-NOM famous/lonely/ignorant be  
 'The teacher is famous/lonely/ignorant.'  
 b. Sensei-ga tadasii/okuyukasii/awatadasii.  
 teacher-NOM right/graceful/hurried  
 'The teacher is right/graceful/hurried.'

However, without the honorific prefix, the subject *sensei* 'teacher' is not honored in (i). In order to show respect in these semantic contexts, the only thing the speaker can do is to use different lexical items that may take the prefix. For example:

- (ii) Sensei-ga go-chomei da.  
 teacher-NOM famous be  
 'The teacher is famous.'

<sup>10</sup> From the lexical gaps observed in section 2.4, we may be led to suspect that the attachment of the honorific prefix is a morphological process that takes place entirely in the lexicon, being totally independent of what happens in syntax. Indeed, lexical gaps of this type have been reported to be very common in word formation processes, and they seem to constitute "non-existent but possible words" (Kageyama 1993:9–10). If so, the choice between, say, *o-isogasioi* 'busy (honorified)' and *isogasioi* 'busy (neutral)' would be purely lexical, just like the choice between, say, *pass away* and *die* in English.

- (i) a. Dr. Gold passed away.  
 b. That stupid bastard died.

This lexical choice is by no means determined by syntactic feature checking of any kind; in fact, an example like (ii) is semantically odd, but syntactically well formed.

- (ii) #That stupid bastard passed away.

This oddity seems to parallel that of (iii).

- (iii) #Ano tonma-ga o-isogasioi.  
 that fool-NOM busy (honorified)  
 'That fool is busy.'

As a reviewer points out, however, this is not the only alternative; nor can it be adequately argued for in the confines of a squib. Hence, I would like to suggest it only as one possibility at this time, leaving solid argumentation in its favor for future research.

## References

- Chomsky, Noam. 1986. *Knowledge of language*. New York: Praeger.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1993. A minimalist program for linguistic theory. In *The view from Building 20: Essays in linguistics in honor of Sylvain Bromberger*, ed. Kenneth Hale and Samuel Jay Keyser, 1–52. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1995. Categories and transformations. In *The Minimalist Program*, 219–394. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Harada, S. I. 1976. Honorifics. In *Syntax and semantics 5: Japanese generative grammar*, ed. Masayoshi Shibatani, 499–561. New York: Academic Press.
- Kageyama, Taro. 1993. *Bunpou to gokeisei* (Grammar and word formation). Tokyo: Hituzi Syobo.
- Kuno, Susumu. 1973. *The structure of the Japanese language*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Levin, Beth. 1993. *English verb classes and alternations: A preliminary investigation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Masuoka, Takashi, and Yukinori Takubo. 1992. *Kiso nihongo bunpou* (Basic Japanese grammar). Tokyo: Kuroshio Shuppan.
- Morita, Yoshiyuki. 1980. *Kiso nihongo 2* (Basic Japanese 2). Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten.
- Shibatani, Masayoshi. 1990. *The languages of Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toribio, Almeida Jacqueline. 1990. Specifier-head agreement in Japanese. In *Proceedings of the Ninth West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, 535–548. Stanford, Calif.: CSLI Publications. [Distributed by Cambridge University Press.]
- Ura, Hiroyuki. 1993. L-relatedness and parametric variation. In *MIT working papers in linguistics 19: Papers on Case and agreement II*, 377–399. MITWPL, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, MIT, Cambridge, Mass.

A TYPE OF HEAD-IN-SITU  
CONSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH  
Atsurō Tsubomoto  
University of Shizuoka  
John Whitman  
Cornell University

## 1 Syntactic Amalgams

The pattern of *syntactic amalgams* (SAs) in (1) has gone largely undiscussed since Lakoff 1974.

- (1) John invited you'll never guess how many people to his party.

Lakoff proposes to derive SAs by combining two independent clauses as in (2).<sup>1</sup>

We wish to thank Chris Collins and audiences at Cornell University and Kanda University of Foreign Studies for discussion and comments.

<sup>1</sup> In this squib we omit discussion of the pragmatic restrictions on SAs proposed by Lakoff. Lakoff's actual derivation of (1) posits an underlying sentence of the form *John invited [a lot of people] to his party*; S<sub>1</sub> in (2b) is attached subject to the restriction that S<sub>1</sub> conversationally entails 'John invited