

# A Distributed Morphology-based analysis of Japanese Verbal Honorifics

## Abstract

Within the principles of DISTRIBUTED MORPHOLOGY (DM) (Halle and Marantz, 1993), I propose an analysis of several morphological issues that arise in JAPANESE SUBJECT AND OBJECT HONORIFICS (Harada, 1976). Because their use is never obligatory, but used in accord with a speaker's attitude, I argue that they fall into the class of EXPRESSIVE DERIVATIONS (Beard, 1995, among many). The quirky system of (*quasi*-)BLOCKING (Aronoff, 1976 and Embick and Marantz, 2006) is also discussed.

**Keywords:** Expressive Derivations, Japanese Honorifics, Distributed Morphology

## 1. Introduction

Japanese Subject and Object Honorifics are a particularly challenging topic from the morphological viewpoint. The issues, while ripe with morphological data deserving analysis, are underrepresented in the literature. This paper is an attempt to fill that lacuna by analyzing several of the morphological issues. I frame my analysis within the theoretical framework of DISTRIBUTED MORPHOLOGY (DM) (Halle and Marantz, 1993).

The first point of interest is that the use of Japanese honorifics is at the discretion of the speaker. This seems partially related to the fact that their morphology never results in a change of lexical category, but the morphology when used, is very meaningful.

The prefix *o-*, found in both Subject and Object honorifics, has a semantic elasticity which allows it to express attitudes other than honorification, as seen below.

Beard (1995: 163-4)'s research finds that cross-linguistically EXPRESSIVE DERIVATIONS are limited to Diminutives, Augmentatives, Perjoratives, Affectionates, and Honorifics. Thus Japanese honorifics fall within the limited universal types of Expressive Derivations. It is no surprise that Japanese Honorifics display many of the properties associated with Expressive Derivations, including expression of a speaker's attitude, inability to change lexical class and semantic elasticity; all major properties associated with Expressive Derivations.

## 2. The domain of Japanese Honorifics

Japanese Subject and Object Honorifics are used to display a speaker's attitude towards a subject and a subject's attitude, usually towards a discourse participant, respectively. In this paper I build an argument that the traditional term, Object Honorifics (Harada 1976), is actually a case of SUBJECT HUMBLING. This has consequences: it allows a single syntactic position; subject, to be the nexus of Expressive Derivations, additionally the syntax of both types, Subject Honorification and Humbling, is identical.

A brief observation is that Subject Humbling is nearly a direct translation of: *kenjōgo* 'humble words' the Japanese term. Below I provide my argument for the reanalysis, but note that the single syntactic constraint on Subject Humbling is that its subject must be +human.

Aspects shared by both Subject Honorification and Subject Humbling are the native prefix *o-*, which affixes to a non-finite verb form,<sup>1</sup> light-verbs bear the tense features, and both display cases of a productive default being blocked by suppletive verbs where they exist.

Example 1 shows the two types, honorifics and humbling, as productive defaults:

- (1) a. Sensei-wa o-machi-ni nari-mas-u.  
teacher-TOP PREFIX-wait-ESSIVE become-HON-POLITE-NON-PAST  
'The teacher deigns to wait.' (Speaker shows attitude of honor to subject)
- b. Watashi-wa o-machi shi-mas-u. (Subject has a humble relation towards the discourse participant)  
I-TOP-PREFIX-wait do-HUMBLE-POLITE-NON-PAST  
'I will humbly wait.'

Example (2) shows blocking by suppletion for both honorifics and humbling:

- (2) a. Sensei-wa irasshai-mas-u. (cf. \*Sensei-wa o-iki-ni nari-mas-u)  
teacher-TOP go-HONOR-POLITE-NON-PAST  
'The teacher deigns to go'
- b. Watashi-wa mairi-mas-u. (cf. \*Watashi-wa o-iki shi-mas-u)  
I-TOP go-HUMBLE-POLITE-NON-PAST  
'I will humbly go'

Example (1) a. and b. are the productive defaults for Subject Honorifics and Humbling, respectively. Examples (2) a. and b. demonstrate suppletives blocking productive forms. Note that Subject Humbling is strongly associated with a 1<sup>st</sup> person Subject (Martin, 1975) as seen in the b examples of (1) and (2).

### 3. The prefix *o-*

Since both Subject Honorification and Subject Humbling employ the prefix *o-* in their productive forms, the presumption has been that the prefix itself is honorific in all its uses (Bobaljik and Yatsushiro, 2006, Boeckx and Niinuma, 2004, Niinuma, 2003, Hamano, 1993 and Harada, 1976). Native prefixes are exceedingly rare; *o* is one of a mere handful of native prefixes found in the language.

One place *o-* is found is in (semi-) grammaticalized expressions which seem to have little to do with honorification; absence of the *o-* often result in near or total ill-formedness:

- (3) a. *o-nara* 'flatulence' (cf. *naras-u* 'to sound-TRANS')
- b. *o-naka* 'stomach' (cf. *naka* 'inside')
- c. *o-sagari* 'hand-me-downs' (cf. *sagar-u* 'lower-INTRANS')
- d. *o-bake* 'a monster, a ghost' (cf. *bakemono* 'ibid.')
- e. *o-taku* 'a nerd, pencil geek' (cf. *taku* 'your house')

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<sup>1</sup> Some have claimed that the non-finite verbs in honorifics are nominal (Toribio, 1990 and Suzuki, 1989), but consistent with Harada (1976) there are good reasons to believe they are verbal. They receive aspect and the verbal argument structure from the verb stem. In addition, true Japanese nominalizations are often non-compositional, the verbal meaning of *awase* means 'join, introduce', e.g., *Shimpu-san-wa te-o o-awase ni-natta* 'The priest deigned to join his hands together'. The homophonic nominal form *awase* means 'a lined kimono'. Finally, a hallmark of Japanese nouns is their optionality at PF. The putative nominal in honorifics must be pronounced to avoid ungrammaticality, e.g., *Shimpu-san-wa o-awase ni natta* vs. \**Shimpu-san wa te-o o-natta*. The true noun *te* 'hand' allows pro-drop unlike the putative noun *awase* 'lined kimono'.

Honorific meaning is not associated with the prefix in examples (3), e.g. *o-nara* ‘#an honorable fart’ or *o-bake* ‘#the honorable monster (that scares the hell out of me)’. A sense of jocular or irony seems to be found in these examples.

An optional use of the prefix *o-* is conventional, polite, but not necessarily honorific. Martin (1975: 332) notes this use of *o-* is more closely associated with the speech of women and children:

- (4) a. *o-uchi* ‘your house, dwellings’
- b. *o-cha* ‘tea’
- c. *o-kane* ‘money’
- d. *o-tenki* ‘the weather’
- e. *o-kashi* ‘a snack’ ‘confectionary’

An additional usage of the prefix is clearly sarcastic. Martin (ibid.) cites examples (5) a., b. and c.:

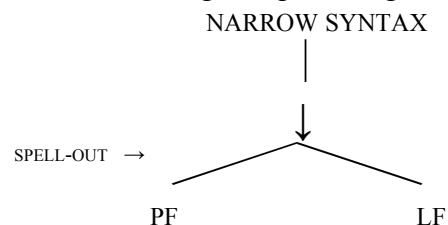
- (5) a. *o-era-gata* ‘big-wigs’ (lit. ‘the great people’)
- b. *o-erai shakai hyōronka nado* ‘our great social critics and the like’
- c. *on-deru* ‘leave before being tossed out’ (cf. *der-u* ‘leave’)
- d. *on-boro* ‘my jalopy’

The final two examples display a nasal coda, a “corrupted” form of the prefix *o-*.

My point in this section is to show that the prefix *o-* is not necessarily honorific, but shows features more closely associated with Expressive Derivations, i.e., semantic elasticity

#### 4. A brief overview of theoretical assumptions

DM (Halle and Marantz, 1993) assumes the syntactic findings of the MINIMALIST PROGRAM (Chomsky, 1995), e.g., *Phase*, *Merge*, *Move*, and *Agree*. The major difference is that in DM, a NUMERATION (ibid) contains no phonological pieces, but only semantic-syntactic features, e.g., +Past, + male, +first person, etc. Each language chooses a finite number from a universal pool At the point where narrow syntax ends and is handed over to PF, these feature bundles are given phonological form in a process called SPELL-OUT:



Frequent mismatches between narrow syntax and PF require a number of post-syntactic manipulations of VOCABULARY ITEMS (Halle and Marantz, 1993) Morphology has the role of insuring what syntax generates is consistent with a language’s PF requirements (Embick and Noyer, 2007).

A familiar example of such a syntactic-phonology mismatch is the post-syntactic manipulation of phonological pieces in the English past-tense. Despite the fact that the terminal head containing the tense feature is syntactically higher than the terminal node of the verb, tense in English is realized as a suffix to *vP*’s terminal head (Halle and Marantz, 1993).

The morphological operation which makes this possible is MORPHOLOGICAL MERGER (MM) (Marantz, 1984, among many). MM is constrained to the heads of complements (Bobaljik, 1995).

There are similar mismatches between syntax and phonology. An additional morphological proposal within DM is FUSION, the combination of two terminal heads into one. Fusion requires a sisterhood relation of terminal nodes. Consider the fact that the verbal affix *-s* of English expresses both person and tense (Bobaljik, 1995) so the morpheme *-s* in English is actually the Fusion of the person and the tense nodes. Consider the form: *\*He walk-s-ed*, where tense and number are not fused.

FISSION is a morphological process that splits one terminal node into two; most frequently used in cases where two overt morphemes express the same feature, e.g. circumfixes (Marantz, 1992; Halle and Marantz, 1993; Noyer, 1997; and Halle, 1997).

Crucially, post-syntactic morphological processes are not arbitrary or ad hoc, but are attested cross-linguistically. They are limited in number and abide to strict hierarchical relations that sanction the matching of syntax to its morpho-phonological output. (Halle and Marantz, 1993).

## 5. Blocking effects in Japanese honorifics

A relevant morphological phenomena in terms of the structural imperatives it imposes is BLOCKING (Aronoff, 1976 and Embick and Marantz, 2006), found in both Subject Honorifics and Humbling. The blocking of productive defaults by suppletive forms entails competition for the identical terminal node at Spell-out.

Japanese honorifics/humbling both possess a quirky combination of free-variation (which gives the impression of blocking) and true blocking where native Japanese suppletive specified for the relevant features blocks the default form.

In addition to suppletives, Japanese also contains EUPHEMISMS (Martin, 1975), typically a Sino-Japanese word (*kango*) which uses the morphology of the default forms, *o-* V-*ni naru* ‘for Subject Honorific’/*o-*V *suru* ‘for Subject Humbling’.

COMPETITION BLOCKING, where insertion of a more highly specified VOCABULARY ITEM competes for insertion into the same terminal node are the only true cases of blocking (Embick and Marantz, 2006).

The existence of Euphemisms is a complicating factor for blocking. An example of a Euphemism for Subject Humbling is the verb *kari-ru* ‘borrow’; which has both a Subject Humbling default form, i.e., *o-kari suru* ‘I humbly borrow’, despite that fact, there is also a Euphemism, *go-haishaku suru* ‘I humbly borrow’. Note the morphology is the same as the default; *go-* is an allomorph of the prefix *o-* which appears most frequently with Sino-Japanese words. They are therefore free variants with no blocking involved:

**Table 1 Subject Honorifics and Blocking**

Basic Verb	Default Honorific	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>yom-u</i> ‘read- <sub>NON-PAST</sub> ’	<i>o-yomi-ni nar-u</i>	Ø	Ø
<i>kaeru</i> , return	<i>o-kaeri-ni nar-u</i>	Ø	Ø
<i>i-ru</i> , <i>ku-ru</i> , <i>ik-u</i> ‘be, come, go’	<i>*o-i-ni nar-u</i> , <i>*o-ki-ni nar-u</i> , <i>*o-iki-ni nar-u</i>	<i>irasshar-u</i>	<i>o-ide-ni naru</i>
<i>sur-u</i> ‘do’	<i>*o-shi-ni nar-u</i>	<i>nasar-u</i>	Ø
<i>i-u</i> ‘say’	<i>*o-ii-ni-naru</i>	<i>osshar-u</i>	Ø
<i>mi-ru</i> ‘see, look at, watch’	<i>*o-mi-ni nar-u</i>	Ø	<i>go-ran-ni nar-u</i>
<i>shir-u</i> ‘know’	<i>??o-shiri-ni naru</i>	Ø	<i>go-zonji desus</i> <sup>2</sup>

The pattern of blocking/free-variation shows that, where there is a suppletive in the absence of a Euphemism, the suppletive is the grammatical form. Where a suppletive exists in the presence of a Euphemism, both suppletive and euphemistic forms may be used. Euphemisms also may block defaults, but this is not absolute., interestingly, defaults and Euphemisms display the same pattern morphologically.

**Table 2: Subject Humbling and Blocking**

Basic Verb	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>i-ru</i> ‘be- <sub>EXISTENTIAL</sub> ’	<i>*o-i su-ru</i>	<i>or-u</i>	Ø
<i>ik-u</i> ‘go’	<i>*o-iki su-ru</i>	<i>mair-u</i>	Ø
<i>i-u</i> ‘say’	<i>*o-ii suru</i>	<i>mōs-u</i>	Ø
<i>kari-ru</i> ‘borrow’	<i>o-kari suru</i>	Ø	<i>go-haishaku suru</i>
<i>mi-ru</i> ‘see’	<i>*o-mi su-ru</i>	Ø	<i>go-haiken su-ru</i>

Note also that there is a near one-to-one relationship of suppletive verbs for both Subject Honorification and Subject Humbling; *irrasha-ru* vs. *or-u* ‘be-<sub>existence</sub>’, *irrasha-ru* vs. *mai-ru* ‘go’, *osshar-u* vs. *mōs-u* ‘say’ seen in tables 1 and 2. Subjects must be +Human in both Subject honorifics and humbling. This is the only syntactic rule that Subject Humbling or so-called Object Honorifics must obey:

**A. Subject Honorific Blocking Effects**

- (6) a. *o-yomi-ni-naru*. ‘read’

**Default**

- (7) a. *\*o-ii-ni-naru*

**Default blocked by suppletive**

- b. *osshar-u* ‘say’

- (8) a. *irrasharu* ‘go,’

**Free-Variation-suppletion and Euphemism**

- b. *o-ide-ni-naru* ‘go’

<sup>2</sup> Subject Honorific defaults and Euphemisms occur in free variation with the copula *da*, usually in its polite form *desu*, in free variation, e.g. the Subject Honorific *o-yomi-ni narimasu* ‘deign to read’, and *o-yomi desu* (ibid). There are aspectual properties that the copula cannot capture, as one might expect. Euphemisms select for one of the variants, *ni-naru* or *da*.

**B.** The identical pattern is found for both Subject Honorifics and putative Object Honorifics:

(9) *o- tsutae suru* ‘transmit’

**Default**

(10) a. *\*o-ii-suru*

**Default blocked by suppletive**

b. *mōsu* ‘say’

(11) a. *\*o-mi suru* ‘see, look at, watch

**Default blocked by Euphemism**

b. *go-haiken suru* ‘see, look at, watch

(12) a. *go-haishaku suru* ‘borrow’

**Free variation between Euphemism and Default**

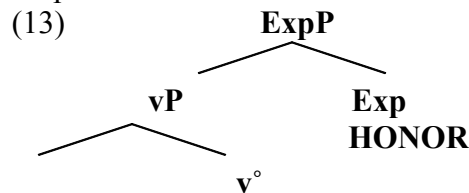
b. *o-kari suru* ‘borrow’

Occasionally, suppletives are in free-variation with a Euphemism (8) a. and (12) a so only the default suppletive (with no Euphemism) behaves like true blocking. One also is lead to wonder why the systems that target very different pieces syntactically should have such a similar, if not identical, system of blocking/free variation. I try to explain this in the next half of this article.

## 6. Subject Honorification and Spell-out

I call the functional phrase that bears the Abstract Morphemes, HONOR AND HUMBLE, EXPRESSIVE PHRASE or ExpP. Let me start with the structure of Subject Honorifics.

The abstract feature responsible for Subject Honorifics is HONOR.<sup>3</sup>ExpP is introduced from the universal semantic-syntactic features in the numeration and are spelled out after narrow syntax ends the morphemes of honorification. This is shown partially in example (13). The absence of the abstract features in the numeration entails the absence of the functional phrase:

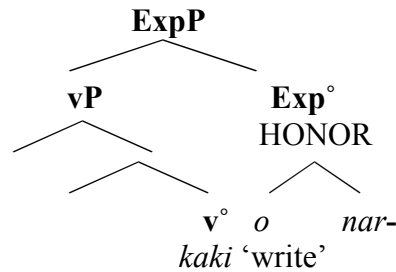


The default form at Spell-out consists of three morphemes, the prefix *o-*, the light-verb *nari--NON PAST* and a ‘postposition’ *–ni*. Each morpheme requires its own terminal node by the completion of Spell-out. To accomplish this, the terminal head of ExpP undergoes FISSION (Halle and Marantz, 1993, Noyer, 1997, and Halle, 1997), which divides one terminal node into two terminal nodes since they necessarily have the same abstract

<sup>3</sup>Hasegawa notes that most languages have a way of expressing politeness. One needn’t look far for morphological expression of politeness, e.g., Korean. I therefore consider the abstract feature HONOR a morpheme available from the universal pool of semantic-syntactic abstract morphemes available to language.

feature, HONOR. In the two nodes created by fission, the prefix and the light-verb are inserted during Spell-out, as in example (14):

(14)

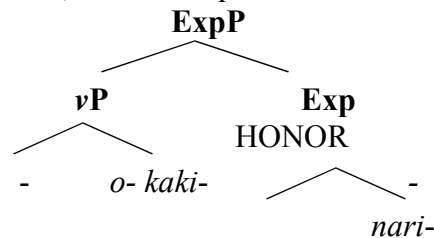


The prefix *o-* attaches to the terminal node of its complement by MORPHOLOGICAL MERGER (MM) (Marantz, 1984; Halle and Marantz, 1993; Bobaljik, 1995; and Embick and Noyer, 2001):

At any level ...a relation of a lexical head X and Y may be replaced by the affixation of X to Y (Embick and Noyer, 2001: 561)

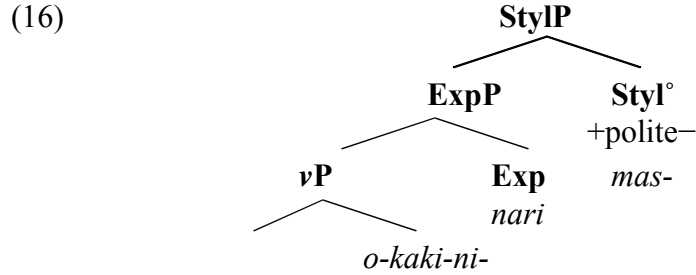
MM is sensitive to the subcategorical properties of affixes (Halle and Marantz, 1993) e.g., suffix, circumfix, prefix, here it is a prefix *o-*:

(15)



What of the morpheme *–ni*? I treat it as a DISSOCIATED NODE (Embick, 1997 and Embick and Noyer, 2007), “an ornamental morpheme” not present at Narrow Syntax and LF, but “added to a structure under specified conditions at PF” (ibid.). Recall from footnote 2 that the morphology of Subject Honorifics is in free variation with the copula *da* so there is no bi-unique relation between *ni-* and Subject honorific. The monomorphemic *da* or the multi-morphemic *o ni-naru* are equivalent for the purposes of Subject Honorific; *–ni-* is not a requirement for the Syntax-and LF.

This *ni* does not indicate a goal, or supply case here; its only role is to be an ornament at PF. Further insertion of functional heads of VP creates a grammatical utterance. Among these functional heads is a speech-level, addressee-oriented morpheme *mas*. It occurs as the complement of TP and. I call this functional morphology STYLE PHRASE or StylP which can be either + Polite, introducing *mas* or –Polite, realized as Ø. (See *Performative Honorific*, Harada, 1976: 502). Since this morphology is optional, their presence in a Numeration must be optional; so the optionality is explained by the absence of the feature entailing the absence of the relevant syntax:



## 7. Subject Humbling, a reanalysis and Spell-out

The traditional term, Object Honorification (Harada, 1976), seems to imply that you can pick any object (or internal argument) That is +human, like Subject Honorification. In fact, Humbling is almost a mirror image of Honorification. Humbling is strongly associated with 1<sup>st</sup> person; Honorification can never be 1<sup>st</sup> person.

In order to maintain the traditional term, Object Honorification, the fact that Japanese DPs are often deleted at PF does not help sort out the problem of who is being honored or who is being humble.

I show that to maintain Object Honorific, the term *object* loses any meaning. Here a possessor qualifies as an “object”; a 1st person offers to HUMBLY ‘carry the luggage:

- (17) Nimotsu-o o-mochi shimas-u  
 luggage-ACC HUMBLING carry LIGHT-VERB  
 ‘I will carry the honored person’s luggage.’

In example (18), below, the only “object” who seems available is *musume* ‘my daughter’ marked with ablative case. Pragmatically, a parent honoring a daughter is extremely rare to non-existent. Especially in view of their relation: parent < daughter.

- (18) (sensei-ga) o-kaeri ni naru to musume-kara o-kiki shimashita. (Hamano, 1993:83)  
 (The honored teacher-NOM) return SUBJ HONOR-from daughter I hear-PAST-OBJECT  
 HUMB (, 1993: 88)

If we consider it an Object Honorific, who is honored in the matrix clause ‘I heard from my daughter’? It seems that Subject Humbling can make sense of this utterance:

- ‘(I) humbly heard from my daughter that (the esteemed person will return (home)).’

Clearer and more decisive data for my reanalysis is the fact that “Object Honorification” applies to intransitive verbs:

- (19) Osoba ni o-tachi shita  
 near by-LOC PREF stand-SUBJECT HUMBLING-PAST  
 ‘I humbly stood near him/her.’ (Hamano, Shoko, 1993: 102)  
 (20) Go-isscho-ni osuwari itashimasho-ka (Hamano, Shoko, 1993: 84)  
 PREF together PREF-sit-SUBJECTHUMB COHORTATIVE-Q  
 ‘May I humbly sit together with you?’ (Hamano, 1993:85)

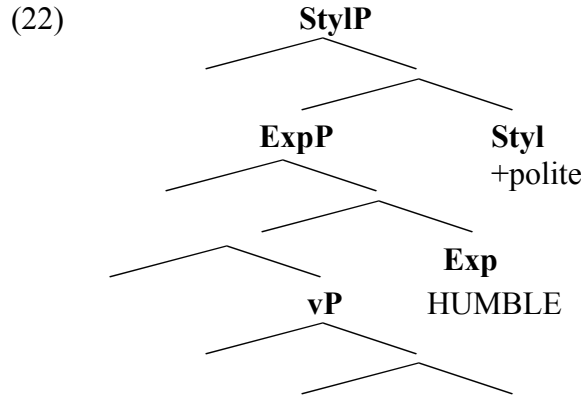
Above, the intransitive verbs ‘stand’ and ‘sit’ participate in Subject Humbling. If the construction in question is an object honorific, how could this be explained? It is not limited to unaccusative verbs as; example (16) is an unergative example:

- (21) Go-isscho-ni soko made o-aruki itashimashou-ka  
 PREF-together there UNTIL PREF-walk-SUBJECT-HUMB-Q  
 ‘Shall I humbly walk until there with you?’ Hamano, (1993: 92)

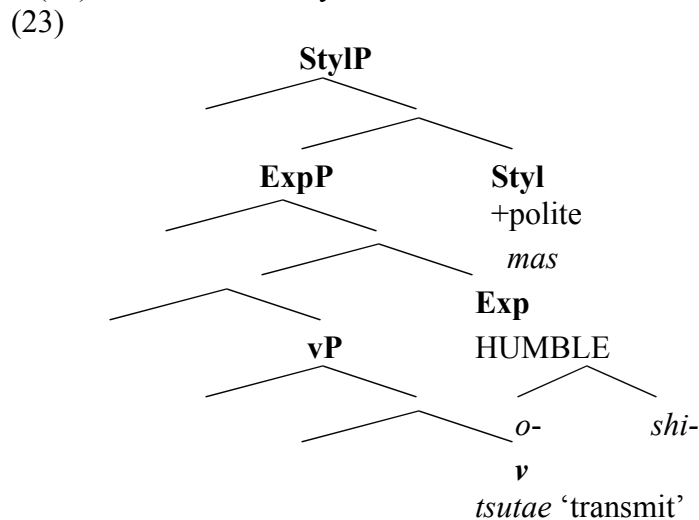


If this reanalysis is correct, we explain the similarities between the two and allow Spell-out and syntax to be isomorphic for both Subject Honorifics and Subject Humbling. The difference derives from a feature in ExpP which chooses for different light verbs, *nari* for HONOR and *shi-* for HUMBLE. Example (22) shows us what syntax hands over to Spell-out/PF before Vocabulary Insertion begins.

In the presence of the abstract feature a phrase is built and fission takes place:

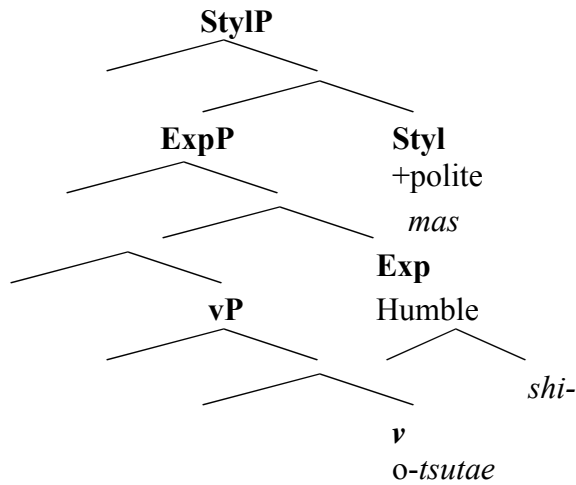


Example (23) shows Vocabulary Insertion:



Example (22) shows that manipulation of some heads is necessary; handled by morphology as part of Spell-out. Example (24) is the post-morphology stage:

(24) a.



b. I shall humbly transmit (that to someone of prestige.)

The abstract morphemes Honor and Humble demand a functional phrase, ExpP. The fission of its head occurs since two morphemes, necessarily holding the same features, are needed in honorification.

## 8. Summary

I have argued that Object Honorific is Subject Humbling and both are produced by the same functional phrase which can have one of two possible abstract morphemes. The third case, where neither of these abstract functions is present, entails the lack of the functional phrase. This has the consequences of explaining the similarities and simplifying the grammar by attributing their syntax to a common functional phrase. If this analysis is on the right track, then it's a small contribution to the study of Japanese Honorifics but it shows what a minimum of post-syntactic morphological movements can achieve. Still, there are many remaining facts that deserve analysis.

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