

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 found in Japanese SUBJECT and OBJECT HONORIFICS (Harada, 1976). Because Honorifics are 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 BLOCKING/FREE-VARIATION (Aronoff, 1976 and Embick and Marantz, 2006) is also discussed.

Keywords: Expressive Derivations, Japanese Honorifics, Distributed Morphology

1. Introduction

Japanese Subject and Object Honorifics is a topic of particular interest from the morphological viewpoint. Despite this intrinsic interest, morphological analysis has been underrepresented in the literature. This piece is a modest attempt to fill that lacuna, analyzing several morphological issues within the theory of DISTRIBUTED MORPHOLOGY (DM) (Halle and Marantz, 1993).

The first point of interest is that the use of Japanese honorifics is at the speaker's discretion. This seems partially related to the fact that honorific morphology never brings about lexical category change.

Beard (1995: 163-4) finds that cross-linguistically EXPRESSIVE DERIVATIONS are limited to Diminutives, Augmentatives, Perjoratives, Affectionates, and Honorifics, thus Japanese Honorifics fall squarely within the limited universal typology of Expressive Derivations.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Japanese Honorifics display properties associated with Expressive Derivations, including expression of a speaker's attitude, the inability to change lexical class and importantly, but less obviously, semantic elasticity.

The prefix *o-*, found in both Subject and Object honorifics, has a semantic elasticity which allows it to express attitudes not limited to honorification alone, as shown in Section 3.

2. The domain of Japanese Honorifics

Subject Honorifics are used to display a speaker's attitude towards a subject; Object Honorifics display a subject's attitude, usually towards a discourse participant. This piece argues that structures traditionally referred to as Object Honorifics (Harada 1976), have a proper analysis as SUBJECT HUMBLING. This may seem like a distinction without a difference, but it has important consequences. First, it allows a single syntactic position, subject, to be the nexus of both Honorific and Humbling constructions; more importantly, the syntax of both types, Honorification and Humbling, becomes identical; the difference between the two is the product of optional abstract morphemes, an important simplification to the grammar.

A brief observation is that Subject Humbling is nearly a direct translation of *kenjōgo* 'humble words', the Japanese term. Below, in Section 7, I provide my argument for the reanalysis and its consequences, but note that the single syntactic constraint on Object Honorification, i.e., Subject Humbling, is that its subject must be +human.

Aspects shared by both Subject Honorification and Subject Humbling are that the native prefix *o-* attaches to a non-finite verb form¹, light-verbs bear the tense features, and productive defaults are 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 shows humility toward 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 1st 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).

One use of *o-* is in (semi-) grammaticalized expressions which seem to have little to do with honorification; absence of the *o-* often results 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')

¹ Some have claimed that the non-finite verbs in honorifics are nominal, e.g., Toribio (1990). Consistent with Harada (1976), however, there are good reasons to believe they are verbal. Honorifics receive aspect and the verbal argument structure from the verb stem. In addition, true Japanese nominalizations are often non-compositional, while honorifics verb stems are consistent with the verbal meaning. *Awase* as a verb 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 *awase* means 'a lined kimono'. Finally, a hallmark of Japanese DPs 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*.

Honorific meaning is not associated with the prefix in examples from (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 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.:

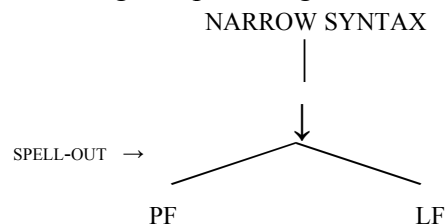
- (5) a. *o-era-gata* ‘big-wigs’ (lit. ‘the great people’)
- b. *o-erai shakai hyōronka nado* ‘our great social critics and the like’
- c. *on-deru* ‘leave before being tossed out’ (cf. *der-u* ‘leave’)
- d. *on-boro* ‘my jalopy’

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, +1st person, etc. Each language chooses a finite number from a universal pool of features, partly accounting for individual language differences. In place of phonological pieces in a syntactic derivation, only feature bundles occupy terminal nodes. 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 made compatible 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), which is applicable to the heads of complements (Bobaljik, 1995).

There are similar mismatches between syntax and phonology. An additional morphological concept 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, 3rd and tense, present (Bobaljik, 1995). The morpheme *-s* in English is actually the Fusion of the person and the tense nodes. Consider the hypothetical form: **He walk-s-ed*, where tense and number are not fused.

FISSION is a morphological process that splits one terminal node into two; used in cases where two Vocabulary Items 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 phonologic output. (Halle and Marantz, 1993).

5. Blocking effects in Japanese honorifics

A relevant morphological phenomena in terms of the structural imperatives it imposes is COMPETITION BLOCKING (Embick and Marantz, 2006), found for both Subject Honorifics and Subject Humbling. The blocking of productive defaults by suppletive forms entails competition for the identical terminal node at Spell-out. Additionally, Japanese honorifics/humbling both possess a quirky combination of free-variation (which gives the impression of blocking) and competition blocking.

This is caused by the presence of EUPHEMISMS in addition to suppletives (Martin, 1975). A Euphemism is a Sino-Japanese word (*kango*) which uses the morphology of the default forms, for Subject Honorification: *(g)o-V-ni naru*, for Subject Humbling: *(g)o-V suru*. The existence of Euphemisms is a complicating factor for the system of blocking.

An illustrative example of a Euphemism is found in Subject Humbling. The verb *kari-ru* ‘borrow’ has a Subject Humbling default form, i.e., *o-kari suru* ‘I humbly borrow’. Despite this; it also has an associated Euphemism, *go-haishaku suru* ‘I humbly borrow’. One might expect the Euphemism to be more highly specified, but Euphemisms are the “Joker in a deck of cards” when it comes to Blocking effects, sometimes in free-variation, others acting like a suppletive. Note again, the morphology of Euphemisms is the same as defaults; *go-* is an allomorph of the prefix *o-* which appears most frequently with Sino-Japanese words:

Table 1 Subject Honorifics and Blocking

Basic Verb	Default Honorific	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>yom-u</i> ‘read’ ^{NON-PAST}	<i>o-yomi-ni nar-u</i>	Ø	Ø
<i>kaer-u</i> ‘return’	<i>o-kaeri-ni nar-u</i>	Ø	Ø
<i>ik-u</i> ‘go’	* <i>o-iki-ni nar-u</i>	<i>irrashar-u</i>	<i>o-ide-ni naru</i>
<i>i-ru</i> ‘be’ ^{EXIST}	* <i>o-i-ni naru</i>	<i>irrashar-u</i>	Ø
<i>ku-ru</i> ‘come’	* <i>o-ki-ni nar-u</i>	<i>irrashar-u</i>	Ø
<i>su-ru</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 desu</i> ²

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 are sometimes used. Euphemisms sometime block defaults, but this is not absolute.

Table 2: Subject Humbling and Blocking

Basic Verb	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>i-ru</i> ‘be’ ^{EXISTENTIAL}	* <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>
<i>shir-u</i>	? <i>o-shiri suru</i>	<i>zonji-ru</i>	Ø

The shaded sections of tables 1 and 2 are where the term Competition Blocking applies. Note also that there is a near one-to-one relationship of suppletive verbs for both Subject Honorification and Subject Humbling; *irrashar-u* vs. *or-u* ‘be’^{existence}, *irrashar-u* vs. *mair-u* ‘go’, *osshar-u* vs. *mōs-u* ‘say’ seen in tables 1 and 2. Subjects must be +human in both Subject Honorifics and Humbling.

The similarities of Subject Honorifics and Humbling blocking effects are shown in the tables below:

A. Subject Honorifics

Table 3: Default

Basic	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>yom-u</i> ‘read’	<i>o-yomi-ni nar-u</i>	Ø	Ø

² Subject Honorific defaults and Euphemisms occur in free variation with *ni-nar-u* and the copula *da*, usually in its polite form *desu*, 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*.

Table 4: Suppletive blocks Default

Basic	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>ii-u</i>	<i>*o-ii-ni-nar-u</i>	<i>osshar-u</i>	Ø

Table 5: Euphemism blocks Default

Basic	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>mi-ru</i> ‘see, look at’	<i>*o-mi-ni nar-u</i>	Ø	<i>go-ran-ni nar-u</i>

Table 6: Suppletive and Euphemism in Free-variation

Basic	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>ik-u</i> ‘go’	<i>*o-iki-ni nar-u</i>	<i>irrashar-u</i>	<i>o-ide-ni nar-u</i>

B. Subject Humbling

Table 7: Default

Basic	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>tsutae-ru</i> ‘transmit’	<i>o-tsutae su-ru</i>	Ø	Ø

Table 8: Suppletive blocks Default

Basic	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>ii-u</i> ‘say’	<i>*o-ii su-ru</i>	<i>mōs-u</i>	Ø

Table 9: Euphemism blocks Default

Basic	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>mi-ru</i> ‘see’	<i>*o-mi su-ru</i>	Ø	<i>go-haiken su-ru</i>

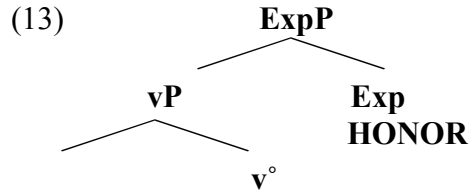
Table 10: Default and Euphemism in Free-variation

Basic	Default	Suppletive	Euphemism
<i>kari-ru</i> ‘borrow’	<i>o-kari su-ru</i>	Ø	<i>go-haishaku su-ru</i>

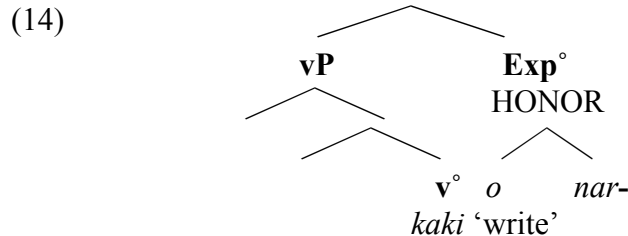
Because of the similarities between Honorifics and Humbling in terms of blocking effects, the data above leads to the question of why structures that “honor” very different “syntactic arguments” should have such similar, if not identical, systems of blocking/free variation. I try to answer this question below.

6. Subject Honorification and Spell-out

I call the functional phrase that bears the abstract morphemes for Honorifics and Humbling, EXPRESSIVE PHRASE or ExpP. Let me start with the structure of Subject Honorifics. Its syntax is shown partially in example (13). To account for its optionality, absence of honorific features in the Numeration entails the absence of the functional phrase ExpP:



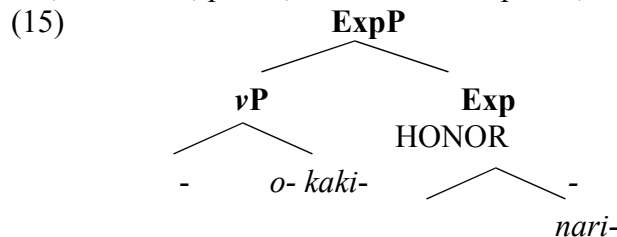
The productive Subject Honorification default consists of three relevant morphemes: the prefix *o-*, the light-verb *nari*—‘become’ and a postposition *–ni*. Let me put aside *–ni* for the time being and concentrate on the morphemes shared with Subject Humbling, a prefix and a light-verb. The terminal head of ExpP undergoes FISSION (Halle and Marantz, 1993, Noyer, 1997, and Halle, 1997), dividing its head to host the Vocabulary Items sharing the common abstract feature, HONOR. In these new nodes, the prefix and the light-verb are inserted as an intermediate part of Spell-out shown in example (14):



The prefix *o-* attaches to the terminal node of its complement by 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).

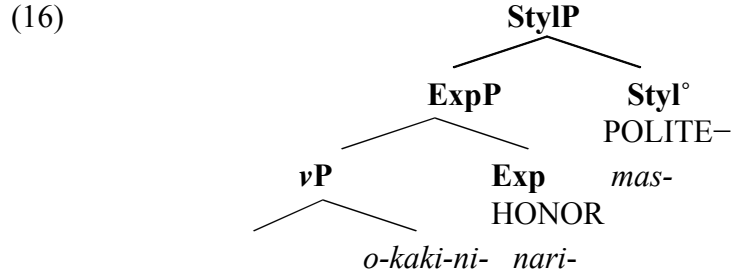
MM is sensitive to the subcategorical properties of affixes (Halle and Marantz, 1993), e.g., suffix, circumfix, prefix, etc. Here it is a prefix, *o-*:



I return now to the Vocabulary Item *–ni*. I treat it as a DISSOCIATED NODE (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 default Subject Honorifics is in free variation with the copula *da*. Therefore, there is no bi-unique relation between *ni-* and Subject Honorifics. The monomorphemic *da* or the multi-morphemic *ni-nar-u* is equivalent for the purposes of Subject Honorification; *–ni-* is not required for Syntax-and LF; its only role is to be an ornament at PF/Spell-out.

Further insertion of an extended functional head of VP creates a near grammatical utterance (missing only TP). This functional head is a speech-level, addressee-oriented morpheme, *mas-*. It occurs as the complement of TP. I call this functional phrase STYLE PHRASE or StylP. If the abstract morpheme POLITE is in a Numeration, the StylP hosting the Vocabulary Item *mas-* is introduced³. (See *Performative Honorifics*, Harada, 1976):

³ Cinque (1999) finds that such addressee-oriented morphology more commonly occurs higher than Tense cross-linguistically.



7. Subject Humbling: a reanalysis and Spell-out

The traditional term, Object Honorification (Harada, 1976), seems to imply that any verb and object (or internal argument) combination that is +human can be honored, as with Subject Honorification. This is not the case.

Humbling is a mirror image of Honorification. While Humbling is strongly associated with 1st person; Honorification can never be 1st person.

If one maintains the traditional term Object Honorific, the term *object* becomes meaningless. Here, in example (17), a possessor qualifies as an “object” over the Direct Object ‘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” which seems available is *musume* ‘my daughter’ marked with ablative case. However, pragmatically, a parent honoring a daughter never occurs except ironically or sarcastically, both are not in effect here:

- (18) (Sensei-ga) o-kaeri-ni naru to musume-kara o-kiki shimashita.
 (Hamano, 1993: 83)

(teacher-NOM) return SUBJ HONOR daughter-ABL hear-PAST-OBJECT-HON

As an Object Honorific, who is the object of honorification in the matrix clause ‘I heard from my daughter’? It seems that Subject Humbling better handles this utterance, i.e., ‘(I) humbly heard from my daughter that (the esteemed person will return (home))’.

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

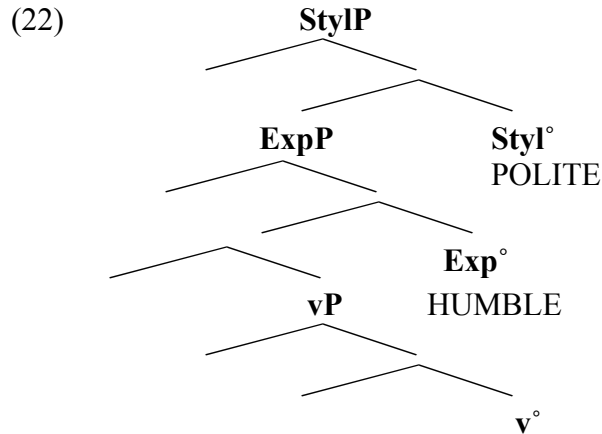
- (19) O-soba ni o-tachi shita
 PREF-near by-LOC PREF-stand-SUBJECT HUMBLING-PAST
 ‘(I) humbly stood near (him/her.)’
 (Hamano, 1993: 102)

- (20) Go-isscho-ni o-suware itashimasho-ka
 PREF together PREF-sit-SUBJECTHUMB COHORTATIVE-Q
 ‘May (I) humbly sit together (with you)?’
 (Hamano, 1993:85)

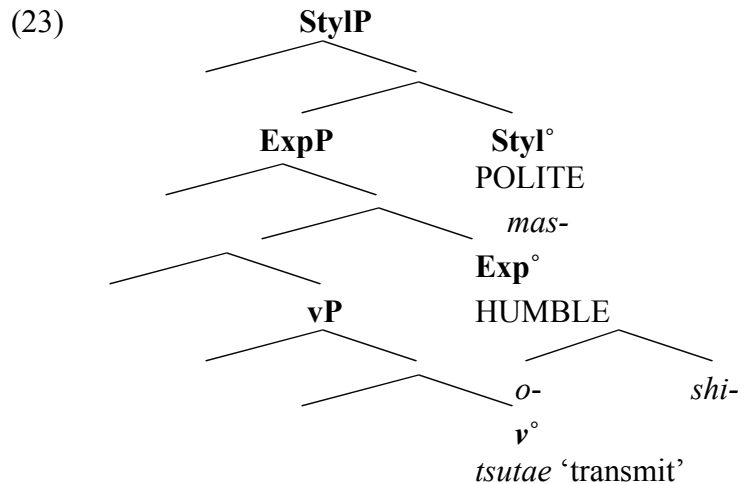
Above, the participation of intransitive verbs ‘stand’ and ‘sit’ rules out the Object Honorification analysis. It is not limited to unaccusative verbs as; example (21) shows an unergative example:

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

If this analysis is on the right track, the similarities in blocking effects between Honorification and Humbling fall into place; Spell-out and syntax of the two become isomorphic. Their difference derives from abstract features in ExpP which choose for distinct light-verbs, *nari* ‘become’ for HONOR and *shi-* ‘do’ for HUMBLE. Example (22) shows the verbal features that syntax hands over to PF/Spell-out prior to Vocabulary Insertion:

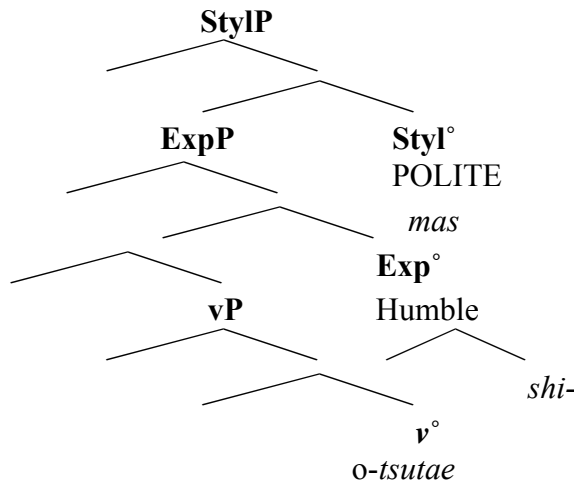


Example (23) shows Vocabulary Insertion:



Example (23) shows that manipulation of some heads is necessary; Example (24) is the spelled out linearized form:

(24) a.



b. O-tsutae shi-mas-u.

PRE-transmit-HUMBLE-POLITE-NON-PAST

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

The abstract morphemes Honor and Humble have a functional phrase, which I have called ExpP. The fission of the ExpP head occurs because two overt Vocabulary Items containing either Honor or Humble appear in the same terminal node.

8. Summary

I have argued that Object Honorific is Subject Humbling and that Subject Honorifics and Subject Humbling is a product of the same functional phrase. This allows an explanation for the similarities of Japanese Honorifics and Humbling blocking effects. This move also substantially simplifies the grammar, attributing both to a single functional phrase.

I have also made a case for Honorifics and Humbling as Expressive Derivations. If the general analysis is on the right track, then it shows some of the virtues of Late Insertion morphology. There are many remaining questions that deserve to be analyzed on the topic of Honorifics/Humbling in Japanese. Two that come immediately to mind are pragmatic issues and applications to other lexical categories.

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