The performative nature of Japanese honorifics   Christopher Potts & Shigeto Kawahara
SALT 14   (UMass Amherst)

Harada (1976:500) writes that the meaning and use of Japanese honorifics "is not a problem to which a grammatical description is addressed". We reassess this claim in light of two strands of research that emerged after Harada's extensive study: dynamic semantics and multidimensional theories of content. We rely on both tools in developing a theory of honorifics that treats them as independent speech acts, separate from the illocutionary force of the main clause and inextricably linked to the utterance situation. We concentrate on two under-studied kinds of honorification: *performative honorification* (1) and *antihonorification* (2), though our theory makes correct predictions about the meanings of argument-oriented honorification (Boeckx and Niinuma 2003).

(1)   Mary-ga ringo-o tabe-mashita.
        Mary   apple   ate-PERFORMATIVE-HONORIFIC-PAST
        'Mary ate the apple. I am speaking nicely to you.'
(2)   John-wa [Mary-ga ringo-o tabe-yagat-ta   ] -koto-o shitteiru.
        John   Mary   apple   eat-ANTIHONORIFIC-PAST *-fact   know*
        'John knows that Mary ate the apple. I am displeased that Mary ate the apple.'

The following descriptive generalizations, adapted and expanded from work on the broader class of *expressive meanings* (Kaplan 1999; Kratzer 1999; Potts 2003), form the core of our proposal:

Nondisplaceability (Cruse 1986)   Honorifics tell us about the *speaker*'s beliefs in the *utterance situation*. Thus, they never end up in the semantic scope of any operators. Example (2) illustrates: it is the speaker who expresses displeasure at Mary's apple eating. This displeasure cannot be attributed to John (the matrix subject), and no reading of the sentence entails that John knows that the speaker is displeased about the apple eating.

Independence   Sentences containing honorifics are multidimensional in the sense that each honorific contributes a meaning that is independent of the meaning of the main clause. This is reflected in the glosses provided in (1)–(2), which are in fact two-sentence discourses. Honorifics are not definedness conditions — they *establish* that the speaker holds a particular attitude in the utterance situation — and hence cannot be treated as presuppositions. (This conclusion is already suggested by the projection behavior described under **nondisplaceability**.)

Immediacy (Kaplan 1999)   Honorifics achieve their intended act simply by being uttered; they do not offer content for inclusion into the common ground so much as inflict content upon it. In this sense, they are performative.

Descriptive ineffability   Speakers are never fully satisfied when they paraphrase honorifics. This suggests that their content is not propositional.

The nondisplaceability and immediacy properties indicate that honorifics are a part of discourse semantics. We model discourses using *information states* as defined in (3).

(3)   An *information state* is a pair (W, C), where W is a subset of the set of all possible worlds and C is a subset of the set of all possible contexts.
(4)   A *context* is a tuple $c = \langle c_A, c_W, c_T, c_P \rangle$, where c_A is the agent (speaker) of c, c_W is the world of c, c_T is the time of c, and c_P is the place of c.

Regular content affects the first (world) coordinate of the information state. Illocutionary force operators (Krifka 2001) affect the second (context) coordinate. If Ali, in information state (W, C), successfully asserts that it is snowing, then we move to the information state such that for all $w \in W$, it is snowing in w, and for all $c \in C$, the agent of c is Ali and Ali is acting, at c_T and c_P,

to convey that it is snowing in c_W. The theories of content and illocutionary force are kept distinct, but we house them both in a single theory.

We are free to define functions that operate on one dimension independently of the other. This is the key to honorifics: they affect only the context coordinate. To make this precise, we assign honorific morphemes a designated output type, which we symbolize with ε. The domain of ε is the set of all information states. We can then define terms like (5), in which $\bullet$ is the update function (defined for now as $(W, C) \bullet (W', C') = (W \cap W', C \cap C')$, for any W, W', C, C'):

(5) $(W, C) \bullet [\![\textbf{anti-hon}(p)]\!] = (W, C \cap \{c \mid c_A \text{ is displeased by } [\![p]\!] \text{ at } \langle c_W, c_T, c_P \rangle\})$

We control the distribution of the ε in two ways. First, $\langle \varepsilon, \sigma \rangle$ is not a well-formed type for any type σ. That is, though we have functions into the realm of expressive content, no lexical meaning takes expressive content as its argument. This achieves **nondisplaceability**. Second, we employ the following application scheme:

(6) $\beta : \sigma$ denotes an information state

$$\overset{\text{'}}{\underset{\alpha : \langle \sigma, \varepsilon \rangle \quad \beta : \sigma}{\overbrace{\qquad\qquad}}}\alpha(\beta) : \varepsilon$$

the argument to the expressive function is passed up unmodified, and hence can continue to participate in the compositional semantics

This achieves **independence**: the honorific content does not intrude on the composition of the regular meaning. Our interpretation rule finds all the nodes in the parsetree that denote information states and uses them to perform an intersective update. The **immediacy** property follows from the nature of an honorific update: it changes the context via the same sort of mechanism used for obviously performative content. Finally, we attribute **descriptive ineffability** to the fact that saturated honorifics denote information states rather than sets of worlds. They are not propositional.

To close, we note that the theory also correctly predicts that honorification and quantifier binding are severely limited in their licit interactions:

(7)   ?* hotondo no kyoojyu-ga [*pro* sono kurasu-wo o-oshieninatta   ] -to   omotteiru.
       most-of   professor   that class   taught-SUBJ-HON -COMP *believes*
       ?* 'Most professors believe that they, who I honor, taught that class.'

The subject-honorific, realized morphologically on the embedded verb, applies to a free variable (the meaning of the *pro*-subject of the embedded clause). In our theory, this variable necessarily remains free in the honorific meaning, even though it is bound by the matrix quantifier. Thus, to obtain a coherent reading of (7), speakers must restrict attention to assignments that take the variable to a denotation that is equivalent to that of *the professors who believe they taught that class*. The need for this extra-grammatical repair accounts for the fact that speakers judge the *very best* examples of this form to be highly questionable.

References

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