Honorific-Agreement Constraints in Japanese

This paper seeks to integrate Japanese object honorification (OH) within a broader cross-linguistic context concerning agreement, and thereby explain some of its most interesting properties.

Following a long tradition (Harada 1976, Shibatani 1977, Toribio 1990, Ura 2000), we regard honorification in Japanese as a case of agreement, but unlike previous approaches we show that the Spec-Head configuration is not necessary for agreement to obtain. Long-distance Agree(ment) (Chomsky 2000) suffices.

Besides subject honorification (1), Japanese also allows OH (2). The most interesting property of the latter is that agreement is blocked in the presence of a dative element (3b). We argue that this blocking effect is a reflex of a more general constraint: The Person-Case Constraint (4) -- first discovered in the context of Romance clitic-clusters (Kayne 1975; Perlmutter 1971) (5a), but recently extended to puzzles such as person-agreement constraints in Icelandic quirky constructions (Boeckx 1998) (5b). Roughly, (4) says that in the presence of dative agreement, accusative agreement is restricted to 3rd person. Since honorification is a form of polite 2nd person agreement, (4) predicts the absence of OH in the presence of a dative (which we take to agree with the verb, hence triggering (3b)).

We contemplate two ways of accounting for (4), both in Japanese, and cross-linguistically. One is 'morphological blocking.' According to it, agreement does obtain with objects despite the presence of datives, but it fails to be realized in PF (see Bonet 1994 for such an approach). The other (which we adopt) is an extension of the defective intervention effect of datives (or Quirky elements) proposed by Chomsky 2000. According to the latter, the dative, which does not agree with the verb, prevents agreement with a structurally Case-marked element it c-commands. Chomsky's analysis can be extended to Japanese if we regard VP as a phase, with the dative at the edge of it, rendering the object invisible (Phase-Impenetrability condition) (6). To ensure that the accusative object never appears at the edge of the VP-phase, we argue against Miyagawa 1997, and in favor of Hoji 1985, and regard the Indirect Obj-Direct Obj order to be the underlying order in Japanese. The present analysis has the further theoretical implication that Japanese datives behave like Quirky elements in Icelandic (5b), thereby supporting Ura's 1999 claim that Japanese has Quirky elements.

In sum, we subsume OH in Japanese under Agree, and show that it is subject to the same constraint (4/Defective Intervention + (6)) as other cases of object agreement cross-linguistically. In addition to supporting the idea that honorification is to be treated on a par with phi-feature agreement, the analysis begs the question whether, if Agree is subject to the same constraints as other languages, functional heads in the language are really as impoverished (or 'different') as argued by Fukui 1986, 1995.

(1) Tanaka sensei-ga o-warai-ni nat-ta
Tanaka Prof.-Nom laugh-SH-Past
‘Prof. Tanaka laughed’

(2) Taro-ga Tanaka sensei-o o-tasuke-si-ta
Taro-Nom Tanaka Prof.-Acc assist-OH-Past ‘Taro assisted Prof. Tanaka’

(3) a. Boku-ga Tanaka sensei-ni Mary-o go-syookai-si-ta
    I-Nom Tanaka Prof.-Dat Mary-Acc introduce-OH-Past
    ‘I introduced Mary to Prof. Tanaka’

b.* Boku-ga Mary-ni Tanaka sensei-o go-syookai-si-ta
    I-Nom Mary-Dat Tanaka Prof.-Acc introduce-OH-Past
    ‘I introduced Prof. Tanaka to Mary’

(4) The Person-Case Constraint (PCC)
Human language disallows the presence of first or second person agreement with a direct object [AGRo] when there is also dative agreement
If AGRdative → AGRobj = 3rd person

(5) a. * Anne {me lui} introduit [French]
    Anne me-Acc him-Dat introduced
    ‘Anne introduced me to him’

b. Mér fannst/*fundust henni lei_ast _eir [Icelandic]
    Me.dat seemed.3.sg/pl her.dat to.be.bored they.nom
    ‘I thought she was bored with them’

References