

# ROOT ALTERNATIONS FOR DISCOURSE EFFECTS: A CHALLENGE FOR LOCALITY?\*

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## 1. Introduction

Japanese has a class of verbs with root alternations that seem to depend on some concept of politeness. Within traditional descriptions, this form of politeness is known as honorification. Honorification contrasts with the so-called performative honorific, a term introduced by Harada (1976), which expresses the formal function in a T-V system, though there are some differences (see Miyagawa 2012). Though similar in function, as we will demonstrate shortly, there is a surprising lack of interaction between the performative honorific and honorification.

Plain, or non-honorific, forms of the verb *iku* ‘go’ are given in (1). These forms contrast with the honorific forms in (2) and (3) which can properly be subdivided into honorific and humble forms of the verb, respectively. Honorifics in (2) raise the status of the addressee while the humble form in (3) lowers the status of the author. Observe that the honorific forms of *iku* are suppletive.

- |     |    |   |    |   |
|-----|----|---|----|---|
| (1) | a. | <b>ik-u</b><br>go-NON.PAST<br>someone goes                    | b. | <b>iki-mas-u</b><br>go-ALLO-NON.PAST<br>someone goes      |
| (2) | a. | <b>irrashar-u</b> <sup>1</sup><br>go-NON.PAST<br>someone goes | b. | <b>irrashai-mas-u</b><br>go-ALLO-NON.PAST<br>someone goes |
| (3) | a. | <b>mair-u</b><br>go-NON.PAST<br>someone goes                  | b. | <b>mairi-mas-u</b><br>go-ALLO-NON.PAST<br>someone goes    |

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<sup>1</sup> Norio Ota, a professor of Japanese at York University, (p.c.) notes that the use of casual honorifics, as in (2a) and (3a) which lack *-masu*, are predominantly restricted to the so-called female register of the language. And another speaker reports that this usage is possible for male speakers but takes on a distinctly sarcastic quality.

The data in (1) – (3) demonstrate that the notion of politeness that *-mas* imparts does not need to interact with honorific and humble forms as honorification is possible without the use of the performative honorific suffix. We can, therefore, conclude that the performative honorific and honorification constitute separate domains due to the lack of interaction.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the productive and suppletive honorific forms. In section 3, we discuss the status of the putative honorific morpheme and show that this characterization is imprecise. Section 4 addresses the syntax of expressive categories while section 5 explores the concept of respect and formalizes various power hierarchies in terms of in-group versus out-group relations. In section 6, we discuss the notion of locality as suppletion is argued to be a local phenomenon. We formalize the details of our analysis in section 7 arguing for a sentience head as the locus of perspective-based calculations. We take the in-group versus out-group dichotomy to be a featural distinction of the sentience head. This feature eventually ends up in the local domain of the root to allow it to condition the observed suppletion. Last section 8 concludes.

## 2. Japanese honorifics

### 2.1 The productive forms

Forming the honorific and humble is a fairly productive process in Japanese. The honorific form of the verb in (4) is constructed with the light verb *naru* ‘become’ and requires the presence of a lexically selected post-position *ni*. The humble form in (5), on the other hand, is constructed with the light verb *suru* ‘do’ and does not have any required post-position. In both constructions, the nominalized verb is preceded by the prefix *o-*.

(4) *o-machi ni nari-mas-u*  
 O-wait.REN NI BECOME-ALLO-NON.PAST  
 someone (of higher status) waits

(5) *o-machi shi-mas-u*  
 O-wait.REN DO-ALLO-NON.PAST  
 someone (of lower status) waits

(Volpe 2009: 2)

Previous analyses (Thompson 2011, Ivana and Sakai 2007) have argued that *o-* is an honorific marker. However, we avoid this characterization here as we will present data illustrating that the distribution of *o-* is more complex than has been previously suggested. The gloss REN stands for the non-finite form of the verb called the *renyookei*. It consists of the verb stem followed by the vowel /i/ if the verb stem ends in a consonant otherwise the /i/ deletes if the verb stem ends in a vowel.

## 2.2 The suppletive forms

In addition to the more productive honorific and humble forms, several verbs have suppletive alternants. We use *iku* ‘go’ as an example as it is already familiar from the introduction. Poser (1992: 10) notes that the productive periphrastic construction is ‘blocked’ so long as there is a corresponding synthetic verb (see also Volpe 2009). This observation is exemplified by the data in (6) taken from Volpe (2009: 2).

- (6) a. Sensei-wa **irasshai**-mas-u (*\*o-iki-ni nari-mas-u*)  
 teacher-TOP **go**. HON-ALLO-NON.PAST  
 ‘The teacher deigns to go.’
- b. Watashi-wa **mairi**-mas-u (*\*o-iki shi-mas-u*)  
 I-TOP **go**. HUM-ALLO-NON.PAST  
 ‘I will (humbly) go.’

In the grand scheme of honorification, *iku* ‘go’ is, of course, not the only verb of this type. We do not provide an exhaustive listing for reasons of brevity but some verbs in this category are *iru* ‘be.exist’ (animate), *aru* ‘be.exist’ (inanimate), *suru* ‘do’, *iu* ‘say’, among others.

## 3. On the status of (g)o<sup>2</sup>

Volpe (2009) analyses Japanese Honorifics as some type of Expressive Derivations. He notes that they enact the expression of a speaker’s attitude, they cannot change their lexical class, and they fundamentally have a certain semantic elasticity. Beard (1995: 163-4) finds that cross-linguistically, Expressive Derivations are limited to diminutives, augmentatives, pejoratives, and affectionate. As we show in (7), *o-* in Japanese has several uses that roughly correspond to Beard’s categories.

Volpe (2009), notes that *o-* appears in grammaticalized expressions that have little to do with honorification as in (7a). Martin (1975) notes that the prefix also clearly has a sarcastic use, as seen in (7b) and (7c). Last, Thompson (2011: 166) notes that there is a use of the prefix that is conventional and polite but not necessarily honorific as in (7d–f).

- (7) a. *o-nara* ‘flatulence’  
 b. *o-era-gata* ‘big-wigs’  
 c. *on-deru* ‘leave before being tossed out’  
 d. *o-uchi* ‘your house’  
 e. *go-kazoku* ‘family’  
 f. *o-tanosii* ‘fun’

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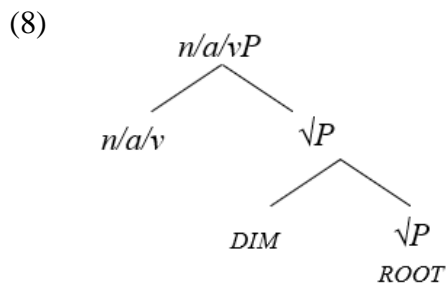
<sup>2</sup> *o-* is used on words of typically Japanese origin and *go-* is used on words of foreign (usually Chinese) origin.

Shibatani (1990) mentions that the prefix *o-* has a long history as a beautification prefix, which might explain how it can be perceived as having some flavors politeness, but not of honorification *per se*. However, given all the uses that we have seen in (7) beautification does not seem entirely adequate either. If we take the position that *o-* is a generalized maker of an expressive derivation as advocated by Volpe (2009), then we get a rather straightforward account for its varied usages. In what follows we offer some justification for this approach.

#### 4. Expressive syntax

##### 4.1 Diminutives

Wiltschko and Steriopo (2007) look at the syntax of diminutives in three typologically unrelated languages, German, Halkomelem, and Russian. They argue that DIMINUTIVE (DIM) can be merged as a head or as a modifier. When DIM is merged as a modifier it has two properties: (i) it can combine freely with many grammatical categories, and (ii) it is neither clearly derivational nor inflectional. They argue that DIM combines with nouns, verbs, and adjectives as a result of its low merge position with yet-to-be-categorized roots. Their proposed structure for modifier-DIM is given in (8).



Several properties of *o-* and modifier-DIM line up almost identically. DIM's apparent lack of semantic elasticity is the only complicating factor. Volpe (2009: 1) has argued that honorific morphology neither inflectional nor derivational morphology and we have clear evidence that the *o-* prefix can occur with verbs as in (7c), adjectives as in (7f), and nouns as in the remainder of (7). If we could demonstrate that DIM also exhibits the same semantic elasticity as *o-*, then we could conclude that the analysis proposed for modifier-DIM is not only desirable but warranted as the pertinent facts would be identical. It would strike us as quite the conspiracy for the properties of these two expressive categories to be identical while also being derived from drastically different syntactic resources.

In the following section, we show that DIM does exhibit semantic elasticity and that the elasticity observed is a direct consequence of the DIM analysis.

## 4.2 Diminutives and idiosyncratic meanings

Crosslinguistically, diminutives are found in a wide array of languages. They usually indicate that a nominal is small or conceived of as being ‘cute’ in some sense. Consider the examples in (9) and (10) from Russian and Georgian, respectively.

(9) Russian: *vodka* → *voda* (water) + *-ka* (DIM)  
(lit. little water)

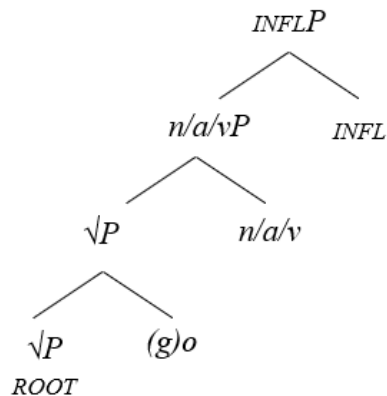
(10) Georgian: *Rusiko* → *Rusudan* (proper woman’s name) + *-iko* (DIM)  
(lit. little Rusudan, but means either “my dear *Rusudan*” or the affectionate expression “cute *Rusudan*”)

In (9) the literal meaning of *vodka* is little water, but its common meaning denotes a particular kind of spirit. In this case, the interpretation of the diminutive is quite idiosyncratic whereas in the Georgian example in (10) its interpretation is straightforwardly diminutive in character. Clearly, there is some semantic elasticity with diminutives which rounds out the properties and makes DIM and (*g*)*o*– identical.

## 4.3 The syntax of expressive (*g*)*o*

The syntax for expressives we adopt is based on Wiltschko and Steriopolo’s (2007) proposal and expressive (*g*)*o*– is a modifier to an uncategorized root in (11).

(11)



We view expressive (*g*)*o*– as an adjunct and typically adjuncts have not been considered interveners for head-movement. Head-movement to the category-defining head must occur since inflected words (minimally verbs and adjectives) are the result of a complex head in the syntax and inflection always occurs closest to the root. When the root has moved to *v*, for instance, (*g*)*o*– is left stranded in its base position. This structure would then linearize as (*g*)*o*+*V/A/N*, deriving the prefix order. Here the inflection head is just a

general stand-in to denote that additional structure can appear after the category-defining head. If expressive *(g)o-* occurs under a nominal head, it behaves more as a type of *sarcasm/euphemism/polite* marking as seen in (12). In the verbal domain, it can form the basis of the honorific forms but is equally suitable as an indicator of sarcasm as in (13).

- (12) *(g)o-* under *n* = euphemism/sarcasm/polite  
*o-nara* ‘flatulence’/ *o-era-gata* ‘big-wigs’/ *go-kazoku* ‘family’
- (13) *(g)o-* under *v* = hon/sarcasm  
*o-yomi* ‘read’/ *on-deru* ‘leave before being tossed out’

The idiosyncratic character of *(g)o-* falls out from the proposed analysis. Arad (2003), argues that the first merge of a root with a categorizing head (*v, a, n*) is the domain of semantic idiosyncrasy. Therefore, this behaviour is predicted by the analysis and obviates the need to postulate homophonous *(g)o-* prefixes as is assumed in previous analyses.

In the following section, we explore the linguistics conception of respect. We claim that honorification revolves around power differentials between interlocutors which can be mapped to the traditional Japanese notions of in-group and out-group.

## 5. Respect in context

Sakai and Ivana (2009: 439) note that the notion of respect must be situated in context. However, the context of the utterance is difficult to identify, as it includes considerations such as the relative social status of the Speaker and Addressee, among other factors. In our analysis, the concept of respect involves dividing people into *in-groups* (In) and *out-groups* (Out). When speaking with someone from an *out-group*, the *out-group* must be honored, and the *in-group* humbled. Consider (14).

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (14) <i>in-group</i> (about one's own) | <i>Out-group</i> (about someone else's) |
| <i>chichi</i> (my) father              | <i>o-tō-san</i> (your) father           |
| <i>haha</i> (my) mother                | <i>o-kā-san</i> (your) mother           |
| <i>kazoku</i> (my) family              | <i>(go-)kazoku</i> (your) family        |

Here we can see how the partitioning of relations in terms of *In* and *Out* is represented in Japanese kinship terms. The language has a dedicated vocabulary for talking about one's own family versus talking about someone else's family. This contrast can be seen in (15) where talking about someone else's family in (15a) warrants the addition of *(g)o-* whereas the same is not true when talking about one's own family as in (15b).

- (15) a. sensei-no (go-)kazoku  
 Professor-GEN EXP-family  
 ‘The Professor’s family’

- b.    *watashi-no*    (\**go-*)*kazoku*  
       I-GEN            EXP-family  
       ‘My family’

By splitting the Speaker/Addressee’s pragmatic position in the social hierarchy in terms of *In* or *Out*, we reduce the data to a cartesian mapping of the ‘culturally appropriate’ forms of specialized Japanese vocabulary including verbs and kinship terms. In short, what appears to be the pure product of culture can be concretely mapped to structural positions that interact with pragmatics.

We show this mapping obtains in Section 7. However, before doing so, in section 6, we turn to the issue of locality as it relates to suppletion.

## 6. Context and locality

Current theoretical work has pervasively argued that the locus of the syntax-pragmatics interface is a Speech Act domain in the left periphery of the clause above C (Speas and Tenny 2003, Miyagawa 2012). For Japanese, Miyagawa’s (2012) analysis of the performative honorific *-mas* argues for an allocutive probe in this domain. The notion of allocutivity, borrowed from Basque (see Oyharçabal 1993), was adopted by Miyagawa due to *-mas* having an analogous function to allocutive markers. That is, it is an addressee-oriented agreement that marks politeness. It has also been argued that perspective-based phenomenon (such as the partitioning of a sentence into *In* and *Out* as we argue in Section 7) is the result of a sentience head in the Speech Act domain (Speas and Tenny 2003, Zu 2018).

Given this view of the clausal architecture, then, the trigger for the honorific verbal alternation is located high in the structure. If lexical insertion is done at terminal nodes, then suppletion points to some “spooky action at a distance” as one head influences the realization of another. However, most recent thinking about suppletion and its spooky action has advanced arguments that suppletion is in actuality a local process. This fact notwithstanding, definitions of locality vary which begs the question of how far apart can these heads be? In order to assess the question, we need to properly define locality. Thus, we briefly sketch out the two prominent views that have been advocated in the (DM) literature.

The first take is quite restrictive and advances the position that two nodes are local if they are structurally adjacent (Embick 2010, Calabrese 2015). Extraneous, or non-overt, nodes are removed through various morphological operations such as impoverishment as a requirement of adjacency. The second view takes a more relaxed approach to locality and defines locality within a span of heads in the functional domain of a word, like INFL for verbs (Svenonius 2016, Merchant 2015, Haugen and Siddiqi 2016). It takes an approach similar to Relativized Minimality (Rizzi 1990) and enforces locality in the shortest relevant domain which may be larger than what structural agency permits.

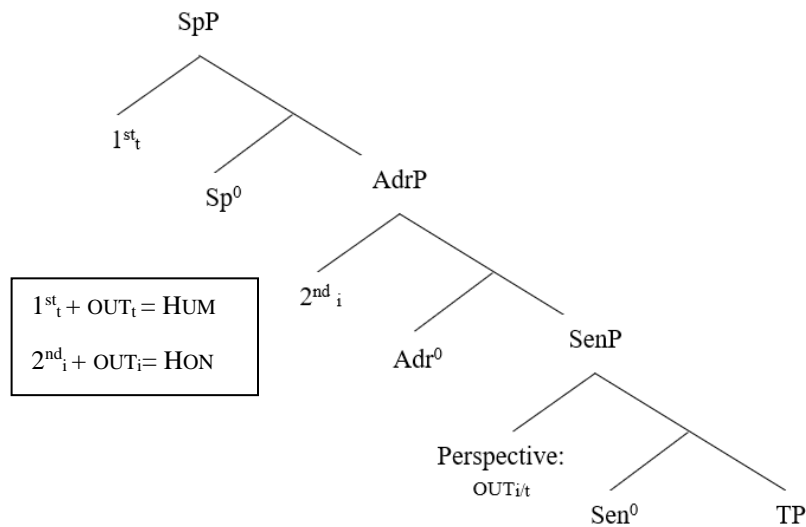
Clearly, neither definition of locality will permit heads in the Speech Act to act as triggers for the observed suppletion, and it is not obvious that any lower heads could plausibly be the trigger. We, therefore, need to develop an analysis that can satisfy at least one of the two views. In the following sections, we begin to lay out the details for how this can be accomplished and argue that the relative notion of locality is better suited to the Japanese data.

## 7. Analysis

### 7.1 The syntax of perspective

To capture the root suppletion patterns, the interaction between the morphology of the verbal root, and the role of *honorification* in suppletion, we adopt a structure proposed by Zu (2018). Consider (16).

(16)



We propose that the two honorific categories are doing similar work but grammaticalize different (though loosely related) relations between interlocutors. The relevant scales are the ones familiar from the politeness literature. Brown and Levinson (1987) posit that the following factors (among others not strictly relevant to the present discussion) affect the choice of politeness strategy: (i) the social distance between speaker and addressee and (ii) power differences between the speaker and addressee. We suggest that performative honorifics (i.e. *-mas*) plausibly operate on the first strategy while honorifics operate on the second. In this way, the two categories are related but not in any way that forces their interaction. The structure in (16) shows the following: if the addressee (2nd person) is indexed to the Perspective OUT feature, the root must be Spelled Out to reflect the honorific form. If the Speaker (1st person) is indexed to Perspective OUT and not the Addressee,



however, the verbal root must be Spelled Out to reflect the humble form; the precise mechanism that allows this is discussed in section 7.2.

This perspective-based approach could be easily extended to deal with other phenomena that consider various social hierarchies. Consider (17).

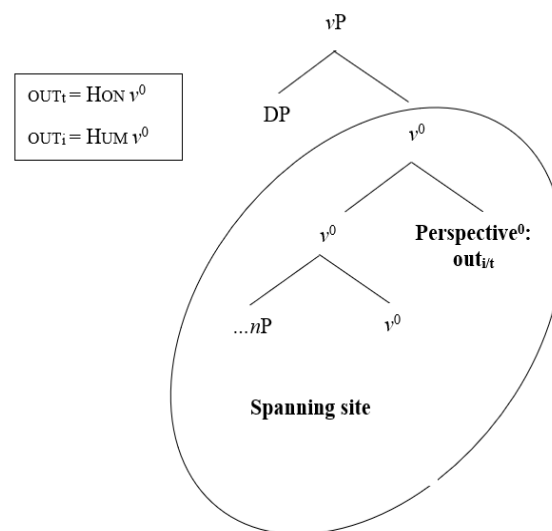
- (17) a. Sensee-ga (watashi-ni) kono jisho-o kudasai-masi-ta.  
 Teacher-NOM (I-DAT) this dictionary-ACC give-ALLO-PAST  
 ‘Sensei gave (me) this dictionary.’
- b. Tomodachi-ga (watashi-ni) zasshi-o kure-masi-ta.  
 Friend-NOM (I-DAT) magazine-ACC give-ALLO-PAST  
 ‘My friend gave (me) a magazine.’ (Ota 2020)

In (17a) the giver is the senior person in the dynamic whereas in (17b) the giver and receiver are of equal social status. Unfortunately, due to limitations of space, we cannot provide an analysis of these data in this short paper. However, the data do lend credence to the fact that a perspective-based system is at play in the grammar of Japanese and that it has consequences for verb suppletion.

## 7.2 Perspective node sprouting

In the humble form, *iu* ‘say’ in (18a) is suppletive and is realized as a single word *mosu* which we analyze as in (18b).

- (18) a. *mosu* (hum) / \**o-ii suru*
- b.



Before discussing the suppletive forms, however, we must lay out our proposal for the productive forms as they are intimately related. The productive forms of honorific verbs are composed with light verb *suru* ‘do’ and *naru* ‘become’ which will be spelt out by  $v^0$ . Following Thomson (2011), we view these constructions as taking nominalized complements that correspond to *nP* in the structure. Concretely, this *nP*’s complement would be the structure we argued for in (13) without the INFL layer. The *Out* feature either indexed to the Speaker or the Addressee is inserted on  $v^0$  via PERSPECTIVE<sup>0</sup>, creating a complex head in the post-syntactic component. We adopt Choi and Harley’s (2019) proposal updating the old terminology of dissociated morpheme in favour of Node Sprouting. Under this approach *suru* and *naru* are allophones of the same underlying light verb and the choice of which to insert is determined by the spouted node which corresponds to either HON or HUM. Indeed, it has been argued quite pervasively that the *ninaru* light verb construction is less strongly agentive than the *suru* light verb construction (Thomson 2011: 169, Ivana and Sakai 2007: 186). In our analysis, this is a symptom of having PERSPECTIVE indexed to either the Speaker (agentive) or the Addressee (non-agentive).

Thomson (2011: 165) argues that in the *N+ninaru* construction the verb is highly semantically bleached, and it is there to turn the nominal into a verb. Essentially, *ni* is not a post-position but analyzed as part of the verb. However, Volpe (2009: 7–8) treats *-ni* as a dissociated morpheme (a sprouted node) as it is not required for either **Syntax** or **LF**; its only role is to be an ornament at **Spell-out**. As the particular analysis of *-ni* is not central to the analysis, we do not take a position either way. Both analyses capture this fact and though the technical implementation is different, they are not radically different in spirit.

In regard to the spanning site, spanning is only needed for the verbs that show root suppletion. A span is defined in terms of a complement sequence of heads, in a single extended projection excluding specifiers and adjuncts (e.g. Svenonius 2016). In a Spanning theory of vocabulary insertion, in (18b), a single lexical item is inserted for honorific (or humble) structure and blocks the appearance of the otherwise more productive form (see Poser 1992). However, in the normal course, there is no need for spanning at all in which case we get the insertion of the productive forms in the manner previously discussed.

Lastly, we briefly comment on some alternate proposals for honorification. Different approaches to honorification can be seen in Boeckx and Niinuma (2004) and Bobaljik and Yatsushiro (2006). They argue that honorification is best analyzed in terms of agreement. However, Thompson (2011) points out that a major problem with these two agreement-based accounts is that they do not adequately capture all of the empirical data and therefore undegenerate. Thompson (2011) and Volpe (2009) both take a more purely morphology approach such as the one offered here. However, our approach pays critical attention to the fact that honorific and humble forms have a perspective-based component. Given our observation that perspectival phenomenon triggering verbal suppletion is more common in Japanese, we believe that our analysis fares better as it is, in principle, generalizable to the other set of perspective-based alterations.

## 8. Conclusion

This analysis resolves several issues in the analysis of Japanese honorifics. First, we address issues related to *(g)o-* and the fact that it has several associated meanings, and not all of them concern honorification as previously claimed. We capture this fact by comparing *(g)o-* and diminutives and showing that these expressive categories have the same properties. Most notably, we characterized the power differentials in honorification in a simple perspective-based system that considers the in-group versus out-group. We argued for a sentience domain which is a perspectival center with an OUT feature. When this feature is indexed to the speaker it produces humble morphology and when indexed to the addressee produces honorific morphology. As seen in the analysis, locality issues in honorification and root suppletion are resolved by having a PERSPECTIVE<sup>0</sup> node sprout on  $v^0$ . This captures **how** a very low element such as  $v^0$  gets the various possible combinations of perspective which are established very high in the clausal spine. Last, spanning captures the fact that for some honorific and humble forms a single synthetic verb form is selected, while in the general case spanning is not necessary and the productive forms *o-verb-(ni)naru/suru* are produced.

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