

**Subject Honorification:
with special reference to possessive and existential constructions in Japanese**

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In this research, we are concerned with the so-called subject honorification in Japanese possessive and existential constructions. Predicates preferably take the "subject honorific" form when the subject refers to a person to whom a speaker should pay deference. Thus, the sentence *Sensei-ga o-suwari-ni nat-ta* 'the teacher sat down' is more felicitous than *Sensei-ga suwat-ta*.

In his book *Nihongo no Bunseki* (1978), Shibatani argues that the dative NP is the target of "subject honorification" in a possessive construction such as (1a), but the nominative NP in an existential construction like (1b).

- (1) a. {Tanaka sensei/*Taroo}-ni nyooboo kodomo-ga o-ari-ni nar-u.
'{Prof. Tanaka/Taro} has a wife and a child.'
b. Sono kooen-ni {Tanaka sensei/*Taroo}-ga irassyar-u.
'In the park is {Prof. Tanaka/Taro}.'

On the basis of this observation, Shibatani claims that the possessive construction differs from the existential construction in that the dative NP, but not the nominative NP, functions as subject.

There are, however, some difficulties in Shibatani's analysis. First, subject honorification cannot be actually used to justify the subjecthood of the dative NP in the possessive construction.

- (2) a. Tanaka sensei-ni {okusan/*izi-no warui okusan}-ga irassyar-u.
'Prof. Tanaka has a {wife/ill-natured wife}.'
b. {Tanaka sensei/*Taroo}-ni okusan-ga irassyar-u.
'{Prof. Tanaka/Taro} has a wife.'

Both (2a) and (2b) describe one and the same situation, i.e. Prof. Tanaka has a(n) (ill-natured) wife. However, they are different from each other in which NP plays a decisive role in the evaluation of the acceptability. Given Shibatani's analysis, (2a) will be classified as the existential construction, while (2b) will be classified as the possessive construction. This will pose a problem for his analysis, since the sentence which describes the same situation will be divided into two different constructions in which different NPs function as subject. Rather, the fact observed here indicates that some factor other than subject is involved in "subject honorification." Thus, this phenomenon cannot be always used as a diagnosis of subjecthood.

A second problem is that it would be predicted in Shibatani's analysis that the genitive NP is the subject of the sentence in (3a) and the vocative NP the subject of the sentence in (3b). For it is these NPs that refer to an honorable person in the sentences in question. The replacement of *Tanaka sensei* with *Taroo* yields unacceptable sentences.

- (3) a. [{Tanaka sensei/*Taroo}-no] me-ga] o-warui.
 '{Prof. Tanaka/Taroo} is weak in sight.'
 b. {Tanaka sensei/*Taro}, [me-ga] o-waru-ku nari mas-u yo.
 '{Prof. Tanaka/Taroo}, you would be weak in sight.'

It should be noted, however, that the adjective *o-warui* in (3a) and the composite verb *o-waruku nari mas-u* in (3b) are not predicated of the NP *Tanaka sensei*, rather of the NP *me* 'eyes,' which is marked with the nominative case particle *-ga*. Thus, the notion of subject cannot be extended to NPs in the genitive or vocative.

Alternatively, we propose that the "subject" honorific form of a predicate is licensed if the nominative subject refers to either an honorable person or something that is possessed by (or, in the most general sense, accessible to) that person. On this hypothesis, we can account for the grammatical status of the sentences in (1)–(3) in a unified way. In (1a) and (2), the nominative NP refers to the person who is "possessed" by the honorable person referred to by the dative NP. Similarly in (3a, b), the body part designated by the nominative NP is taken as "possessed" by the honorable person denoted by the genitive NP and vocative NP. Thus, the NP which refers to an honorable person can be related to the "subject" honorific predicate via the possessor-possessee relation that it has to the nominative NP.

It should be added that not only the dative NP but also the nominative NP must refer to a person in a possessive construction with the verb *iru*. Consequently, we cannot tell which of these NPs is responsible for the "subject honorific" form of the verb in (2a). The nominative NP may well count as the target of "subject honorification," as in (1a).

We have argued that the nominative NP does not always denote an honorable person in a sentence with the "subject honorific" form. "Subject honorification" is applicable to even a sentence with a nominative NP denoting an inanimate thing. If nominative NPs normally fall in subject position, then the dative NP will not be necessarily the subject of a sentence such as (2b), as Shibatani maintains. The "subject honorific" form is demonstrably licensed if the nominative NP is associated with some other NP which denotes an honorable person. This fact allows us to claim that the nominative NP, but not the dative NP, functions as subject in the possessive construction as well.