

Dative Subject in Japanese

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In this research, I am concerned with the so-called subject honorification in Japanese, and discuss the mechanism for honorification phenomena in constructions like (1a)-(1c), in which the dative NP allegedly functions as subject.

- (1) a. {Tanaka sensei/*Taroo}-ni okusan-ga o-ari-ni naru.
 {Tanaka Prof./Taro}-DAT wife-NOM honorific prefix (HP)-be-HONOR
 ‘{Prof. Tanaka/Taro} has a wife.’
- b. {Tanaka sensei/*Taroo}-ni eigo-ga o-wakari-ni naru.
 {Tanaka Prof./Taro}-DAT English-NOM HP-understand-HONOR
 ‘{Prof. Tanaka/Taro} understands English.’
- c. {Tanaka sensei/*Taroo}-ni karate-ga o-deki-ni naru.
 {Tanaka Prof./Taro}-DAT karate-NOM HP-can do-HONOR
 ‘{Prof. Tanaka/Taro} can do karate.’

Generally, it is assumed in the literature that predicates preferably take honorific forms when their subjects denote honorable persons. On this general assumption, Shibatani (1978) points out that the dative NP counts as the target of honorification in sentences such as (1a)-(1c), claiming that it behaves as subject. But the fact pointed out by him does not necessarily give strong evidence for his claim.

- (2) {Tanaka sensei/*Taroo}-no me-ga o-warui.
 {Tanaka Prof./Taro}-GEN eye-NOM HP-bad
 ‘{Prof. Tanaka/Taro} is weak in sight.’

In (2), only the genitive NP can be taken as the target of honorification. If we follow Shibatani’s reasoning, it follows that the subject of (2) is the genitive NP *Tanaka sensei* ‘Prof. Tanaka’. However, the adjective *o-warui* ‘bad’ is not predicated of the genitive NP, but rather of the NP *Tanaka sensei no me* ‘Prof. Tanaka’s eyes’ as a whole. So it is unreasonable to extend the notion of subject to the genitive NP in (2). This shows clearly that the target of honorification is not necessarily identified with the subject NP.

Alternatively, I propose on the basis of the fact observed in (2) that if an NP which refers to an honorable person enters into a possessor-possessee relation with (the head of) the nominative NP, the latter NP can trigger subject honorification. In (2), for instance, the genitive NP *Tanaka sensei* ‘Prof. Tanaka’ denotes an honorable person, and bears a possessor-possessee relationship with the head of the nominative NP *me* ‘eye’. So subject honorification is triggered. The same is true of sentence (1a). In this case, too, the dative NP that designates an honorable person has a possessor-possessee relationship with the nominative NP, which enables the predicate to be put in an honorific form. However, honorification phenomena in (1b) and (1c)

cannot be explained in terms of the condition proposed here, because in each case, the dative NP has no such relationship with the nominative NP. Hence, the condition needs to be modified to accommodate apparent counter-examples like (1b) and (1c).

The key to explicating the mechanism for honorification phenomena in (1b) and (1c) lies in the applicability of subjectivization to the dative NPs in these examples.

- (3) a. Tanaka sensei-ga eigo-ga o-wakari-ni naru.
 Tanaka Prof.-NOM English-NOM HP-understand-HONOR
 'It is Prof. Tanaka that understands English.'
- b. Tanaka sensei-ga karate-ga o-deki-ni naru.
 Tanaka Prof.-NOM karate-NOM HP-can do-HONOR
 'It is Prof. Tanaka that can do karate.'

As discussed in Yamada (this volume), an NP can be subjectivized when the corresponding conceptual argument enters into a possessor-possessee relation with (the head of) the first argument of a semantic predicate in Lexical Conceptual Structure (LCS). Based on this condition, Yamada (this volume) proposes the following LCS representations for the verbs *wakaru* 'understand' and *dekiru* 'can do'.

- (4) a. *wakaru*: [_{STATE} [KNOWLEDGE OF English] BE_{Possession} [AT-[Prof. Tanaka]]]
 b. *dekiru*: [_{STATE} [ABILITY OF Karate] BE_{Possession} [AT-[Prof. Tanaka]]]

Subjectivization is applicable to the dative NPs in (1b) and (1c), as shown by (3a) and (3b), because the corresponding arguments bear possessor-possessee relationships to the heads of the first arguments, i.e. KNOWLEDGE and ABILITY in (4a) and (4b).

In addition, the LCSs postulated for the verbs *wakaru* 'understand' and *dekiru* 'can do' enables us to clear a new path toward the explication of the mechanism for honorification phenomena in (1b) and (1c). I propose that the first argument of a semantic predicate can trigger subject honorification if the argument which denotes an honorable person enters into a possessor-possessee relation with (the head of) the first argument. In each of sentences (1b) and (1c), subject honorification is triggered because the argument *Prof. Tanaka* that refers to an honorable person has a possessor-possessee relationship with the head of the first argument, i.e. KNOWLEDGE or ABILITY. The same is true of (1a) and (2), although I cannot give an explanation of the mechanism for honorification phenomena in these cases for lack of space.

To conclude, in (1a)-(1c), what triggers subject honorification is (the head of) the first argument of a semantic predicate, which is realized as the nominative NP. In (2), the nominative NP functions as subject. Considering this, I can conclude that in (1a)-(1c), too, the nominative NPs, but not the dative NPs, function as subject.

Selected References

- Shibatani, M. (1978) *Nihongo no Bunseki*, Taishukan, Tokyo.
 Yamada, K. (1999) "On Pseudo double nominative constructions in Japanese," in this volume.