

A Bracketing Paradox in Japanese Honorifics

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1. Observations

The aim of this article is to bring to light a seeming bracketing paradox¹ in the morphology of Japanese honorifics and to examine several conceivable analyses of the phenomenon.

In this section, I will first go over the basic properties of Japanese honorifics and then present some of the observations that constitute the central concern of this article.

In Japanese, the honorific forms of verbs are usually created by attaching the prefix *o-* to the verb stems, as exemplified below.

- (1) a. *kasi* 'lend'
b. *o-kasi* 'Hon-lend'

The form in (1a) is used in sentences not involving honorification, as in (2a), while the form in (1b) is used in sentences involving subject honorification, as in (2b), or in sentences involving non-subject honorification, as in (2c). (Sentences involving subject honorification are used to exalt the person(s) denoted by the grammatical subject, and sentences involving non-subject honorification are used to exalt the person(s) denoted by a non-subject argument.)

- (2) a. *Tanaka-ga Suzuki-ni hon-o kasita.*
Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat book-Acc lend-Past
'Tanaka lent a book to Suzuki.'
b. *Tanaka-sensei-ga Suzuki-ni hon-o o-kasi-ni*
Prof. Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat book-Acc Hon-lend-Dat
natta.
'become'-Past
'Prof. Tanaka lent a book to Suzuki.'

- c. Suzuki-ga Tanaka-sensei-ni hon-o o-kasi
 Suzuki-Nom Prof. Tanaka-Dat book-Acc Hon-lend
 sita.
 do-Past
 'Suzuki lent a book to Prof. Tanaka.'

Most of those verb stems that consist of only one mora (henceforth monomoraic verb stems) cannot be honorified simply by attaching the prefix *o-* (Mikami (1970)).² Various suppletive forms serve as the honorified counterparts of most of those verb stems, as shown in (3a) and (3b), while some monomoraic verb stems simply cannot be honorified, as shown in (3c).³

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|-------|----|---------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| (3) | a. | mi-; | *o-mi; | go-ran |
| | | watch; | Hon-watch; | Hon-watch |
| | b. | ki-; | *o-ki; | o-mesi |
| | | put on; | Hon-put on; | Hon-put on |
| | c. | ni-; | *o-ni ; | (no suppletive form available) |
| | | boil; | Hon-boil; | — |

Not only morphologically simple verb stems but also morphologically complex verb stems can be honorified by *o-*prefixation in most cases (Martin (1975), Kuno (1983)). Some examples involving morphologically complex verb stems are shown below.

- | | | | | |
|-------|----|----------|-------------------|------------------|
| (4) | a. | kak-; | kak-ase-; | o-kak-ase |
| | | write; | write-Caus; | Hon-write-Caus |
| | | 'write'; | 'cause to write'; | 'cause to write' |
| | b. | kak-; | kaki-hazime-; | o-kaki-hazime |
| | | write; | write-begin; | Hon-write-begin |
| | | 'write'; | 'begin to write'; | 'begin to write' |

(4a) and (4b) show that the causative verb stem and the inchoative verb stem based on the morphologically simple verb stem *kak-* 'write' can both be turned into honorific forms by *o-*prefixation.

Now, consider the following paradigm, which constitutes the central concern of this article.⁴

- (5) a. Tanaka-ga Suzuki-ni terebi-o mi-sase-ta.
 Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat TV-Acc watch-Caus-Past

'Tanaka made Suzuki watch TV.'

- b. ??Tanaka-sensei-ga Suzuki-ni terebi-o
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat TV-Acc
 o-mi-sase-ni natta.

Hon-watch-Caus-Dat 'become'-Past

'Prof. Tanaka made Suzuki watch TV.'

- (6) a. Tanaka-ga terebi-o mi-hazime-ta.
 Tanaka-Nom TV-Acc watch-begin-Past
 'Tanaka began to watch TV.'

- b. ?*Tanaka-sensei-ga terebi-o o-mi-hazime-ni
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom TV-Acc Hon-watch-begin-Dat
 natta.

'become'-Past

'Prof. Tanaka began to watch TV.'

- (7) a. Tanaka-ga terebi-o mi-tume-ta.
 Tanaka-Nom TV-Acc watch-'stuff'-Past
 'Tanaka gazed at a TV set.'

- b. Tanaka-sensei-ga terebi-o o-mi-tume-ni
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom TV-Acc Hon-watch-'stuff'-Dat
 natta.

'become'-Past

'Prof. Tanaka gazed at the TV set.'

Compare (5b) and (6b) with (4a) and (4b) respectively. A causative verb stem whose first element is not monomoraic can be honorified by *o-*, as shown in (4a), while a causative verb stem whose first element is monomoraic cannot be, as shown in (5b). Likewise, an inchoative verb stem whose first element is not monomoraic can be honorified by *o-*, as shown in (4b), while an inchoative verb stem whose first element is monomoraic cannot be, as shown in (6b). In short, morphologically complex verb stems such as *mi-sase-* 'watch-Caus' and *mi-hazime-* 'watch-begin' have the same property as monomoraic verb stems like *mi-*, as far as the morphology of subject honorification goes. On the other hand, compound verb stems such as *mi-tume-* 'gaze' in (7a) and (7b), although based on the same monomoraic verb stem *mi-*, can be honorified by *o-*, just like other non-monomoraic verb stems.

The following examples show that two other monomoraic verb stems,

ni- 'boil' ((8)–(10)) and *ki-* 'put on' ((11)–(13)), behave in exactly the same way as *mi-* in this regard.

- (8) a. Tanaka-ga Suzuki-ni mame-o ni-sase-ta
 Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat bean-Acc boil-Caus-Past
 'Tanaka made Suzuki boil beans.'
- b. ?*Tanaka-sensei-ga Suzuki-ni mame-o
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat bean-Acc
 o-ni-sase-ni natta.
 Hon-boil-Caus-Dat 'become'-Past
 'Prof. Tanaka made Suzuki boil beans.'
- (9) a. Tanaka-ga mame-o ni-hazime-ta
 Tanaka-Nom bean-Acc boil-begin-Past
 'Tanaka began boiling beans.'
- b. ?*Tanaka-sensei-ga mame-o o-ni-hazime-ni
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom bean-Acc Hon-boil-begin-Dat
 natta.
 'become'-Past
 'Prof. Tanaka began boiling beans.'
- (10) a. Tanaka-ga mame-o ni-tume-ta.
 Tanaka-Nom bean-Acc boil-'stuff'-Past
 'Tanaka boiled down beans.'
- b. ?Tanaka-sensei-ga mame-o o-ni-tume-ni
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom bean-Acc Hon-boil-'stuff'-Dat
 natta.
 'become'-Past
 'Prof. Tanaka boiled down beans.'
- (11) a. Tanaka-ga Suzuki-ni kimono-o ki-sase-ta.
 Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat kimono-Acc put on-Caus-Past
 'Tanaka made Suzuki put on a kimono.'
- b. ??Tanaka-sensei-ga Suzuki-ni kimono-o
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat kimono-Acc
 o-ki-sase-ni natta.
 Hon-put on-Caus-Dat 'become'-Past
 'Prof. Tanaka made Suzuki put on a kimono.'
- (12) a. Tanaka-ga kimono-o ki-hazime-ta.
 Tanaka-Nom kimono-Acc put on-begin-Past

'Tanaka began putting on a kimono.'

- b. ?*Tanaka-sensei-ga kimono-o o-ki-hazime-ni
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom kimono-Acc Hon-put on-begin-Dat
 natta.

'become'-Past

'Prof. Tanaka began putting on a kimono.'

- (13) a. Tanaka-ga kimono-o ki-konasi-ta.
 Tanaka-Nom kimono-Acc put on-'achieve'-Past
 'Tanaka put on a kimono neatly.'

- b. ?Tanaka-sensei-ga kimono-o
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom kimono-Acc
 o-ki-konasi-ni natta.
 Hon-put on-'achieve'-Dat 'become'-Past
 'Prof. Tanaka put on a kimono neatly.'

The pattern that can be observed in (8)–(10) and (11)–(13) is identical to the one we saw in (5)–(7).

While there is nothing unusual about the well-formedness of (7b), (10b), and (13b), the ill-formedness of (5b), (6b), (8b), (9b), (11b), and (12b) constitutes a bracketing paradox in the following sense. Semantically, the internal structure of the verb stems involved in these examples (which are all of the form *o-V₁-V₂*) should be (14a), because what is exalted by the prefix *o-* in these cases is the referent of the grammatical subject of the entire verb stem (i.e., *V₁-V₂*), not just of the first verb stem (i.e., *V₁*).⁵ On the other hand, the fact that (5b), (6b), (8b), (9b), (11b) and (12b) turn out to be unacceptable favors an analysis in which the internal structure of the honorified verb stems in these examples is assumed to be (14b); only under such an analysis do these verb stems contain illicit constituents made up of the prefix *o-* and a monomoraic verb stem such as *mi-*.

- (14) a. [*o* [*V₁-V₂*]]
 b. [[*o-V₁*] -*V₂*]
V₁ = *kak* 'write', *mi* 'watch', *ni* 'boil', *ki* 'put on' etc.
V₂ = (*s*)*ase* 'Caus', *hazime* 'begin' etc.

Thus we are faced with a paradox: the first line of analysis seems to make it difficult to rule out sentences such as (5b), (6b), (8b), (9b), (11b) and

(12b), whereas the second line of analysis seems to make it difficult to assign correct meanings to honorified complex verbs such as *o-kak-ase* 'Hon-write-Caus' and *o-kaki-hazime* 'Hon-write-begin' (cf. (4)).

Before concluding this section, I would like to note the fact that examples involving non-subject honorification do not exhibit exactly the same pattern as the examples involving subject-honorification that we have seen above. For whatever reason, it is generally difficult if not impossible to apply non-subject honorification to morphologically complex verb stems. The following are some of the relevant examples.

- (15) ??*Watasi-wa Tanaka-sensei-ni hon-o o-yom-ase*
 I-Top Prof. Tanaka-Dat book-Acc Hon-read-Caus
sita.
 do-Past
 'I made Prof. Tanaka read a book.'
- (16) ??*Watasi-wa Tanaka-sensei-no tame-ni hon-o*
 I-Top Prof. Tanaka-Gen benefit-Dat book-Acc
o-yomi-hazime sita.
 Hon-read-begin do-Past
 'I began to read a book for Prof. Tanaka.'

2. Analyses

In this section, I will examine several conceivable analyses of the data presented in the preceding section.

2.1. Semantic Analyses

It might seem possible to resolve the apparent paradox by setting up an appropriately elaborate mechanism for semantic blocking. For instance, it might seem possible to rule out a sentence like (5b) by stating (informally) that the suppletive form *go-ran* 'Hon-watch' (cf. (3a)) blocks every other honorified verb stem whose "core meaning" (namely the meaning of the whole verb stem minus the meaning of causation, inchoation etc.) is *to watch*, for instance **o-mi* 'Hon-watch' (cf. (3a)), **o-mi-sase* 'Hon-watch-Caus' (cf. (5b)), and **o-mi-hazime* 'Hon-watch-begin' (cf. (6b)). This approach, however, is obviously inappropriate; the unacceptability of sentences like (8b) and (9b) cannot have resulted from any kind of blocking, as there is no actual form that could block **o-mi* 'Hon-boil' (cf. (3c)).

A similar, but more plausible analysis would be one in which a filter is

set up that states that verb stems whose "core meanings" are identical to those of monomoraic verb stems such as *mi-* and *ni-* are not allowed to exist. Though this line of analysis could be made to work, there are several potential problems with it that incline me to reject it. First, it is not clear if the term *core meaning* (which I used in informally stating the filter to be postulated) could be given a definition concrete enough to distinguish cases like (5b) and (6b) from cases like (7b). Second, this line of analysis predicts that even a verb stem that does not involve any monomoraic morpheme should resist honorification if it is synonymous with some of the monomoraic verb stems that resist honorification, a prediction that is not borne out.

2.2. A Verb-Raising Analysis

It might seem that the observed pattern can be captured by an analysis in which morphologically complex verbs such as causative verbs and inchoative verbs are created not by suffixation in the lexicon but by a syntactic operation of verb raising (see Kuno (1983) for an account along this line). On such an account, the internal structure of a verb of the form *o-V-sase* 'Hon-V-Caus' or *o-V-hazime* 'Hon-V-begin' will have to be $[[o\ V\ V]]$, not $[o\ [V\ V]]$, assuming that a verb raised out of the embedded clause must be Chomsky-adjoined to the upper verb, rather than infixed into it. Thus, in this analysis, a verb stem like **o-mi-sase* 'Hon-watch-Caus' will be given the structure $[[o\ mi]\ sase]$, not $[o\ [mi\ sase]]$, and will be correctly ruled out by whatever constraint rules out constituents such as **o-mi* and **o-ni*.

One problem with this account is that it makes it difficult to account for the fact that a verb such as *o-kak-ase* 'Hon-write-Caus' expresses respect toward the person who causes someone to write something, not toward the person who is caused to write something. We can get around this problem if we assume (i) that an expression like $[[o\ kak]\ ase]$ is rebracketed into an expression like $[o\ [kak\ ase]]$ in LF (or whatever level is relevant to semantic interpretation) and (ii) that a constraint that rules out constituents like $[o\ mi]$ is operative at S-structure (or whatever level is relevant to morphosyntactic composition). Thus articulated, however, the analysis in question runs into another problem, which is more recalcitrant. Consider the example in (17).

- (17) Tanaka-sensei-wa okosan-ni dokusyo-o
 Prof. Tanaka-Top Hon.child-Dat reading-Acc
 o-sase-ni natta.
 Hon-do.Caus-Dat 'become'-Past
 'Prof. Tanaka caused his child to do some reading.'

The verb *o-sase* in this example is the honorific form of the causative verb *sase* 'do.Caus'. (The verb *si* 'do' is an irregular verb and becomes *sase* when combined with the causative suffix (*s*)*ase*.) What is to be noted here is that the verb stem *si* 'do' is monomoraic and resists *o*-prefixation; that is, **o-si* 'HON-do' is ill-formed.⁶ This means that, in the analysis under consideration, the example in (17) is expected to be ill-formed, as the putative S-structure representation for this example contains a constituent of the form [*o si*]. Thus the fact that (17) is perfectly acceptable poses a problem for the analysis.

2.3. A Nominalization Analysis

It might seem possible to capture the observations we made in section 1 by assuming (i) that *o*-prefixation is a process that turns a verb into a noun and (ii) that causative verbs and inchoative verbs based on monomoraic verb stems resist nominalization for some reason or another.

This line of analysis, however, is falsified by examples of the following type.

- (18) Ni-hazime-ga kanzin-da.
 beginning of boiling-Nom important-Cop.Pres
 'The early stage of boiling is important.'

The noun *ni-hazime* in this example is the result of nominalizing the inchoative verb based on a monomoraic verb stem (*ni*- 'boil'). The sentence is nonetheless acceptable. This shows that there is nothing wrong in nominalizing inchoative verbs (and perhaps causative verbs as well, though I have been unable to construct a sensible example) based on monomoraic verb stems.

2.4. A Level-Ordering Analysis

It might seem that the observations we made in section 1 could be captured by setting up levels (or strata) within the lexicon (see Kiparsky (1982) and Mohanan (1986)) in an appropriate manner. For instance, we might try to account for the observations in question by assuming (i) that

the level at which *o*-prefixation takes place precedes the level at which (*s*)*ase*-suffixation (i.e., causativization) and *hazime*-suffixation (i.e., inchoativization) take place, (ii) the level at which *o*-prefixation takes place does *not* precede the level at which compounds such as *mitume*- (cf. (7b), (10b) and (13b)) are formed, and (iii) constituents such as **o-mi* 'Hon-watch' are somehow not allowed to exist.

This approach looks promising; for one thing, there are some salient morphosyntactic differences between the causative morpheme (*s*)*ase* (used in (4a), (5a) and (5b)) and the inchoative morpheme *hazime* (used in (4b), (6a) and (6b)) on the one hand and morphemes like *tume* (used in (7a) and (7b)) on the other, a fact that justifies assigning these two classes of suffixes to different levels in the lexicon. First, the causative morpheme and the inchoative morpheme can attach to virtually any verb, producing verbs with predictable meanings, whereas *tume* attach only to a limited set of verbs, producing verbs with idiomatic, hence unpredictable meanings. Second, in causative verb stems and inchoative verb stems, (*s*)*ase* and *hazime* are probably functioning as head, while in a verb stem like *mitume*- 'gaze', it is not clear if *tume* is the head.

There are, however, two potential problems. First, we have to ensure that in the case of a verb like *o-kak-ase* 'Hon-write-Caus', what is honorified is not the subject of the embedded verb but the subject of the entire verb. This is a problem the analysis under consideration shares with the verb-raising analysis that I discussed earlier, and could be circumvented here as easily as in the verb-raising analysis, if we resort to LF rebracketing. The notion of LF rebracketing, however, appears somewhat forced in the present context, although it had a certain plausibility within the context of the verb-raising analysis, where syntax is assumed to be allowed to perform morphological operations in any event. Second, it is not clear on this account how we could explain the fact that examples like (10b) and (13b) are sometimes awkward. (In fact this latter observation poses a problem not only for the level-ordering account but also for all the analyses discussed so far.)

2.5. A Prosodic Analysis

In this subsection I present what I believe to be the right analysis of the phenomenon.

I submit that the bracketing paradox in question results from a mismatch between morphological structures and prosodic structures. More

specifically, I wish to suggest that the prosodic structure of a verb like *o-kaki-hazime* 'Hon-write-begin' is roughly⁷ of the form $[[o\ V]\ V]$ while the morphological structure of such a word is of the form $[o\ [V\ V]]$. Given this assumption, an expression like **o-ni-hazime* 'Hon-boil-begin' can be ruled out by a constraint that bans a prosodic constituent of the form $*[o\ ni]$. At the same time, the fact that a verb like *o-kak-ase* 'Hon-write-Caus' exhorts the causer rather than the writer is straightforwardly accounted for, as the proposed analysis (unlike the verb-raising analysis or the level-ordering analysis discussed above) assigns a morphological structure of the form $[o\ [kak\ (s)ase]]$ to the verb.

Poser (1990) describes a case where particular affixes seem to be inducing peculiar prosodic phrasings. The proposal I put forward in the last paragraph amounts to the view that the phenomenon we observed in section 1 is of the same type as the one Poser (op. cit.) discussed.

One potential problem with this proposal is that it is not clear how to capture in this analysis the difference between examples like (5b), (6b), (8b), (9b), (11b) and (12b) on the one hand and examples like (7b), (10b) and (13b) on the other. This apparent problem, however, could turn out to be a virtue of this approach, given the fact that speakers' intuitions on the contrast between the two types of example is sometimes murky, as indicated.

Another potential problem with the proposed analysis is that it is not clear why there should be any discrepancy between the morphological structure and the prosodic structure of those honorified verbs. In the cases that Poser (ibid.) discussed, there is an overt indication that something peculiar is going on in the phonology of certain affixes, and hence it is reasonable to suppose that those affixes are inducing idiosyncratic prosodic phrasings. In the case at hand, however, there is no overt phonological indication that anything special is going on. Thus, it is far from clear how learners would come to assume that the prosodic constituency of the verbs in question differ from their morphological constituency.

3. Conclusion

In this article I have brought to light a seeming bracketing paradox in the morphology of Japanese honorifics and have suggested that the paradox stems from a certain discrepancy between morphosyntactic and prosodic constituencies.

NOTES

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¹ See Spencer (1991:Ch.10) for an overview of various bracketing paradoxes.

² The monomoraic verb stems *ne-* 'sleep' and *de-* 'go out' allow honorification by *o-* prefixation, at least marginally (Mikami (1970)).

³ The prefix *go-* used in (3a) is a Sino-Japanese counterpart of the native Japanese morpheme *o-*.

⁴ One of the speakers I consulted came to accept (5b) after a while. This is probably because this sentence can be easily confused with (i), which is perfectly acceptable.

- (i) Tanaka-sensei-ga Suzuki-ni terebi-o o-mise-ni natta.
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom Suzuki-Dat TV-Acc Hon-show-Dat 'become'-Past
 'Prof. Tanaka allowed Suzuki to watch TV.'

⁵ Though in the case of sentences such as (6b) the grammatical subject of V_1 - V_2 and the understood subject of V_1 happen to be coreferential.

⁶ Likewise, the following example is unacceptable. Notice that no suppletion takes place when the verb stem *si-* 'do' combines with the inchoative morpheme *hazime*.

- (i) *Tanaka-sensei-ga sore-o o-si-hazime-ni natta.
 Prof. Tanaka-Nom it-Acc Hon-do-begin-Dat 'become'-Past
 'Prof. Tanaka started doing it.'

⁷ Since a Japanese verb is not necessarily capable of constituting a prosodic constituent in itself, the prosodic structure of this type of verb cannot always be *exactly* of the form [[o V] V]. For instance the prosodic structure of the verb *o-kak-ase* 'Hon-write-Caus' cannot be exactly of the form [[o kak] ase], as the string *o-kak*, which ends in a non-geminate *k*, is not a well-formed prosodic constituent in Japanese. I do not have a concrete proposal as to the exact prosodic structure of this type of verb.

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