

Honorificity and Number Features are Distinct Processes: A case of honorificity and plurality in Assamese pronouns

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study the morphosyntax involved in the interaction of honorificity with plurality in the Assamese language, an Indo-Aryan language spoken predominantly in Northeast India. Contrary to related literature by Bhatt & Davis (2023) and Sinha (2022; 2023), who suggest Hindi uses number morphology to express honorificity, the current analysis proposes that there is rather a *restricted* relation between Honorificity and Number in Assamese. Assamese distinguishes honorificity in three layers (following Alok (2020)): NH, H, and HH. This distinction is readily embedded in 2P and 3P singular forms of pronouns.

| Person | Singular | Plural |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| 2P Non-honorific (NH) | <i>tɔi</i> 2P.NH you | <i>tɔhɔt</i> 2P.NH.PL you |
| 2P Honorific (H) | <i>tomi</i> 2P.H you | <i>tomakɔk</i> 2P.H.PL you |
| 2P High honorific (HH) | <i>apɔni</i> 2P.HH you | <i>apɔnakɔk</i> 2P.HH.PL you |
| 3P Non-honorific (NH) | <i>hi / tai</i> 3P.NH.MSC/3P.NH.FEM he/she | <i>hihɔt</i> 2P.NH.PL they |
| 3P Honorific (H) | <i>teu</i> 3P.H he/she | <i>teu-kɔk</i> 3P.H-PL they |
| 3P High honorific (HH) | <i>tek^het</i> 3P.HH he/she | <i>tek^het hɔkɔl</i> 3P.HH-PL they all |

Table 1: Assamese subject pronouns

In deriving plurals of these forms, the plural markers *-hɔt* (for NH) and *-lɔk* (for H & HH) are used¹. The research here contributes to the analysis of what validates the morphosyntactic realization that *tɔi/tɔhɔt* (SG/PL) is grammatical, but *tɔi/*tɔlɔk* not, or *tɔmi/tɔmalɔk* is fine but *tɔmi/*tɔmahɔt* is not, and so on in the pronominal system. This means that there is a mismatch in the [\pm HON] feature between the pronoun root and the plural markers in the plural forms marked using asterisks (*), suggesting an Agree relationship. Stating this phenomenon as evidence, I propose that number does not entail honorificity in Assamese. See for instance 2P.NH.SG *tɔi* \rightarrow 2P.NH.PL *tɔhɔt* does not change the honorificity status. These (honorificity & number) are two distinct processes that interact in the syntax of Assamese speakers, giving rise to distinct plural markers for NH and H & HH, respectively.

To explain this phenomenon, I use Alok’s (2020) theoretical implication of honorificity as a supervening head in the tree. I use the minimalist architect of syntax (Chomsky 1995; Adger 2002) to account for and devise an Agree mechanism between [\pm HON] and [\pm NUM]. I assume that DPs (Abney, 1987) in Assamese have a NumP (Ritter, 1991), hierarchically situated above the NP in the DP spine, which Agrees with the [HON] feature of HonP (Alok, 2020) situated above DP. This Agree relationship syntactically explains the morphology associated with honorificity and plurality in the Assamese pronominal system.

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¹ *hɔkɔl* in 3P high honorific plural form is not a plural marker rather a quantifier construction like *they all* in English. This comes from Assamese NPs like *hɔkɔl-(u)e hukhi (hoi)* ‘**everyone**-EMP happy (exist)’. In conclusion, 3P.HH pronoun does not follow the paradigm of *typical* plural formation of pronouns in Assamese, hence, I exclude *hɔkɔl* from my analysis. Note that 3P.HH pronoun *tekhet* ‘they’ is singular. To refer to a 3P.HH plural subject, the speaker must use *tekhet-hɔkɔl*. (EMP= emphatic)

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