

Re-visiting Honorification in Hindi and the Discourse Particle *ji*

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This paper studies honorification strategies that are used in nominal and verbal domains and their interaction in Hindi-Urdu. Honorification is a context-sensitive strategy that conveys the speaker's relative social standing or deferential attitude towards a discourse referent such as the addressee/interlocutor or a predicate argument. In Hindi-Urdu, this additional meaning layer is cued in the nominal domain by the form of 2nd or 3rd person pronominal forms (1), specific inflections in the noun phrase (2), discourse particle *ji* or lexical items like *saab*, *mahoday*, *mam* etc. (3). In the case of a nominal referent being construed as honorific relative to the speaker in a sentence, the verbal stem reflects this in the form of a distinct honorific agreement pattern (4a vs. 4b). Crucially, this verbal agreement takes the form of subject-verb agreement that shows up in the case of plural-marked subject nominals (5) and thus gets termed as 'plural agreement' in the literature (Bhatt and Davis 2023, henceforth B&D, and Sinha 2023). From a data-centric perspective, Hindi speakers thus revert to either a morphosyntactic cue from the verbal stem or a morphological cue from the nominal domain to decode the honorification status of relevant participants vis-à-vis the speaker.

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|----|--|--|----------------|---------------|
| 1. | a. Tu /tum
2P.NH | b. aap
2P.H | c. us
3P.NH | d. un
3P.H |
| 2. | a. Mera daamaad [non-honorific]
my son-in-law | b. mere daamaad [honorific]
my son-in-law | | |
| 3. | a. Daamaad-ji [honorific]
son-in-law-JI | b. Teacher-saab [honorific]
teacher SAAB | | |
| 4. | a. Ravi aa-yaa
Ravi come-PRF.NH | b. Ravi-ji aa-ye
Ravi-JI come-PRF.H | | |
| 5. | a. Bachche aa-ye
Children come-PRF.NH.PL | b. Bachchaa aa-yaa
Child come-PRF.NH.SG | | |

There have been certain recent formal analyses accounting for honorification in Hindi-Urdu and other Indo-Aryan languages (B&D 2023, Sinha 2023, Kumari 2023, Kaur and Yamada 2022, Alok and Baker 2022 a.o.). While all proposals unanimously postulate a Hon(orific) functional head that projects a HonP layer in the nominal spine, the exact syntactic location and the featural mechanism deployed vary from author to author. All proposals underlie Hon to be semantically interpretable for the nominal referent but not for the verb that agrees and reflects it morphosyntactically. The fact that Hindi co-opts plural morphology in the honorific agreement system motivates both B&D (2023) and Sinha (2023) to operationalize a formal, non-semantic [PL] feature located at the functional Hon head. While Sinha builds a Distributed Morphology account for plural affixes that are compatible/incompatible with nouns that denote singular honorific referents in Hindi, Punjabi and Marathi, B&D propose a mutually exclusive, two formative system (* and PL features) that occupy the same syntactic position (Num head in DP) and that rules out Hon head selecting a singular nominal. B&D also propose that the Hindi particle *ji* be an overt instantiation of Hon and that Hon only selects for an oblique form of its nominal complement (a claim that Sinha problematizes when extended to Marathi).

This paper makes a two-fold proposal: firstly, although honorification does interact with plurality in interesting ways, but analysing the morphological reflex of honorification as plural agreement and employing a non-semantic [PL] feature as the featural core of Hon function head may not be on the right

track. Secondly, although discourse particle *ji* has a honorification-lending meaning core, it may not be the overt realization of Hon head if this head is stipulated to be solely responsible for the meaning import of this social relation. A more layered analysis where the expressive dimension pertaining to honorificity is compositionally built up by any lexical item having an honorificity-related meaning and their dynamic interaction would be more descriptively and explanatorily adequate (Portner et al. 2019, Alok 2020, Alok and Baker 2022). Honorification is not limited to singular nominal referents and Hindi has certain permissible means to honorify plural nominal referents (6a, 6c, 6d) in contrast to an impermissible one (6b). In light of this data, B&D’s claim that Hon selects for singular nominal complements can be modified to state that permissible plurality-indicating cues are restricted when discourse particle *ji* is present – plural affix *-aN* cannot co-occur with *ji* whereas universal quantifier *sab* is acceptable. Hindi not permitting *ji* with plural affix is a language-specific choice, and counterexamples can be seen from Magahi (which has the homonymous particle *ji*), where the plural marker *-an* can be used with *-ji* in some environments (7a) and from Assamese, which has distinct honorific markers that have a plural core to them *-luk* and *-hokol* (7b) (*p.c.* Joynal Ali).

6. Context: Speaker is watching a telecast from the Vaishno Devi temple on TV during navratras (a period of 9 days with religious significance for Hindus) and sees the decked-up idols of nine goddesses prayed during this period. He says to someone:

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|----|----------------|--------|------|------|---------|--|
| a. | Devi-aaN | bhavya | lag | rahi | haiN | [Non-overt Hon on NP, PL referent] |
| | goddess-PL | grand | seem | PROG | be.H.PL | |
| b. | *Devi-aaN-ji | bhavya | lag | rahi | haiN | [Overt Hon as <i>ji</i> , PL referent] |
| | goddess-PL-JI | grand | seem | PROG | be.H.PL | |
| c. | Sab devi-aaN | bhavya | lag | rahi | haiN | [Non-overt Hon on NP, PL referent] |
| | all goddess-PL | grand | seem | PROG | be.H.PL | |
| d. | Sab devi-ji | bhavya | lag | rahi | haiN | [Overt Hon as <i>ji</i> , PL referent] |
| | all goddess-JI | grand | seem | PROG | be.H.PL | |
- ‘All the Goddesses are looking divine.’

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|----|----|--------------------|----|---------------------------|
| 7. | a. | maasTar-ji-w-an | b. | tek ^h et-hokol |
| | | Teacher-H-FM.NH-PL | | 3P.HON-PL ‘they’ |

Data in (8) highlights that discourse particle *ji* marked nominal can take a non-honorific demonstrative *us* to pragmatically convey a situation where the referent, that in an ideal social situation should be honorified, gets less honorification value because of some reason (i.e., the speaker's psychological state such as anger or frustration (or even intimacy) that can bleach the honorific perspective/attitude).

8. Context: A parent is angry at his child’s teacher because she scolded him in front of the classroom. The parent has come to the school to lodge a complaint against the teacher and says to the administrative staff:

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|----|-------|--------------|-----|---------|------------------------------------|
| a. | Us | masterni-ji | ko | bolo | ki... |
| | 3P.NH | teacher.F-JI | DAT | told.NH | that |
| b. | Us | masterni-ji | ko | boliye | ki... (‘Tell that teacher that..’) |
| | 3P.NH | teacher.F-JI | DAT | told.H | that |

Additionally, in both (8a) and (8b), the subject noun phrase is the same. However, the verb is in NH form, while in (8b) it is in H form. This data is in line with honorific mismatch cases reported for Magahi cf. (7a), (see Alok and Bhalla (2024) for mismatch cases in subject-verb agreement) and for Japanese in Kaur and Yamada (2022). If particle *-ji* can be attached to both *us/un*, then this raises a problem for B&D’s claim that the higher NP layer is formally plural and cannot be singular, which would be a by-product of a formal [PL] feature of the HON. An alternative analysis with a fleshed-out selectional criteria of particle *ji* (in Hindi it requires obliques form of nominal and other agreeing dependents like Dem, Poss) with a simpler syntax that is sensitive to the (final) honorific value of a nominal when looking for features to do verbal agreement with can adequately explain the Hindi facts and is in obedience of Occam’s Razor.

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