Locating honorificity in syntax: an investigation of 'Polite Plurals'

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Honorificity is the encoding of the social relation between the speaker and another individual (addressee/a 3rd person) in natural language. Instead of dedicated morphology, most languages of the world employ pre-existing (e.g. plural) forms to convey honorificity towards a singular referent (Helmbrecht 2003, Wang 2023, a.o.). This has led to proposals that a plural used as honorific (henceforth Polite Plural/PoP) is just like a regular plural in morphosyntax, and the singular honorific interpretation associated with a PoP is purely due to a semantic-pragmatic algorithm (Wang 2023, also Sauerland 2003). This talk examines PoPs across a wide-range of languages and argues for a morphosyntactic account of PoPs which specifies the relatively low *n* head in the nominal spine as the locus of honorificity.

We first demonstrate that despite apparent identity in form, PoPs display distinct morphosyntactic behaviour vis-à-vis regular plurals. Thus, a purely semantic-pragmatic treatment of PoPs is untenable. We then provide a novel morphosyntactic account of PoPs, arguing for a dual specification of the number feature in the structure of the PoP - a PL feature located fairly low at *n* is interpreted as honorification, and a SG feature reflecting semantic number is located on a higher Number head. The gender feature is located between the PL and the SG feature. Our proposal differs from existing morphosyntactic accounts of PoPs in three crucial ways: (i) it does not necessitate a dedicated honorific feature in PoPs (*pace* Ackema & Neeleman 2018, Kaur & Yamada 2022), thereby emphasizing feature economy, (ii) it does not treat PoPs as hybrid nouns (*pace* Despić 2017, Puškar-Gallien 2019), a classification which makes incorrect predictions about the behaviour of PoPs as regards the Agreement Hierarchy (Corbett 1979), and (iii) it situates the PL feature below the loci of gender and semantic number (here, SG) features, which is able to derive gender-number interactions in agreement, which cannot be explained by proposals where the PL feature is above the SG and gender feature (e.g. Puškar-Gallien 2019).