

The Emergence of Politeness: Evidence from Dialects

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It has been reported in the literature that honorificity is often realized through pre-existing grammatical constructs such as plurals (for more, see Wang 2023). The plural-politeness connection raises several important questions, including, (i) is HON(orificity) represented as a PL(ural) head/feature in syntax? and (ii) does PL have a unique position inside DP or are there multiple PL heads? To answer these questions, I first present data from Standard Bangla (Eastern Indo-Aryan) – a language that has a robust system of honorific pronouns and person-honorificity agreement. Standard Bangla, however, lacks plural (both, nominal and verbal) inflection and instead uses an associative plural (APL) to encode semantic plurality on its nouns. I then proceed to show how 4 non-standard variants – Murshidabad Bangla, Purulia Bangla, Rajbanshi and Midnapore Bangla – develop honorific pronouns, under contact with either Standard Bangla or Standard Odia, a neighboring language with a rich honorific system. There are three main trends that we observe here. The first is where the APL retains its semantic plural feature and is attached to the borrowed honorific pronouns. The second is where the APL is grammaticalized into a formal plural feature, enabling the honorific pronoun to trigger plural agreement. The third is where the APL is attached to newly created genitive/oblique marked pronouns that fail to control plural inflection. The dialectal evidence presented here suggests that the development of honorificity does not necessarily depend on a PL head/formal plural feature in syntax – an independent HON head is also possible. Additionally, we present APLs in these languages as a non-uniform class, which interact in different ways with pronouns in the development of honorificity.