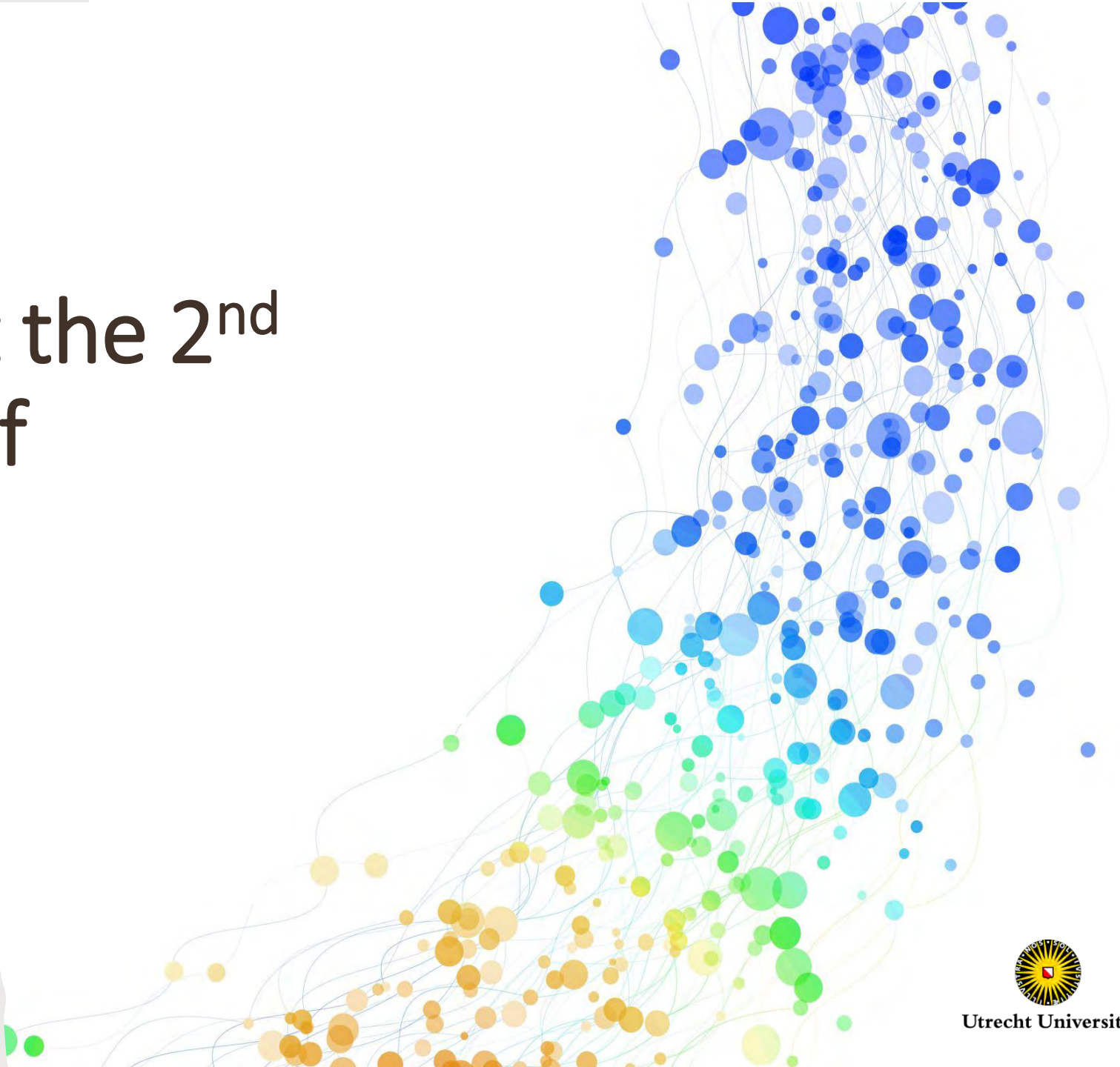


Honorificity and agreement: what the 2nd person is made of

Roberta D'Alessandro
Utrecht University, ILS

Workshop on LDA
Barcelona, 27 May 2026



Agreement and the internal structure of pronouns

- Agreement “mismatches” create honorificity
- The role of deixis in reference/honorificity
- What is 2nd person then?

Honorific agreement

- Honorific agreement can tell us much about “the addressee” and what that really means

TODAY:

- honorifics in non-honorific-marking languages
- the addressee
- the ‘politeness path’ and the nature of the addressee

Some agreement patterns

- Italian Voi, Lei (person, number, **gender**)

Voi= 2PL (now only restricted to some areas)

Lei= 3SG.F (later addition to the Italian system),
ella

Niculescu, Alessandro. 1974. *Strutture allocutive pronominali reverenziali in italiano*, Firenze, Olschki.
Serianni, Luca. 1988. *Grammatica italiana. Italiano comune e lingua letteraria. Suoni, forme, costrutti*, con la collaborazione di A. Castelvechi, Torino, UTET, cap. 7°, §§ 84-97.

Molinelli, Piera. 2002. “*Lei non sa chi sono io!*”: *potere, solidarietà, rispetto e distanza nella comunicazione*, «Linguistica e filologia» 14, pp. 283-302.

Renzi, Lorenzo. 2002. “Tu” e “voi” in italiano antico: da Dante, “Paradiso” (XV e XVI) al corpus elettronico TLIO, in Roma et Romania. *Festschrift für Gerhard Ernst zum 65. Geburtstag*, hrsg. von S. Heinemann & G. Bernhard & D. Kattenbusch, Tübingen, Niemeyer, pp. 269-285.

Scaglia, Claudia. 2003. Deissi e cortesia in italiano, «Linguistica e filologia» 16, pp. 109-145.

Some agreement patterns

✦ Voi

(1) Voi siete bella/-o [IT]
you.2PL.HON are.2PL beautiful.F.SG/M.SG

(2) Vous etes belle/beaux [FR]
you.2PL.HON are.2PL beautiful.F.SG/M.SG

Some agreement patterns

(3) Voi siete bella/-o [IT]
you.2^{PL}.HON are.2^{PL} beautiful.F.SG/M.SG

GENERALIZATION: THE COPULA AGREES WITH *Voi*, THE ADJECTIVE AGREES WITH THE REFERENT

(4) *Voi siete belle/-i
you.2^{PL} are.2^{PL} beautiful. F.PL/M.PL
You.2^{PL} are beautiful

(OK WITH PLURAL REFERENTS)

Benveniste

Benveniste, Émile. 1971.
Problems of General Linguistics.
University of Miami Press.

- Pronouns do not constitute a unitary class but are of different types depending on the mode of language of which they are the signs.
Some belong to the syntax of a language, others are characteristics of what we shall call “instances of discourse”, that is, the discreet and always unique acts by which the language is actualized in speech by a speaker

(Benveniste 1971:217)

Benveniste

- Il faut voir que la définition ordinaire des pronoms personnels comme contenant les trois termes je, tu, il, y abolit justement la notion de "personne". Celle-ci est propre seulement à je/tu, et fait défaut dans il. (Benveniste 1966:251)

In sum:

- “Person” belongs only to I/you, and is lacking in s/he.’

There is more

The definition can now be stated precisely as: / is the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance /”

(Benveniste 1971: 218)

There is more

It is thus necessary to stress this point: / can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone. [...] the form of / has no linguistic existence except in the act of speaking in which it is uttered. **There is thus a combined double instance in this process: the instance of / as referent and the instance of discourse containing / as a referee”**

(Benveniste 1971:218)

What's in a pronoun

- ✦ referent
- ✦ part of discourse (speaker/addressee)
 - ✦ phi-pronoun

3 DIFFERENT THINGS

In an honorific

The three don't overlap

✦ referent

✦ part of discourse (speaker/addressee)

✦ phi-pronoun

➤ **TENDENCY TO MAXIMIZE OVERLAP THROUGH THE CONVERSATION
(THE POLITENESS PATH)**

Pronouns: only 2 dimensions

(5) a. He_i said that he_i would come

same referent

no person

same phi pronoun

b. He_i said “I_i will come”

same referent

no person / speaker

different phi pronoun

b.

Hann₁ segir alltaf að mamma hafi verið svo vond
He says always that mom had been so mean

við mig₁ (sig₁)
to me

Putnam & Arnbjörnsdóttir (2015)

‘He always says that mom was so mean to him.’

same referent

no person / speaker

different phi pronoun

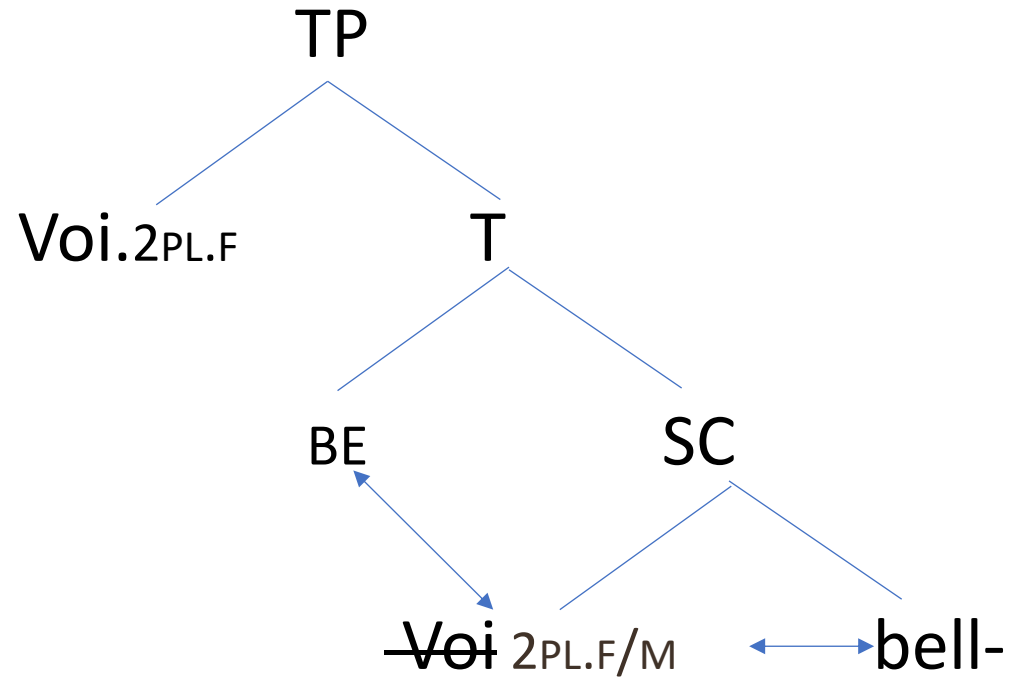
Honorifics: all 3 dimensions

One thing is the referent, one thing is the discourse (speaker/addressee), one thing are the syntactic (phi) features

❖ honorifics

Voi_{HON}

(6) Voi siete bella/-o [IT]
you.2_{PL.HON} are.2_{PL} beautiful._{F.SG/M.SG}



PP agreement with *Voi*_{HON}

FEMALE REFERENT

(7) Vi ho
you.2PL.HON have.1SG
'I have seen You_{HON}'

REFERENT

vist-a/-o
seen-F.SG/M.SG

MALE REFERENT

(7) Vi ho vist-o/(*-a)
you.2PL.HON have.1SG seen-M.SG
'I have seen You_{HON}'

PP agreement with 2p

(8) Vi ho
you.2PL.HON have.1SG
'I have seen You_{HON}'

REFERENT

vist-a/-o
seen-F.SG/M.SG

Syntactic
agreement/like for
tu, not linked to HON
–but also SEM

(9) Ti ho
you.2SG.F have.1SG
'I have seen you'

PP+ADJ

PHI

ADDRESSEE / REFERENT REFERENT

(10) Vi ho trovat-a/-o simpatic-a/-o
 you.2PL.HON I.have found. F.SG/M.SG nice-F.SG/M.SG
 'I've found You nice'

F > F
M > F,M

pp-F	adj-F
pp-M	adj-M
pp-M	adj-F
pp-F	adj-M

marked feature
 triggers concord?
 • two different
 behaviors for PP:
 adjectival and
 syntactic

PP+ADJ

PHI

ADDRESSEE / REFERENT **REFERENT**

(10) Vi ho trovat-a/-o simpatic-a/-o
you.2PL.HON I.have found. **F.SG/SG** nice-**F.SG/M.SG**
'I've found You nice'

Voi: 2PL	(2PL PHI agreement)	> VERB / PHI
ADDRESSEE: SG	(SG agreement)	> PPT / ADDRESSEE
referent: M/F	(gender agreement)	> ADJ / REFERENT

The phi features of *Voi*_{HON}

CAN WE SAY THAT VOI IS 2PL.F/M?

PHI Agreement with copula/ V_{FIN} > plural agreement

DIS Agreement with participle ⊗ it is singular

REF Agreement with adjective gender concord with referent

REF Agreement with participle IF fem

Voi behaves like tu

The features of Voi

- Phi layer N: PL
 P: 2
 G: underspecified
 - Discourse layer N: **SG** (addressee)
 P: 2
 - Participant: M/F
- Finite verb agreement**
- participle**
- adjective** (and F PPT)

Lei

Lei.3SG.F

(11) Lei è bella/-o [IT]
 she.3SG.HON 1 is.3SG beautiful.F.SG/M.SG
 ‘You.HON are beautiful’

Like *Voi*?



Lei/pp agreement

Lei.3SG.F FEMALE REFERENT

(12) La trovo cambiat-a/(*-o)
you.3SG.HON.ACC. find.1SG changed.F.SG/M.SG
'I find you changed'

MALE REFERENT

(13) La trovo cambiat-o/-a
you.3SG.HON.ACC find.1SG changed-M.SG/F.SG
'I find you changed'

✚ cfr Vi: *Vi trovo cambiat_a (for male referent)

Pp and adjectival agreement

You meet your old (male) boss. He says: I had a very adventurous life after we parted. You reply: “Yes, ...”

(14) L'ho trovat-a/(*-o) cambiat-a/-o
you.3SG.HON.ACC=I.have found.SG.F changed-SG.F/SG.M
'I find you changed'

(15) *L'ho trovato cambiat**a**

(16) a. Vi ho trovato cambiata (ok for a woman)

b. *Vi ho trovata cambiata (for a man)

The phi features of *Lei*_{HON}

LEI LIKE VOI

- Agreement with aux like *Voi*
- Agreement with adjective like *voi*
- Agreement with participle? NOT like *voi*
 - ※ pp *Voi*: adjectival with **referent** (singular), both M and F
 - ※ pp *Lei*: syntactic with *lei* (only F.SG) (– marginally adjectival (M or F))

Pp and adjectival agreement

You meet your boss. He tells you that his holidays were great. You reply:

(17) L'ho trovato molto soddisfatto
you.3SG.HON.ACC=I.have found.SG.F very satisfied-SG.F/SG.M
'I find You very satisfied'

(18) *L'ho trovato soddisfatta

(19) *Vi ho trovata soddisfatta (for a man)

The phi features of *Lei*_{HON}

Lei: 3SG	(P,N,G PHI agreement)	> VERB, PPT
ADDRESSEE: SG	(N agreement)	> PPT
referent: M/F	(G agreement)	> ADJ

Compare:

Voi.2PL

pp-F	adj-F
pp-M	adj-M
pp-M	adj-F
pp-F	adj-M

Lei.3SG.F

pp-F	adj-F
pp-F	adj-M
pp-M	adj-M
pp-M	adj-F

Syntactic and deictic agreement

- Voi

Aux/Vfin: PN (2PL), **PHI**

Pp: N (SG) **ADDRESSEE / REFERENT**

Adjective: G **REFERENT** [DEICTIC]

- Lei

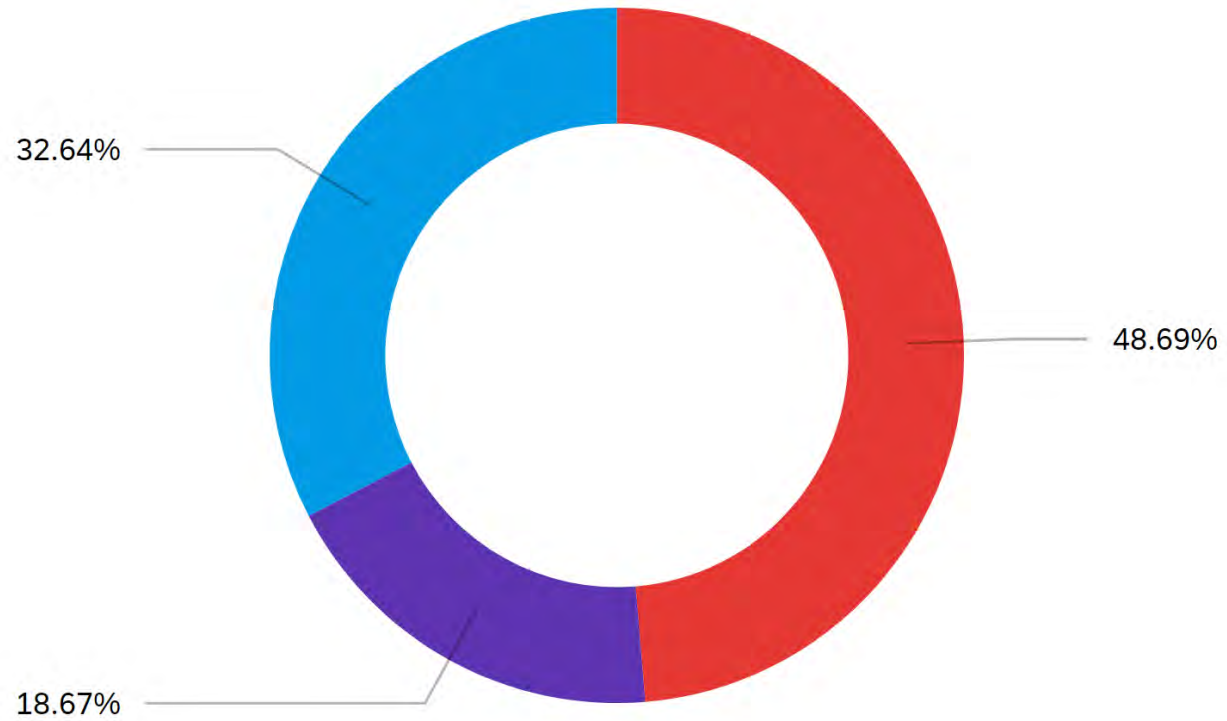
Aux/Vfin: PNG, **PHI**

Pp: NG (SG-F) **PHI** (but some issues with speakers who try ADDRESSEE)

Adjective: G **REFERENT** [DEICTIC]

Online questionnaire

n=573



Lo vedo, l'ho trovata molto soddisfatto stavolta

Lo vedo, l'ho trovata molto soddisfatta stavolta

Lo vedo, l'ho trovato molto soddisfatto stavolta

Lei with female referent

(20) La trovo cambiat-a/(*-o)
 you.3SG.HON.ACC. find.1SG changed.F.SG/M.SG
 ‘I find you changed’

This can refer to two people:

1. The addressee
2. Someone else

(the formality of the situation seems to influence the interpretation)

Addressee and Deixis

- Honorifics have a DEICTIC component > direct reference to the referent
- BUT
- Honorifics also tend to reduce DEIXIS (with the use of 3p, or 2PL)

A note on syntactic change

Syntactic change

- Interface phenomena are more prone to 'random' change and optionality
- Core arguments aren't
- Pronominal systems are stable, but NOT if the pronouns are honorifics

Change (Terenghi 2023, D'Alessandro, Putnam & Terenghi 2022, 2025; Chandra, D'Alessandro, Rothman, Shaktawat *in progress*)

Stability and instability

- Phi layer /grammatical layer > stable
- Honorific part, outside the deictic field > unstable

When phi and hon compete / Tamil

(21) aasiriyar paadam edu-kar-aan
teacher.H lesson take-PRS-3MSG.NH
'The teacher is teaching.'

(22) oruvar vote kek-ir-aal
someone.H (male) vote ask-PRS-3FSG.HON
'Someone is asking for votes.'

(23) madam padichu ta-r-aar
Madam.F teach give-PRS-MSG.HON
'(the) female teacher is teaching.'

(24) anda paiyan vote ke-kar-aanga
that boy vote ask-PRS-HON
'That boy is asking for votes.'

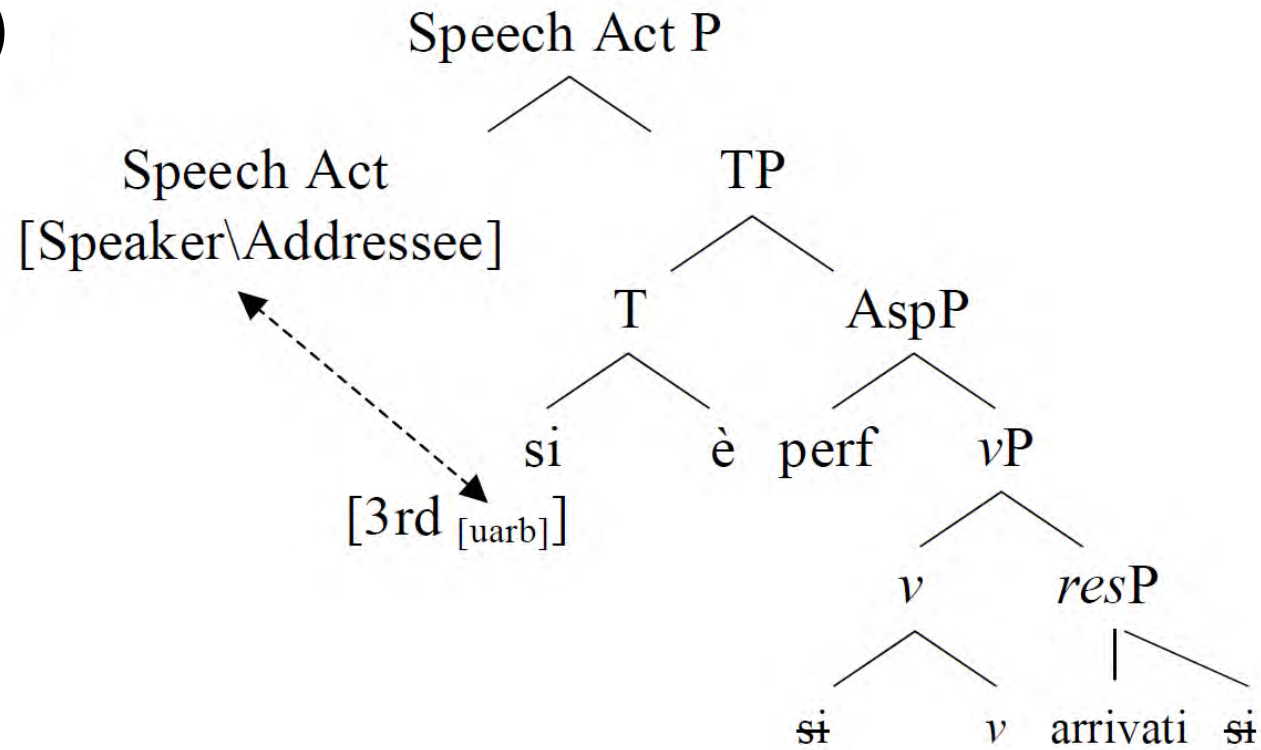
Data by Madhusmitha
Venkatesan, p.c.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, wavy, ribbon-like shapes in shades of blue and teal, flowing from the left side of the frame towards the right. The shapes have a glossy, 3D appearance with highlights and shadows.

The politeness path: ADDRESSEE SURFACING

Linking to the left periphery

(25)



D'Alessandro, Roberta. 2007. *Impersonal si constructions. Agreement and Interpretation*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

D'Alessandro (2007: 171)

Let's begin!

This part is taken from:

**Albu, Carlin-Coleman, Caspi,
Colina Fortuny, D'Alessandro &
Liu. 2026.** Addressee surfacing
and pro in politeness strategies:
the politeness path. To appear,
Linguistic Variation



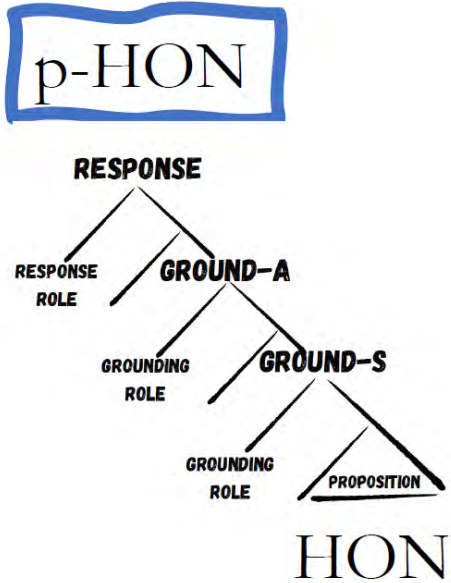
Non-honorificity marking languages

- Languages that DO have honorificity, but do not have dedicated morphemes to express honorificity:
 - Romanian
 - Hebrew
 - Abruzzese (Upper-Southern Italo-Romance)
 - Chinese
 - English
 - Italian

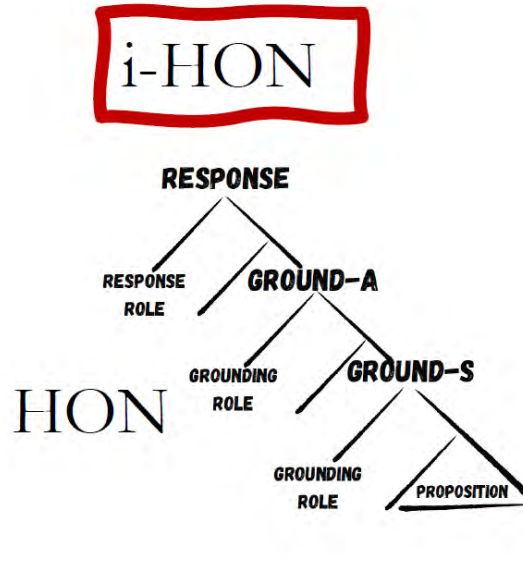
The Interactional Spine Hypothesis

(26)

a.

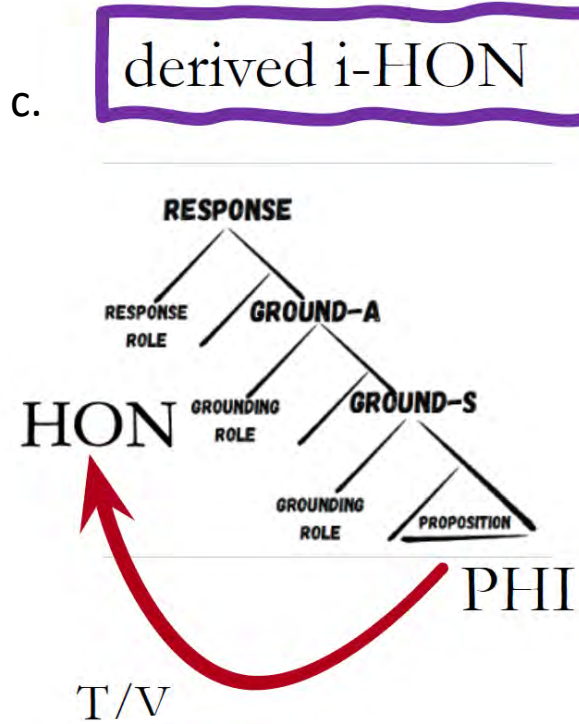


b.



Japanese/Korean

c.



T/V

Wiltschko (2025:49)

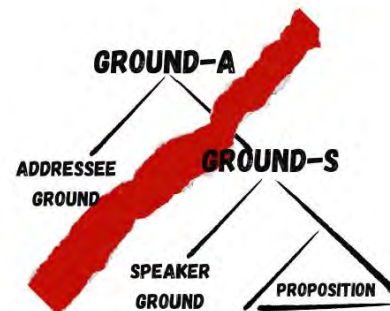
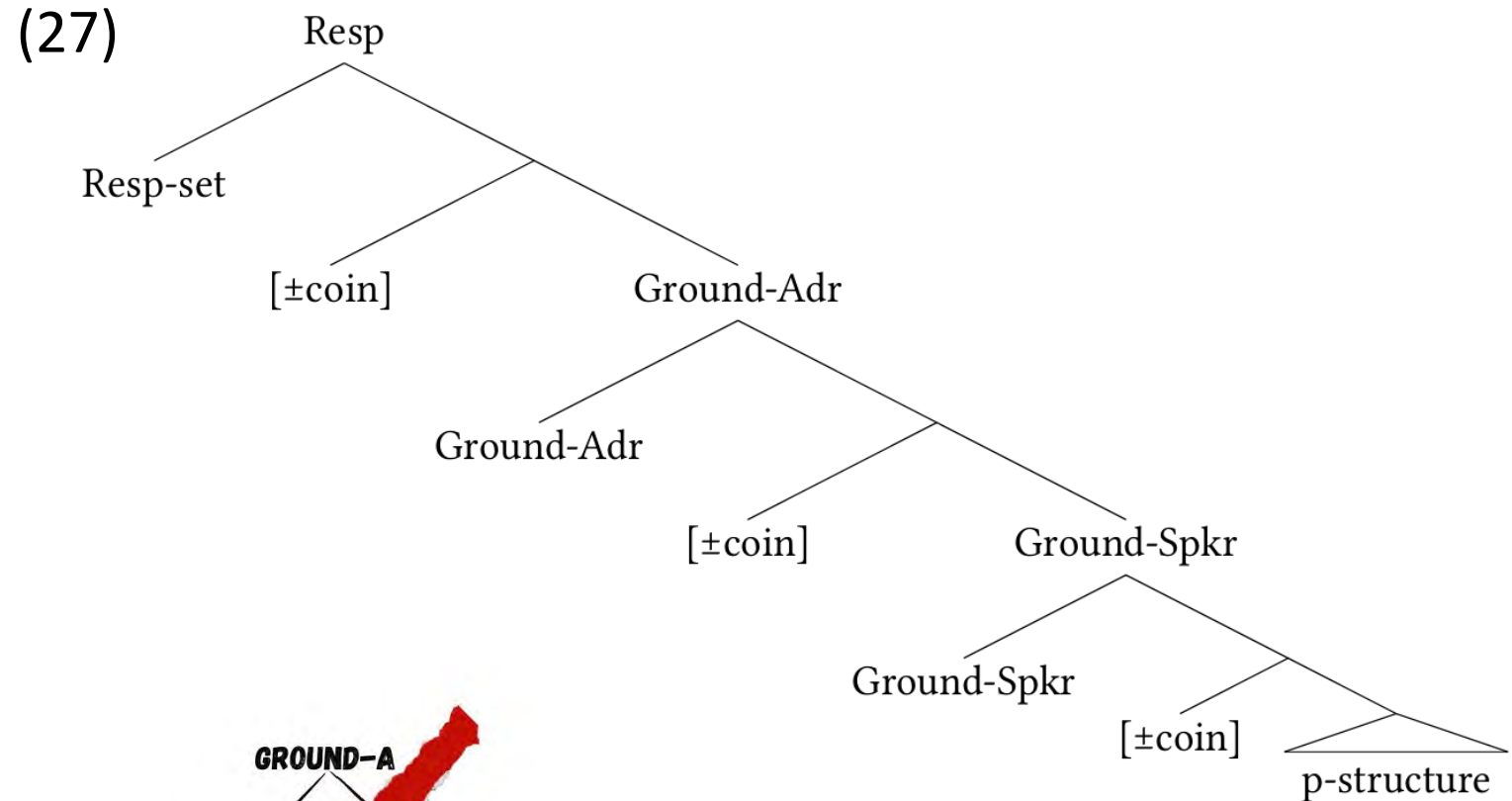
Wiltschko, Martina. 2021. The grammar of interactional language. CUP
 Wiltschko, Martina. 2025. Three syntactic pathways to honorificity. Towards a typology of marking politeness. *Syntactic pathways to morphology Lecture series*, São Paulo, 10 June 2025.

Wiltschko (2021). The Interactional Spine Hypothesis

Different ways to encode honorificity in language

Derived i-HON

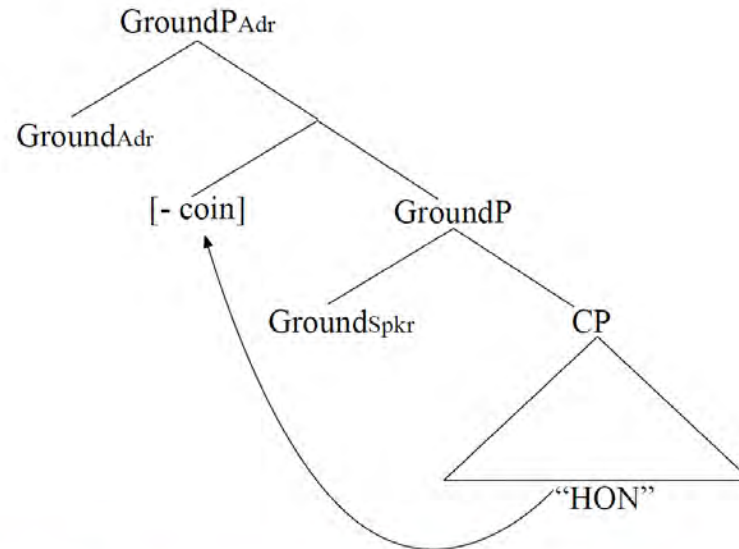
- Two layers:
 - Grounding Layer:
Regulates common ground
 - Response Layer:
Regulates turn-taking



(Wiltschko, 2021, 2022)

Restricted access to Addressee ground

(28)



Access to Addressee Ground is restricted directly

Wiltscho, Martina. 2025. Three syntactic pathways to honorificity. Towards a typology of marking politeness. *Syntactic pathways to morphology Lecture series*, Saõ Paulo, 10 June 2025.

Wiltschko (2025:74)

How about the pronoun?

- Is there an [addressee] already present in the pronoun? YES if we want to take Italian data seriously
- What is exactly happening with honorifics?
- Why do we see this mismatch?



The politeness path

Politeness path

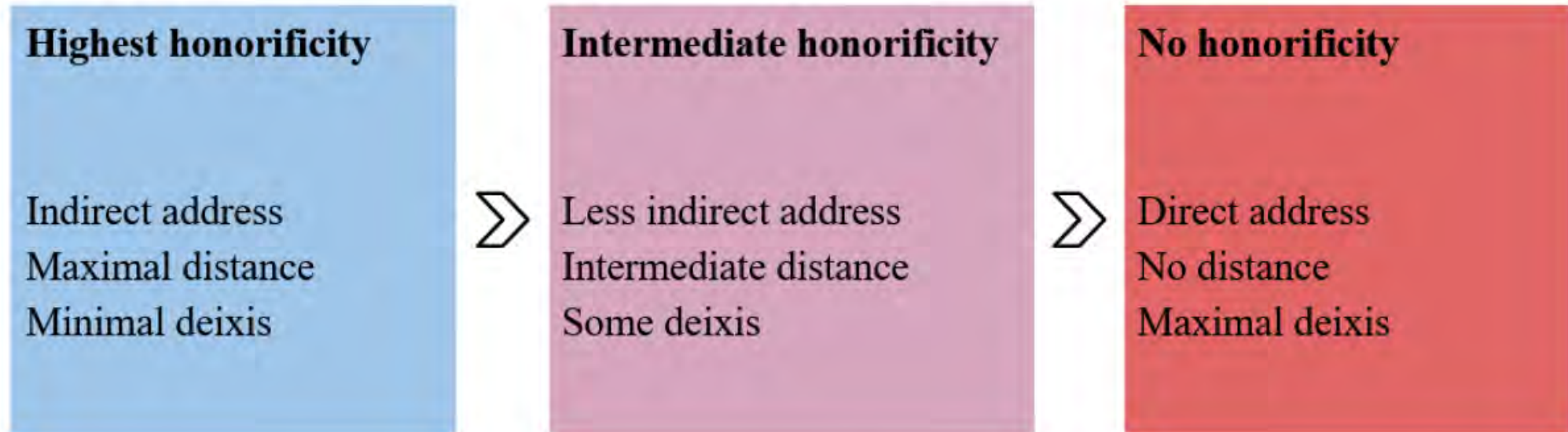
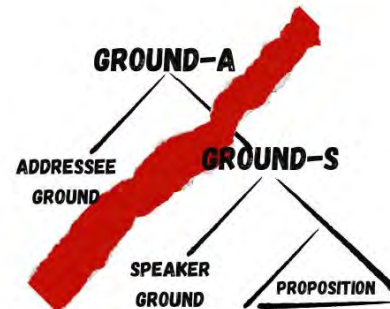
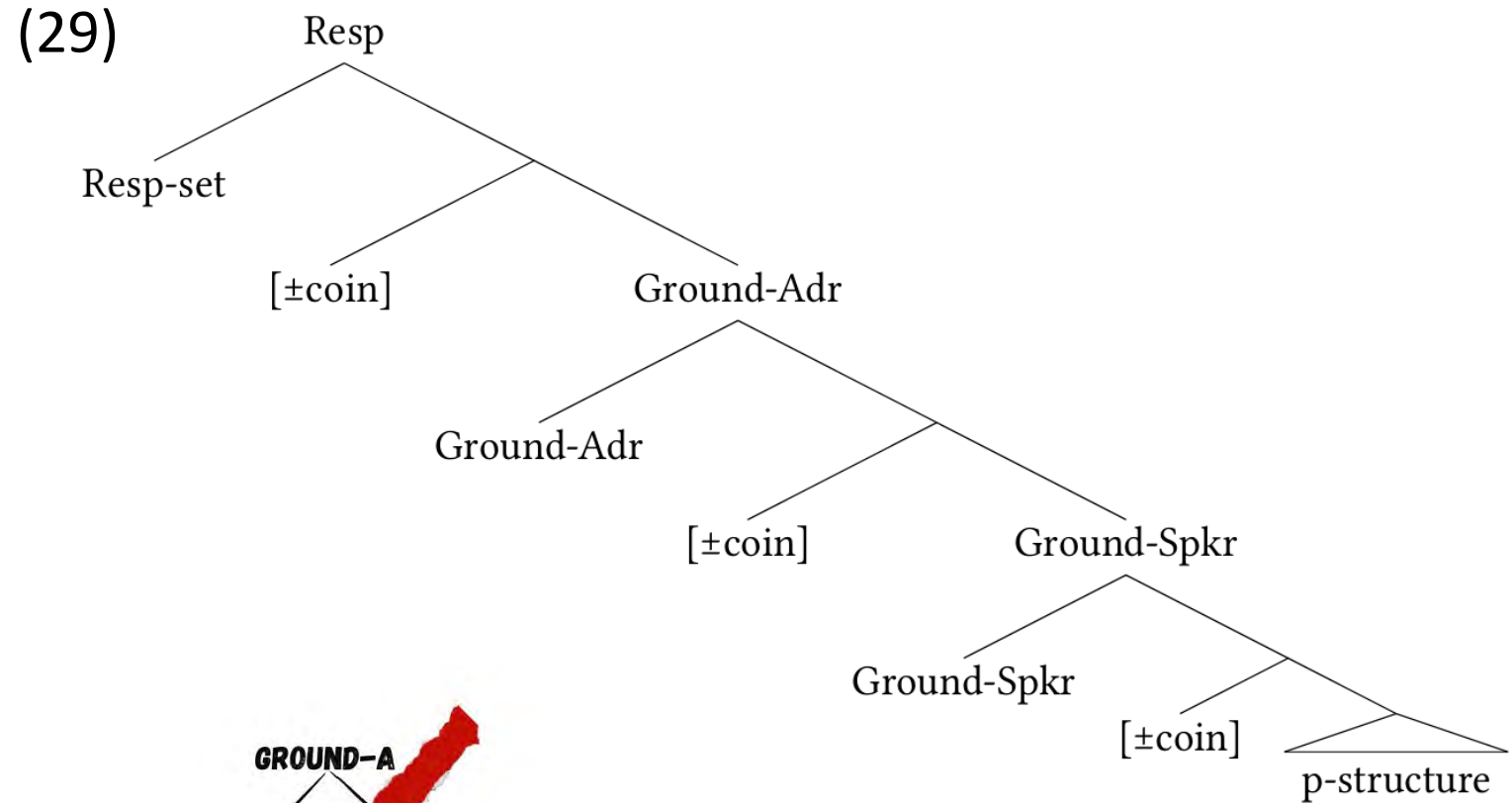


Figure 1: Feature path for addressee surfacing.

Derived i-HON

- Two layers:
 - Grounding Layer:
Regulates common ground
 - Response Layer:
Regulates turn-taking



(Wiltschko, 2021, 2022)

Politeness in Hebrew

(30) a. Im [adon-i]_i yuxal le-xakot 2 dakot, az
if sir-my.1SG.POSS be.able.FUT.3SG.M to-wait 2 minutes, then
[__ / ata]_i tuxal li-Stot kafe.

pro/you be.able.FUT.2SG.M to-drink coffee

'If you (HON) could wait for 2 minutes, then you could have coffee.'

b. * [__ / ata]_i tuxal li-Stot kafe im [adon-i]_i
pro / you be.able.FUT.2SG.M to-drink coffee if sir-my.1SG.POSS
yuxal le-xakot 2 dakot.
be.able.FUT.3SG.M to-wait 2 minutes

*'You could have coffee if you (HON) could wait for 2 minutes.'

Politeness in Hebrew

(30) a. Im [adon-i]_i yuxal le-xakot 2 dakot, az
if sir-my.1SG.POSS be.able.FUT.3SG.M to-wait 2 minutes, then
[__ / ata]_i tuxal li-Stot kafe.

pro/you be.able.FUT.2SG.M to-drink coffee



'If you (HON) could wait for 2 minutes, then you could have coffee.'

b. * [__ / ata]_i tuxal li-Stot kafe im [adon-i]_i
pro / you be.able.FUT.2SG.M to-drink coffee if sir-my.1SG.POSS
yuxal le-xakot 2 dakot.
be.able.FUT.3SG.M to-wait 2 minutes

*'You could have coffee if you (HON) could wait for 2 minutes.'

Honorificity path: Hebrew

(31)

 Honorificity
 No honorificity

	Highest honorificity	Intermediate honorificity		No honorificity
		Higher honorificity	Low honorificity	
Addressee surfacing	possessive honorific	<i>pro</i>	overt pronoun	overt pronoun
φ -features	Tense: future Person: 3	Tense: future Person: 2	Tense: future Person: 2	Tense: present Person: 2



Politeness in Romanian: agreement

- Romanian

(31) **Măria sa** poate aștepta 2 minute? Atunci
highness 3SG.POSS could.3SG wait 2 minutes then *pro*
vă puteți primi cafeau-a.
2PL.ACC could.2PL get coffee-the

'Can His Highness wait for 2 minutes? Then, you could have coffee.'

> Agreement mismatch

the phi-features on *măria* and on *pro* don't agree as they would normally

Honorificity path: The features of pro

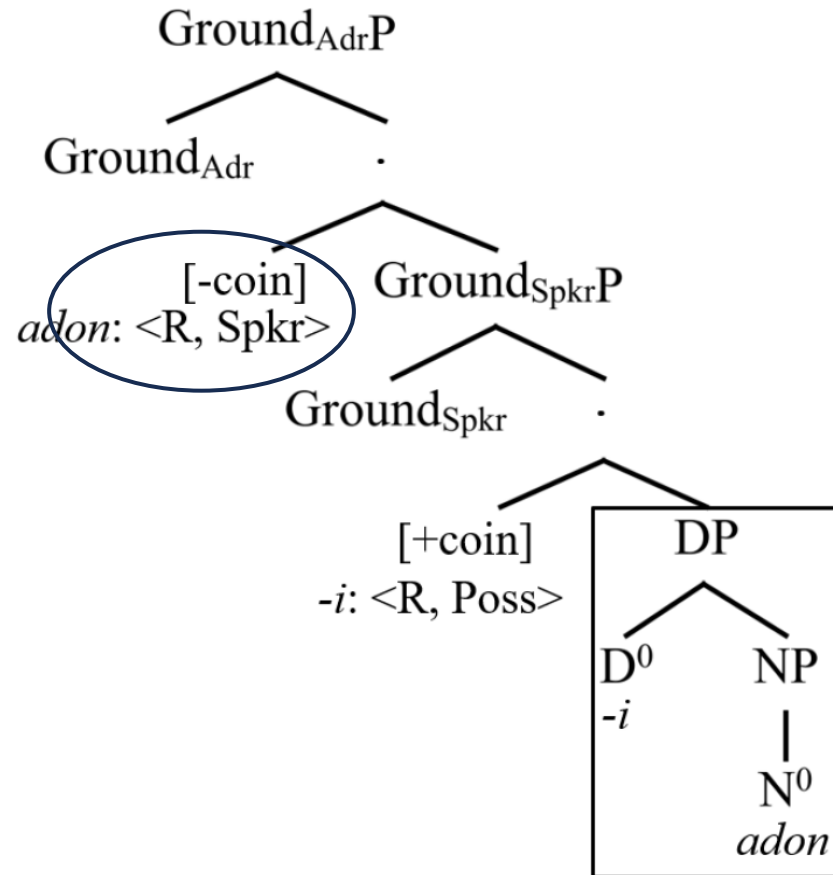
- Hebrew

(32) Im [adon-i]_i yenake kan, az [__]_i tir'e
if sir-my.1SG.POSS clean.FUT.3SG.M here then *pro* see.FUT.2SG.M
et acmexa /*acmo ba-mar'a.
ACC yourself.2SG.M himself.3SG.M in.the-mirror
'If you (HON) clean here, then (you) would see yourself in the mirror.'

- Romanian

(33) [Măria Sa]_i are nevoie de ajutor? [__]_i Vă vedeți
highness 3SG.POSS has.3SG need of help *pro* 2PL.ACC see.2PL
/#se vede în oglindă?
3SG.ACC see.3SG in mirror

'Does His Highness need help? Can you see yourself in the mirror?'



Mismatch is obtained by changing the value of the coin

Politeness in Romanian: Honorificity path

(34)





OR



?

	Lexical element	Possessive	Verbal agreement
High Honorificity	<i>Domnia/Măria/Luminăția/etc.</i> 'Lordship/ Highness/ Lightness'	<i>Sa</i> 3SG	3SG
		<i>Voastră</i> 2PL	3SG 2PL
		<i>Ta</i> 2SG	3SG 2PL

Honorificity path

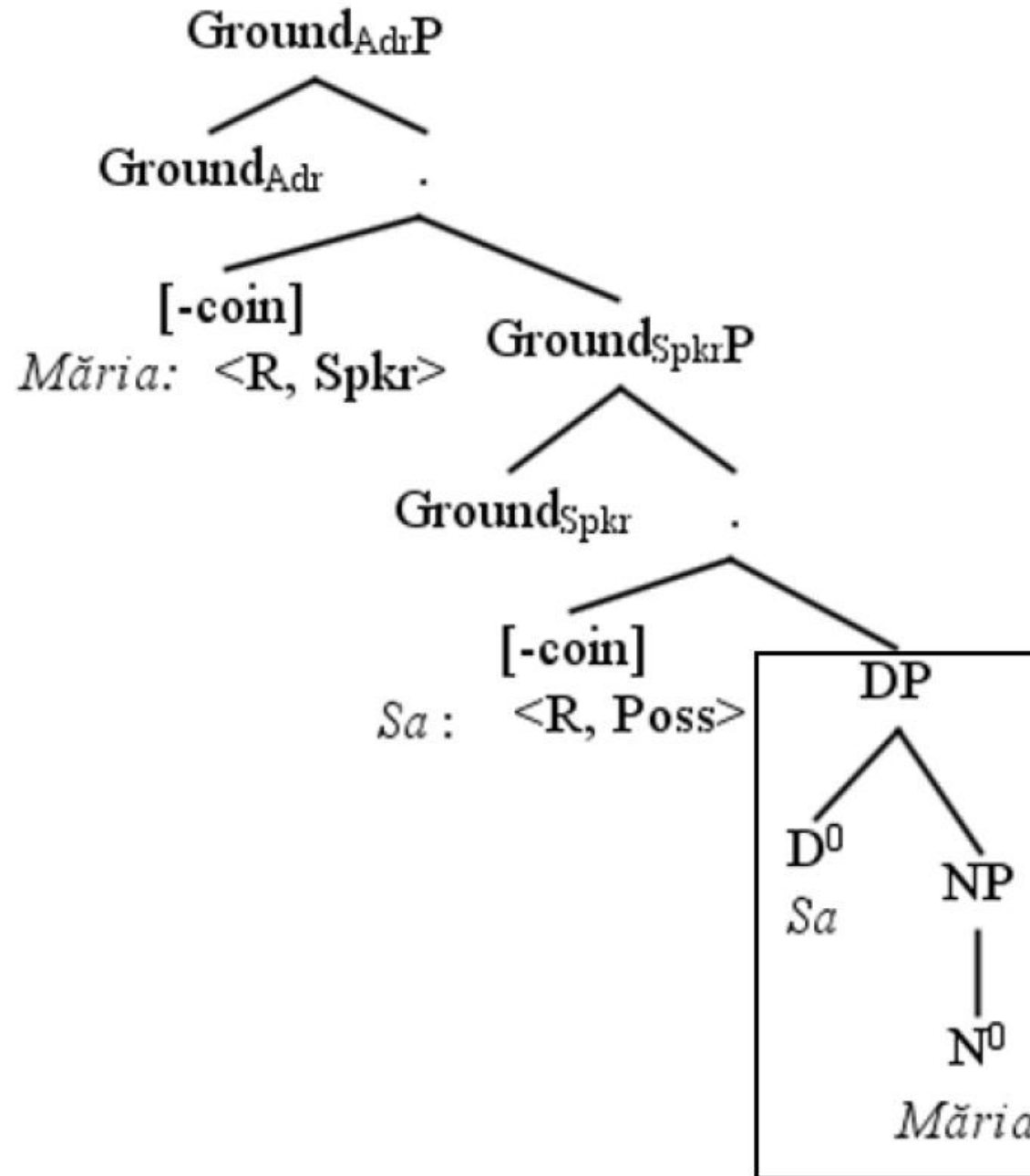
 Honorificity
 No honorificity

(35)

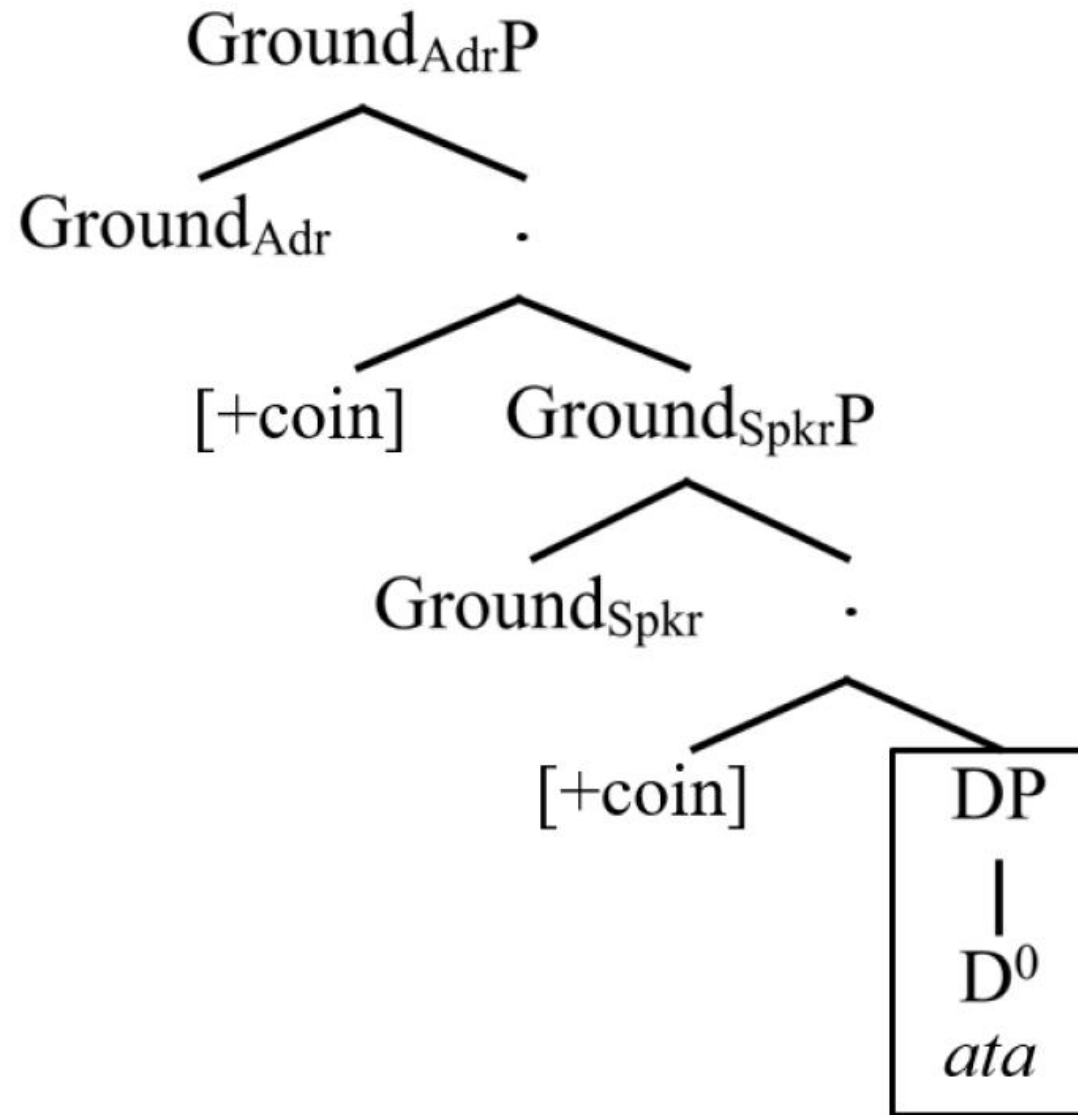
	Highest honorificity	Intermediate honorificity	No honorificity
Addressee surfacing	possessive honorific	<i>pro</i>	<i>pro/overt pronoun</i>
φ -features	Person: 3 Number: SG	Person: 2 Number: PL	Person: 2 Number: SG



(36)



(37)



No honorificity

What is happening?

We are moving towards maximal deixis

Deixis and anchoring

- Deixis ‘structurally includes both enunciation – communicative intent and subjectivity – and reference – anchoring in the content-external world’ (Brandt 2016)

in our words:

- returning to the CG; reopening the path to Addressee (or perhaps severing the link to the left periphery? Switching [-coin] to [+coin])

Person and event deixis

Types of deixis

Person deixis	Event deixis
Person	Tense
Number	Mood
Addressee	

Addressee surfacing: Feature path

Highest honorificity

Indirect address
Maximal distance
Minimal deixis



Intermediate honorificity

Less indirect address
Intermediate distance
Some deixis



No honorificity

Direct address
No distance
Maximal deixis

Addressee surfacing: Deixis path

Reduction of deixis reduces threat of face-threatening acts.

(38)

(Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Minimal deixis	Some deixis	Maximal deixis
3SG	2PL	2SG
Possessive honorifics	<i>pro</i>	Overt pronoun
Future tense; conditional mood	Future tense; conditional mood	Present tense



Addressee surfacing: Deixis path

- There is a tendency towards simplification:
 - > match between syntactic features, addressee and referent

Addressee surfacing	→ maximal person deixis
	→ maximal event deixis

- Simplification results in a unidirectional politeness path observed cross-linguistically

The Addressee

- We looked at mismatches – we concluded that there must be an addressee in honorifics, and that its features are distinct from the phi features of the pronoun and from the referent
- The politeness path shows a tendency to go towards maximum deixis, and therefore for the ADDRESSEE to surface more directly
- More precisely: the politeness path shows a tendency to convergence between ADDRESSEE, REFERENT and phi features

Conclusion

- Agreement “mismatches” create honorificity > **YES BECAUSE THEY SEPARATE THE THREE DIMENSIONS**
- The role of deixis in reference/honorificity > **HIGH, HONORIFICITY CONSISTS IN MOVING THE REFERENT FAR FROM THE DISCOURSE**
- What is 2nd person then?

IT'S COMPLICATED 😊

HONORIFICS SHOW THAT THERE'S 3 DIMENSION TO 'YOU'

*No one familiar with the field has
any illusion today that the horizons
of inquiry are even visible, let alone
at hand, in any domain.
(Chomsky 2005:8)*

Thank you!

