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HONORIFICS IN HINDI: A MORPHOLOGICAL, SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATICAL ANALYSES

Abstract

The usage of honorifics in a language is an important part of its pragmatics. The honorific system in Hindi reflects the interwoven mutual relationships among the individuals based on familial relationships, familiarity, formality, personal closeness, social status, castes and other social factors. This paper deals with honorific system of Hindi language, and analyses it morphologically, semantically and pragmatically. It also tries to give a foreign language learner of Hindi an inside look into uniqueness of the Indian society through the usages of different levels of honorifics and gives some suggestions for its usage.

Keywords

Hindi; honorifics; morphology; semantics; pragmatics

0 The proper usage of the honorific system in any language plays a vital role in second language acquisition. The sociolinguistic context reflecting honorific system is a very important part of pragmatics, equally to a foreign language speaker as to the native. To a native Hindi speaker such use is a part of culture reflecting relationships amongst the individuals, if not used properly by a Hindi language learner it can give a misleading idea of his/her own culture, and in some cases, it can even close the doors for him/her into the uniqueness of the target language society

In Hindi the honorific meaning is depicted through the plurality of pronouns and, nouns and its modifiers as well. The morphological reflection of the honorific usage is present in subject as well as predicate. The concept of honorifics in Hindi is more expanded than usual second person as in Slavic languages and Romance languages. The honorifics are not restricted to the second person only; they are as much present in the third person, and to some extent in the first person as well, the later is mostly used in widely popular dialects or peculiar contexts. The use of different levels is not only matter of informality vs. formality or politeness vs. impoliteness, but sometimes there are some sets of prewired rules defining and expressing the culturally bound interrelationship between individuals in the society.

Different types of honorifics in Hindi are equally foreign to all the students, whether the mother tongue is English with no honorifics in pronouns or the other

European languages, where honorifics are restricted to the second person only and even then it does not always have a parallel reference. It is imperative for a Hindi language learner to acquire the knowledge of it.

Another distinct feature is the levels of honorifics in Hindi. There are three levels of honorifics in the second person; *tū*, *tum* and *āp*. According to the grammatical number *tū* is singular and *tum* and *āp* are plural. Along with politeness vs. impoliteness or formal vs. informal relationship amongst speakers, prewired usages also define the choice of the level of honorific pronoun, such as the lowest level is used to address the mother and the god, on the other hand the father is addressed with the highest level.

Though colloquial not standard, but widely used and sometimes even in TV and radio, a fourth form has also appeared in the pragmatics; the usage of the highest level *āp* followed by the conjugation for *tum*.

With the third person pronoun there are only two levels of honorifics *vah* and *ve*. *vah* is a grammatically singular and *ve* plural. Since here the case is with the third person the use of honorific is expanded to the nouns as well e.g. the noun “professor” shall take higher level of honorific than the “friend”.

To know and chose the appropriate level of honorific one has to get into the interwoven relationships among the kiths and kins in the target language society. And often even the well defined rules are also not much of a help, the foreign language learner gets confused by instinctive and intuitive use of honorifics by the native speakers. To decipher how a native Hindi speaker naturally makes use of these forms is a hard nut to crack. This paper attempts to give an inside look into the semantics, morphology and pragmatics of the honorific system in Hindi, which can help a foreign language learner to comprehend the society better.

1 Honorific forms in second person

The pronominal system and its pragmatics is complex phenomenon in Hindi. T–V distinction¹ is reflected into the three levels of honorifics in second person, possible fourth (grammatically incorrect, but colloquial). Morphologically the *tum* and *āp* forms are plural and the *tū* form is singular.

²*tū hai* – very informal

tum ho – familiar and relatively polite

āp hai – certainly polite

And the colloquial one is:

*āp ho*³

¹ From Latin: Tu and Vos

² All the pronouns here are given with the conjugation of the verb *honā* – be (i.e. *you are*) in present tense, since the colloquial one is an ungrammatical combination of the pronoun and the verb form.

³ *āp ho* is, as mentioned, is colloquial and cannot be found in the textbooks, but widely used

1.1 *tū hai* form expresses very close relationship among the intimate friends of the same age or the addressee should be considerably younger to the addresser, small kids or siblings of same age, animals⁴, lower ranks of the society⁵ often even between the spouses this form is not used. The level of informality is to such extent that it becomes very impolite if used with not very close and intimate acquaintance. This form is commonly used in abusive language.

One should use it with utmost care, if used by a foreigner it will not be perceived by the native speakers very well, as mentioned above it is very impolite to talk to a stranger or new acquaintance using this form.

In a foreign language class this form is simply mentioned, not taught extensively, not at all practiced or drilled. Almost all the textbooks advise the Hindi learners not to use it at all and some of them don't even mention it (Bender, 1968). Bhatia (1996, 74) calls it either "too intimate or too rude", and advises not to use it unless you are absolutely sure about your intimate relationship with the listener and your listener has already been using this pronoun in his/her exchanges with you. The foreigners are always discouraged to use it at all. As a foreign language learner, one should avoid this form completely, until he/she attains a very good level of knowledge of the language and a very close friendship with a native speaker. Shapiro (1989, 40–41) gives a little more elaborate account of this level of honorific, along with the usual usage of *tū* he mentions another interesting use, "It is often used in the home by husbands to address their wives, but less often by wives addressing their husbands". There is an emotional dimension to the usage of *tū*, it is also used to express "contempt, anger and disgust".

The use of *tū hai* has some prewired applications. It is used to address one's mother because of one's emotional closeness to the mother. In fact the word *mā* (mother) already has inherent intimacy and when used, regardless of its reference in second or third person, it mostly takes informal form. To refer to "mother" in a formal situation (third person) the word *mātā jī* or *mammī* or sometimes the honorific particle *jī* is added to *mā* (*mā jī*) because it gives enough room to a speaker while talking to others to express the formal relationship (suitable to the context then) towards the mother (his own or somebody else's)

Gods are also addressed in poetry as in an intimate spiritual relationship by a worshiper using *tū hai*.

– rām, *terī* gaṅgā mailī

Oh God Ram, **your** Ganges is sinful

in conversation. It will be taken later in the paper in some details. This form is actually combination of the highest level honorific pronoun and with the relatively polite form of verb conjugation.

4 Pets should also be included into this category. Once a European student of mine during her travels in India, came to visit me. She used *tum* form for the neighbour's dog. It sounded very strange and unusual. The student cannot be blamed because we, the teachers of Hindi language, absolutely discourage to use *tū* form and never practice in the classroom.

5 These are the common usages given by almost all the textbooks (Agnihotri 2007, Pořízka 1972, Snell – Snell – Weightman, 2003, Shapiro 1989 etc).

– baṛī der bhayī nandalālā **tere** dvār khaṛī brajabālā⁶
 Oh Nandalāl (Krishna), A Braj girl (a girl from Braj) is standing for long on **your**
 doorstep.

1.2 tum ho – the familiar and relatively polite form used among friends, equals and lower ranked ones. This form is fairly acceptable in rural areas since most of the dialects and some other north Indian languages (Gujarati, Punjabi etc) do not have counterpart for *āp* – the certainly polite form – in them. Although the use of *āp* in the dialects are more and more visible, it is because of the influence of the popularity of the standard language through the popular media; Bollywood, TV etc. In urban social background *āp* has always been part of the common speech, it reflects the civility of the speaker, very much emphasised by the etiquettes of the urban Urdu culture. Through Urdu etiquettes *āp* has made into the standard Hindi. McGregor (1972, 12) also mentions the use of *āp* for some people is unnatural and they use *tum* instead of *āp*. Although he doesn't give any reason for such use but this usage might be the reflection of the predominantly urban setting behind such usage. He also advises the Hindi learners not to imitate it.

If a foreign language speaker by mistake or ignorance uses *tum ho* in an informal conversation, they can still be given a benefit of doubt being a foreigner and because of their lack of acquaintance with the culture and incomplete familiarity with the language use. Such use does not strike that dreadfully in an informal conversation, even if you are expected to use higher level. However the form should be avoided, unless the language learner is sure that he can use it.

1.3 āp hai – the certainly polite form – is used with the elders and those you want to pay respect. This form should always be used during the first formal acquaintance with almost everybody except in some cases with small kids. Although with kids sometimes the parents also use *āp*, but that is because of reason that they want the kid to learn to use *āp* rather than they are using honorifics in their real sense, and there is always inconsistency in such use between parents and children.

Almost all the textbooks to learn Hindi advice to stick to *āp* to avoid misunderstandings or certainly use it in case of doubt (Snell – Weightman 2003, 22) and all of them give similar account of the practical usage of all three forms. Kachru (2006, 161) gives some examples of the possible usages of *āp*: kinship terms for elders, referring expressions for teachers, high officials and professionals. Bhatia (1996, 74) referring to the caste colour of the Indian society advises foreign students to avoid stereotyping and use *āp* for everybody regardless of the his/her caste and status. The sensitivity of using *tū*, *tum* and *āp* is nicely portrayed by Friedlander (2009, 25), “The choice of how you use the words for you will greatly influence people's reactions to you.” The reflection of “civility” in Indian society with regard to the choice of second person pronoun is shown by Agnihotri

⁶ A Bollywood film title and a song.

(2007, 131) “Many ‘civilised’ speakers of ‘standard Hindi’ take pride in saying that in their family, they don’t use *tū* at all”

The use of the three levels of honorifics, particularly *āp* and *tum* should not be taken as very rigid rule. Moving back and forth between is also not very uncommon, especially in case of people with a little difference in their ages. Rarely, but possible even with *tū* native speakers make a switch to *tum*.

1.4 *āp ho* is another form in Hindi that is ungrammatical but colloquially very widely used. This is simply the use of *āp* with the conjugation of *tum*.

This phenomenon has been often seen as another form of honorific which lies between *tum* and *āp*, but in my opinion it is just ungrammatical and used ignorantly. If a speaker uses it this is simply that he wants to use *āp* with no intention to find something in between *āp* and *tum*, but just ignorantly uses the verb forms corresponding *tum*. Reason behind this massive use of the wrong grammar lies in the fact, as I mentioned earlier, that the use of *āp* prevails in urban surroundings and is a symbol of civility and etiquettes. Some Hindi dialects and some north Indian languages do not have *āp* at all, their speakers never used the conjugation for *āp* and when trying to be civil, they use *āp* simply to replace *tum*, but rest of the sentences stays the same. This use has become so massive it can be heard in TV/radio programs, Bollywood films and the magazines all use it quite normally.

A foreign language learner is unlikely to make that mistake, since the teachers do not let him use this form, and he is drilled to use the correct form, but he should know that the form does exist at least in a communicative level and should not be surprised to hear it commonly.

1.5 Grammatical Plurality with *āp* and *tum*

Another uniqueness of such honorific forms in Hindi is the fact that in Hindi in some situations the whole predicate takes plural form: predicated noun, adjective or any modifier related to the predicated noun and of course the verb.

āp acche profesar haĩ. – You (pl.) are good (pl.) professors.

This sentence in a context free situation is in fact ambiguous.

– You are a good professor.

– You are good professors.

The choice of singular and plural is disambiguated in the contexts only.

Although grammatically incorrect, Sarkar (2000, 17) tries to disambiguate numerical singularity and plurality of the two upper levels of honorifics, *āp* and *tum* by adding a marker *log* making them *āp log* and *tum log*. The word *log* (people) is in fact a plural noun, which is morphologically plural too. The noun *log* as a plural marker is often used in all plural pronouns (1st, 2nd and 3rd person, there will be a little more about this usage in section 3.) to emphasise the numerical plu-

rality in juxtaposition with plural pronouns that represent singular subject with honorific meaning. Without the plural marker *log* the pronouns do not lose their capability to represent plurality of the subject as stated inaccurately by Sarkar. This phenomenon representing this type of ambiguity is not unusual in other languages as well.

In Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian the sentence:
Vi ste dobar profesor. – You (pl.) are a good professor.

is unambiguous and expresses singular subject (hon.) and predicate, although the subject pronoun expresses grammatical plural but the predicated noun “*profesor*” is makes the sentence honorific singular.

However the ambiguity appears if the predicate has only an adjective, the adjectival predicate also takes the masculine plural form regardless of the gender.
*Vi ste dobri*⁷. – You are good (pl.)

The sentence is ambiguous on two accounts; number and gender, although here the adjective “*dobri*” (good(pl.)) is masculine but it can always refer to a lady professor as well.

In Hindi the plural forms because of honorifics in nouns, adjectives and other relevant parts of the predicate are restricted only to nominative forms, this phenomenon will be discussed a little later in the paper.

There are different set of rules for feminine nouns. To express honorific meaning only the subject and the verbal predicate are changed into plural not the nominal predicate or any other modifier. Although any variable modifier, such as adjectives, participles or postpositional marker for possession (*kī*) for feminine gender are same for singular or plural and they do not change anyway, but on the basis of nouns, it is easy to establish the grammar rule i.e. Unlike masculine gender, the feminine predicative noun and all its modifiers remains the same with the honorific subject, only the verb takes the plural form.

You are a good student. *āp acchī chātrā haĩ.* – not **āp acchī chātrāē haĩ.*

Only *āp* and *haĩ* are in plural form. The former is subject and plural form of second person pronoun, and later is conjugated verb form for plural. Rest of the predicate *acchī chātrā* remains in singular.

This gender distinction is also seen in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. There the predicated noun of feminine gender is also expressed in singular.

Ana, Vi ste dobra studentica (sg.). – Ana, you are a good student (feminine).

In absence of nominal predicate the adjectival predicate takes masculine plural form.

Ana, vi ste dobri (pl.m.) – Ana, you are good.

The feminine subject will not take feminine plural adjectival form for honorific meaning.

**Vi ste dobre (pl.f.).*

⁷ The situation is not the same in other Slavic languages and even in some Croatian dialects.

Conclusively it can be said that the honorific in predicate is reflected morphologically only with masculine nouns, which inflect adjective, verb and other types of relevant words. In case of feminine gender only verb is inflected to express the honorific meaning, but not rest of the predicate that includes adjectives, nouns, and any type of word with gender and number marker.

2 Honorific forms in third person.

Hindi expresses the honorific forms in third person as well. The T–V distinction is expressed through the grammatical plurality to show politeness towards the third person about whom the conversation is being held and he does not need to be present there. In contrast to the second person the third person has only two levels of honorific forms.

- Singular (Informal)
- Plural for honorific singular.

2.1 Honorific forms in third person pronouns.

The personal pronouns⁸ for third person are:

vah – singular

ve – plural and honorific singular

Although very often in conversational Hindi one can hear the pronunciation of both of the pronouns “*vo*”⁹, but the predicate agrees with the singularity or plurality/honorific meaning of the subject to express the difference and apart from the nominative the other forms such as possessive, oblique, and ergative are clearly different i.e. reflect the T–V distinction.

		Literally (Lit.)
<i>ve</i> profesar haĩ (Nominative)	He/she is a professor.	They are professors
<i>unkā</i> bhāĩ (Possessive)	His/her brother.	Their brother
maĩne <i>unse</i> kahā (Oblique)	I told him/her .	I told them
<i>unhōne</i> kahā (Ergative subject)	He/she said.	They said

The choice of honorific form depends on the similar grounds as for *āp* in second person.

Stylistically enhanced, but rare in the contemporary language, and found solely in archaic texts the second person plural *āp* is also used in place of honorific third person *ve*.

⁸ There are another set of third person pronouns *yah* and *ye*: singular and plural/ honorific singular respectively, they are not mentioned here because they follow the same pattern of honorific system. The difference lies on the proximity of the third person to the speaker.

⁹ In Urdu third person singular subject pronoun and its plural counterpart are even orthographically same.

Varmā jī ek acche lekhak haī, āpne kaī acche upanyās likhe haī.

Varma ji is a good writer, **he (Lit. you pl.)** has written good novels.

This type of honorific is kept out of the formal grammar of contemporary Hindi, none of the modern grammar books mention it.

2.2 Honorifics with third person nouns¹⁰

Such as the pronouns the human nouns are also associated with honorific system in Hindi. Similar to the second person in the third person a sentence with honorific expression will have the predicate too in plural.

āpke bhāī acche haī Your brother is nice. Lit. Your brothers are nice.

Although analysing polite plurals morphologically, this possibility is mentioned by Comrie (1975, 412), restricting it only to masculine nouns, but in fact this is expended to feminine nouns too, however only the verb takes the plural from, not in rest of the predicate.

āpkī bahan (sg.) kaisī haī(pl.)? – How is (Lit. are) your sister?

The above example has only the verb in plural.

The formal form is used for elders, certain profession i.e. professor, manager etc. or simply the speaker's subjective relation towards the third person.

hamāre profesar yahā rahte haī.

Our professor lives here.

Lit. Our professors live here.

On the other hand some professions such as cobbler or sweeper because of the caste base cultural heritage simply end up being at the lower end of the honorific system.

is gāv kā mocī yahā baiṭhtā hai. – The village cobbler sits here.

The nouns *ādmī, insān* (man, person, individual) etc. if not definite take singular but if definite as it mentions a respectful person, in that situation the noun will take the plural form.

vahā ek ādmī rahtā thā.

There lived a man (singular).

śarmā jī acche ādmī haī.

Mr. Sharma is a good man (plural).

The honorific *jī, sāhib, śrimān* etc. (which can be translated as Mr. Miss, Mrs. etc.) when used with a personal name or profession it always take honorific forms regardless of one's subjective perception of the person or profession.

The pronouns *vah* and *yah* are used for lower level of honorific and *ve* and *ye* are used for higher level. With the nouns, adjectives and verbs which are affected

¹⁰ Nouns here mean human nouns.

grammatically by the honorific meaning there is a complex system of morphological representation.

Another specificity of honorifics in third person is the fact that only masculine nouns take plural to express honorific meaning, the feminine nouns do not change at all, as it has been mentioned earlier with the honorific agreement reflected in predicate. Masculine nouns express honorific meaning only when they are in nominative form, other forms such as possessive, oblique etc. are incapable of expressing honorific meaning.

ghar mē āpke bhāī haī. (Nominative)

Your brother (hon.) is at home

Lit: *Your brothers* are at home

āpke bhāī ne kahā. (Ergative subject)

Your brother said.

not **āpke bhāīyō ne kahā* Lit: not "*your brothers* said".

In the sentence "*āpke bhāī ne kahā*" the subject "*āpke bhāī*" is in fact singular and it is neutral with regard to honorific meaning¹¹.

maīne kitāb āpke bhāī ko dī. (Oblique form)

I gave the book to *your brother*.

Not **maīne kitāb āpke bhāīyō ko dī* Lit: "I gave the book to *your brothers*."

Such as the previous example oblique plural cannot replace oblique singular to express honorific meaning as it is possible with pronouns. The honorific meaning is not at all expressed morphologically if the noun is not in nominative.

On the other hand as mentioned earlier in case of pronouns only the plural form can express higher level of honorifics:

unhōne kahā (Ergative Subject)

He said (Lit: *They* said)

unse (oblique)

From *him* (Lit: From *them*)

Never the singular:

usne kahā (Erg. sub) *He* said. (Lit: singular)

usse (oblique) For him (Lit: singular)

In conclusion in case of third person nouns the morphological representation of honorifics is reflected only in masculine noun in nominative. The singular noun takes the plural form. In other cases such as feminine gender or masculine noun

¹¹ The oblique form of the singular masculine noun along with all the variable modifiers such as adjectives, possessive pronouns, participles is same as its nominative plural forms. These homonymous forms of masculine singular in oblique case and plural in nominative give a false sense of morphological representation of the honorific use. In such situation the honorific form is morphologically not possible to express, in fact the only possible usage is neutral to any honorific meaning, it hides the possible distinction between the two levels of honorifics.

in oblique or ergative subject form the nouns do not change. And with the third person pronouns the morphological representation of honorifics is reflected in all possible instances i.e. nominative, ergative subject, oblique, possessive forms.

3 Honorific Forms in First Person

Interestingly enough in colloquial Hindi, the honorifics are present in first person too, although in classroom teaching this is never mentioned. But for higher level students it makes sense to have some overview information on the honorifics in first person. Though this type of usage is mentioned by Pořízka in *Hindiština* (1972, 94), however he advises foreigners never to use it.

For Bollywood lovers it makes sense to know this because it is very much used to express poetically enhanced content.

*ham āpke haĩ kaun?*¹² – Who am I to you? Lit. Who are we to you?

Although this form is completely rejected by the standard grammar, but the pragmatics shows the importance of honorifics in first person.

Some eastern dialects often use *ham* – we for *maĩ* – I and when their speakers use the standard Hindi, they carry this uniqueness to the pragmatics of the language as well. To express and emphasise the numerical plural an additional noun *log* – people is added to the pronoun i.e. *ham log*. Often in fictional literature this form, *ham* – we for *maĩ*, is used in the speech of a character to express his geographical belongingness or simply the country background of the character.

The interesting feature of this kind of usage is the fact that the user can be seen both egoistic and humble. Relying on the context one can distinguish the usage as respect towards the listeners or simply mentioning ones greatness.

Often in fictional literature a king, a politician or some eminent person uses plural form instead of singular to emphasise their position above the rest of the audience, this greatness and vastness of him is not covered by simply by *maĩ* goes beyond simple “I”. One of the very common examples of such use is, when the king says, *ham khuś hue*– I am happy, Lit: *We* are happy.” This type of usage is referred as the royal plural (Comrie, 1975, 412) or *pluralis majestatis* (majestic plural) in Latin linguistic tradition.

On the other hand the same form i.e. first person plural for singular subject can be used to express one’s humility. In colloquial Hindi, one uses plural to show respect to the person he/she is talking too. Instead of using *maĩ* – I (which might be a little egoistic), the use of *ham* – we is well accepted, which makes one a part of a group, not standing out and shows one’s humbleness. In a conversation with eminent people a speaker by not using *maĩ* rather by using *ham* skilfully avoids distinguishing himself from others, and expresses himself as a part of group of simple folks. Often in fictional literature one can see the use:

¹² A Bollywood film title

hamē kṣamā kar dījīe – Excuse me – Lit: Excuse us.

In Latin linguistic terminology such kind of plurals are referred as *pluralis modestiae* (plural of modesty).

4 Conclusion

The honorific system in Hindi is a complex set of flexible rules, not restricted to only to the usual second person, rather extended to third person and to some extent first person as well. Switching from one level to another can also be commonly seen. There are some predefined norms which can serve as a good guide to the students of foreign language, where to make the T–V distinction, but other than that to acquire a good knowledge of the honorific system a Hindi language learner will have to rely mainly on the practical use of it. They should carefully observe the relationship among individuals and how the relationships are verbalised through the honorific system.

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HONORIFIKA V HINDŠTINĚ: MORFOLOGICKÁ, SÉMANTICKÁ A PRAGMATICKÁ ANALÝZA

Užití honorifik je významným objektem studia pragmatiky. Systém honorifik v hindštině reflektuje složitou strukturu vzájemných vztahů mezi jednotlivci, danou rodinnými vazbami, známostí, formálností, osobní blízkostí, společenského statutu, kasty a dalších faktorů.

V článku se vykládá honorifický systém hindštiny a je analyzován morfologicky, sémanticky a pragmaticky. Pokouší se také zpřehlednit tento složitý systém nerodilému mluvčímu a pojmout jej jako jedinečné okno do indické společnosti.

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