

The Internal Structure of Copular Sentences with desu and da in Japanese

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Abstract: Japanese is a language known for its rich honorific morphology. Different from many Indo-European languages, Japanese language has its honorifics built into the grammar system. Japanese honorifics have many different forms and their usages are not always clearly predictable, which makes it quite challenging for second language learners to grasp. This paper introduces a less-known honorific pattern that clearly shows how Japanese honorifics behave grammatically. The copula verb “be” in Japanese has two forms: a non-honorific form “da” and an honorific form “desu”. “Da” is used under conditions where the speaker indicates an informal or casual talk, while “desu” is used when the speaker intends to present good manners to the listener. From a formal linguistic perspective, a sentence with the plain copula form and one with the honorific copula form have a different underlying structure represented in the grammar of native Japanese speakers. The paper explains such difference between copular sentences with “desu” and “da” by presenting a syntactic structure analysis. It proposes a different internal structure for a copular sentence with “desu” and “da”, and further argues that the sentence with “desu” has “more structure” in the left periphery and presents a different verb position in the internal structure in comparison to the sentence with “da”. The analysis motivates a syntactical way to present and explain the differences in grammatical structures and social contexts of copula use when teaching honorifics in Japanese second language classrooms. It suggests that modern Japanese second language education start teaching honorifics with copular sentences where the distinction between honorific and non-honorific use is very clear and simple.

Keywords: Japanese, honorifics, copula, syntax

1. Introduction

Expressing politeness through language during interaction is a fairly universal phenomenon to all cultures. Every language has its own way of expressing politeness. In Japanese, there exists a set of morphemes and rules for conveying esteem and courtesy. Japanese honorific is the little morpheme that is used when expressing politeness under some certain rules regarding Japanese grammar and sentence structure.

Japanese honorifics vary greatly in forms, which means there are different morphemes applied to different types of sentences. For example, there are honorific morphemes that attach to a verb and morphemes that attach to a noun. So they have to be used differently between a sentence ending with

a verb and a sentence ending with a noun. In particular, the paper would focus on honorifics in a sentence with a copula.

In this paper, I want to illustrate how honorifics are involved in copular sentence structure and try to show the structural difference between two types of copular sentences. The paper is organized in the following way.

First, I introduce Japanese honorifics with examples and then illustrate how honorifics manifest themselves in copular sentences.

Next, I present the research questions and assumptions.

Then, I propose an analysis for a copula sentence with an honorific form and a copula sentence without an honorific form.

Finally, I conclude the paper.

2. Examples of Japanese Honorifics

2.1. Honorifics That Attach to Nouns and Verbs

Japanese honorifics are little morphemes that attach to nouns and verbs. They give extra meanings such as respect and politeness to an expression. Here are the examples of sentences containing honorifics.

(1a) is a sentence without an honorific. (1b) shows a sentence with an honorific prefix “o-” on the noun “henji (reply)”. It is added at the beginning of the noun “henji (reply)” when the speaker is talking to another person for which they express respect.

(1) a. henji arigatou.

reply thank you.

“Thank you for your reply.” [non-honorific form]

b. o-henji arigatou.

HON¹-reply thank you.

“Thank you for your reply.” [with an honorific on the noun ‘reply’]

(The speaker honors the hearer)

(2a) is a sentence without an honorific. (2b) shows a sentence with an honorific suffix “-masu” on the verb “wara-ttei-ru (laughing)”. It replaces the tense suffix “-ru” of the verb “wara-ttei-ru (laughing)”. The honorific suffix “-masu” is used when the speaker wants to beautify the utterance and show good manners to the listener.

(2) a. Hanako-wa wara-ttei-ru.

Hanako-TOP² laugh-PROG³-Nonpast.

“Hanako is smiling.” [non-honorific form]

b. Hanako-wa wara-ttei-masu.

Hanako-TOP laugh-PROG-HON.

“Hanako is smiling.”

“The speaker is speaking nicely.” [with an honorific on the verb ‘smile’]

2.2. Honorifics in a Copula Sentence

This paper focuses on the two different forms of copula. One is the non-honorific copula *da* and the other is the honorific copula *desu*. Here are the examples:

¹ HON - honorific

² TOP - topic

³ PROG - progressive

(3a) shows a sentence with *da* “be”. This sentence is appropriate in an informal context. For example, when a student is chatting with his/her classmate.

(3b) shows a sentence with *desu* “be”. *Desu* in this sentence is a free morpheme (a copula), which is also an honorific. The sentence with *desu* is appropriate in a formal context. For example, when a student is talking to a professor.

(3) a. Context: A student is chatting with his/her classmate.

Kanojo-wa sannensei *da*.
She-TOP three-grade-student COP⁴.

“She is a three-grade-student.” [non-honorific copula]

a. Context: A student is introducing a classmate to a professor.

Kanojo-wa sannensei *desu*.
She-TOP three-grade-student COP.

“She is a three-grade-student.” [honorific copula]

Similarly, (4a) is a sentence with *da* “be”. This sentence is appropriate in an informal context. For example, when a speaker invites a friend to his/her home and is showing him/her around.

And (4b) is a sentence with *desu* “be”, which is appropriate in a formal context, such as when a secretary is talking to his/her boss (or other superiors).

(4) a. Context: The speaker invites a friend to his/her home and is showing him/her around.

Kore-wa watashi-no heya *da*
This-TOP 1-GEN⁵ room COP

“This is my room.” [non-honorific copula]

b. Context: A secretary is talking to his/her boss (or other superiors)

Kore-wa watashi-no heya *desu*
This-TOP 1-GEN room COP

“This is my room.” [honorific copula]

Here is another pair. (5a) presents a sentence with *da* “be”. As mentioned above, an honorific-free sentence is appropriate in an informal context, where, for example, an employee is talking to his/her familiar coworkers or inferiors.

And a sentence like (5b) that has *desu* “be” is suitable in a formal context where, for example, a TV host is making comments in front of an audience.

(5) a. Context: An employee is talking to his/her familiar coworkers or inferiors.

Yuka-wa kirei *da*
Floor-SBJ⁶ clean COP

“The floor is clean.” [non-honorific copula]

b. Context: A TV host is making comments in front of an audience.

Yuka-wa kirei *desu*
Floor-SBJ clean COP

“The floor is clean.” [honorific copula]

It should be noted that sentences without *desu* or *da* are ungrammatical, as shown in example (7) with (6) as a contrast:

(6) Kare-wa koukousei *desu/da*.
He-TOP senior school student is.

⁴ COP - copula

⁵ 1 - the first person, GEN - genitive

⁶ SBJ - subject

- (7) *Kare-wa koukousei.
He-TOP senior school student

3. Research Questions and Assumptions

The assumption that I make is that the underlying structure of a sentence is linked with interpretation. Therefore, I assume whenever there is a difference in meaning, it is reflected in the structure. For example, questions and declarative sentences have different meanings and are used in different contexts with different purposes, and for these different sentences I assume they differ in syntactic structure (i.e. declarative sentences have syntactically different structure from questions). Then a question arises: how do we explain the meaning differences between copula sentences with *desu* and *da* in terms of syntactic structure?

From the data in the previous sections, we have seen that *desu* and *da* are used in different contexts, namely they are appropriate in different discourse situations. The sentence with *desu* and the sentence with *da* do not share the same meaning since they are conveying different information beyond the surface string of words.

Given the assumption about the link between syntax and interpretation, the prediction is that one Japanese copula sentence with *da* and one with the honorific *desu* do not actually have the same underlying syntax, though at the surface level, they look almost identical except the form of the copula. We can assume that copula sentences with *desu/da* are structurally different.

At this point, one may argue that the difference we observe in Japanese copula sentences above has nothing to do with syntax. The difference could presumably be a matter of semantics or the context but is unrelated to the structure of the sentence. Because if we look at the data listed above, the structures seem to be totally the same. It may be argued that it is something about interpretation, something that is directly linked to semantics, not syntax.

Therefore, in the following parts, I am going to explain the meaning differences between copula sentences with *desu* and *da* by conducting analysis on their syntactic structure.

4. The Analysis

I am going to conduct the generative syntactic analysis by showing the derivation of the tree of a Japanese copula sentence *Hanako-wa gakusei desu/da* “Hanako is a high school student”, based on the theoretical perspective that the initial tree structure of a sentence shows the deep structure, and the deep structure undergoes certain movements before we get the correct surface string [1]. I will begin by showing the derivation with *desu*, and then the derivation with *da*.

4.1. Derivation with *desu*

First, I assume the copula *desu* is in V. Second, I assume that *gakusei* “student” is a subject that starts in the specifier of VP [2], with *Hanako-wa* “Hanako-TOP” to be merged later. (as Figure 1 shows below)

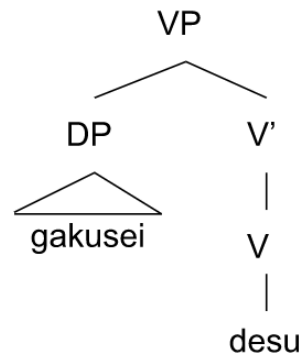


Figure 1: Gakusei is in spec of VP and *desu* is in V.

Then we merge T with VP. To satisfy the EPP feature [3] on T, I assume that *gakusei* “student” moves from the specifier of VP to the specifier of TP. (as Figure 2 shows below)

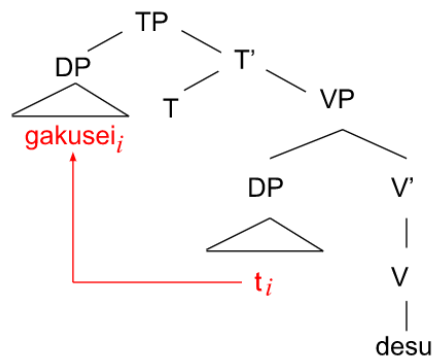


Figure 2: Gakusei moves from spec of VP to spec of TP.

I then assume *desu* first moves to the T layer to get its tense feature checked, as is shown in Figure 3.

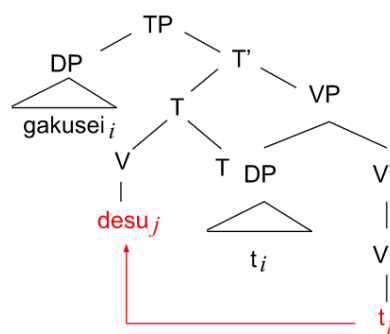


Figure 3: *Desu* moves to T layer to get its tense feature checked.

Next, I will assume that politeness can be reflected by the syntax of a sentence and that politeness is a grammatical category encoded into the system of the sentence. I assume that the sentence with *desu* has the “honorific layer” (HonP) [4]. The head of this projection, namely Hon, gets activated by *desu* moving to it to get its “politeness” feature checked, as is shown in Figure 4.

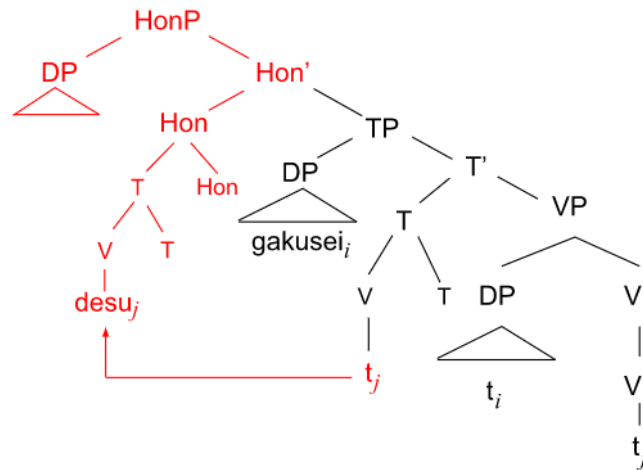


Figure 4: *Desu* moves to the head of HonP to get its “politeness” feature checked.

Now it is the HonP that requires a specifier. To satisfy the EPP feature [3] on Hon, a closest phrase has to move to the specifier of HonP. And the closest phrase is *gakusei* “student”. So I internally merge *gakusei* “student” from the specifier of TP to the specifier of HonP. (as is shown in Figure 5 below)

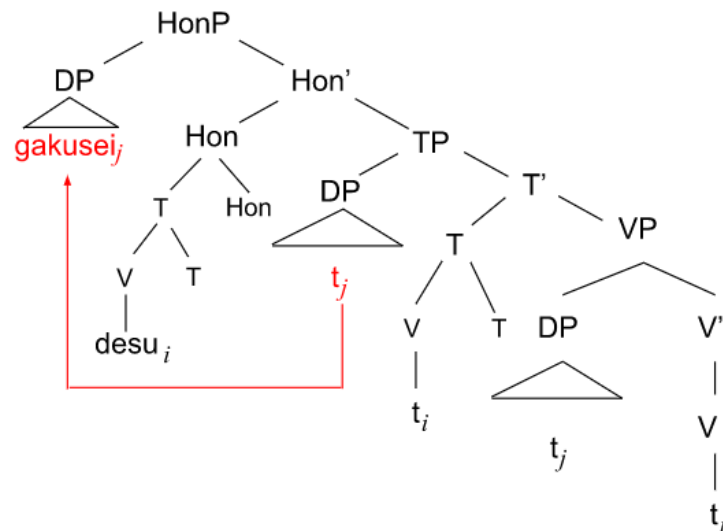


Figure 5: *Gakusei* moves from spec of TP to spec of HonP.

In Japanese, *wa* is a topic marker. Therefore, I assume *Hanako* is the topic of the sentence. According to Rizzi, topics are located higher in a tree [5], hence I assume that there is a “topic layer” (marked as TopP) activated in a sentence with the topic marker *wa* located under Top. To satisfy the EPP feature [3] on Top, I externally merge *Hanako* in the specifier of TopP. (As Figure 6 shows below).

The complete derivation in Figure 6 translates into the correct linear order, namely, *Hanako-wa gakusei desu*. “Hanako is a student.”

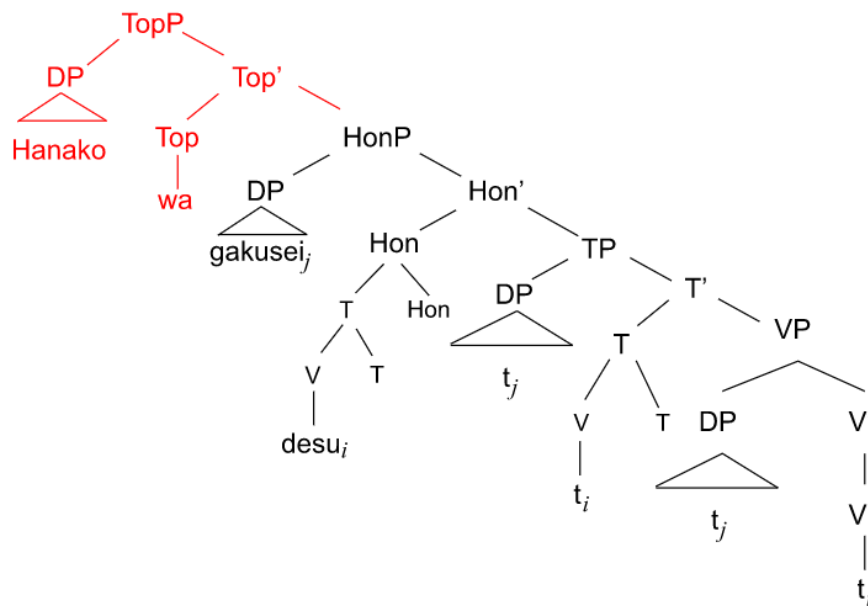


Figure 6: Hanako is externally merged in spec of TopP.

4.2. Derivation with *da*

In the following parts, I would like to switch to the analysis of a sentence with *da*.

Similar to the previous analysis on the polite sentence with *desu*, first I assume the copula *da* is in V. Second, I assume that *gakusei* “student” is a subject that starts in the specifier of VP [2]. (as Figure 7 shows below)

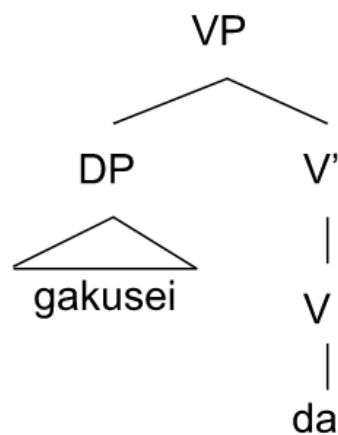


Figure 7: *Gakusei* is in spec of VP and *da* is in V.

We merge T with VP. And I assume that *gakusei* “student” moves from the specifier of VP to the specifier of TP to satisfy the EPP feature [3] on T, as is shown in Figure 8.

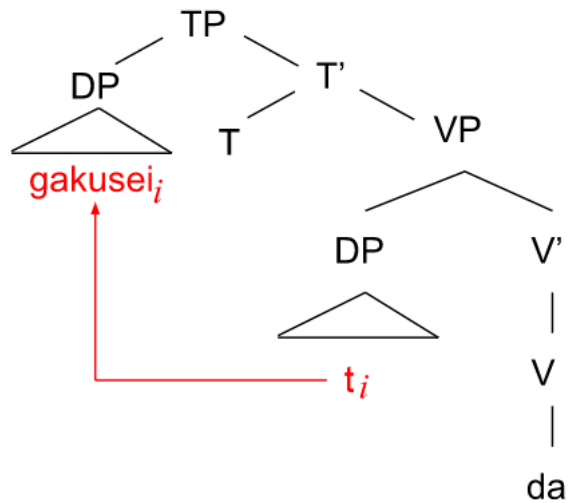


Figure 8: Gakusei moves from spec of VP to spec of TP.

Then I assume that *da* moves to T to get its tense feature, as is shown in Figure 9 below. However, the HonP is not activated in this case, because *da* is not an honorific (copula), thus I assume that *da* stops in T.

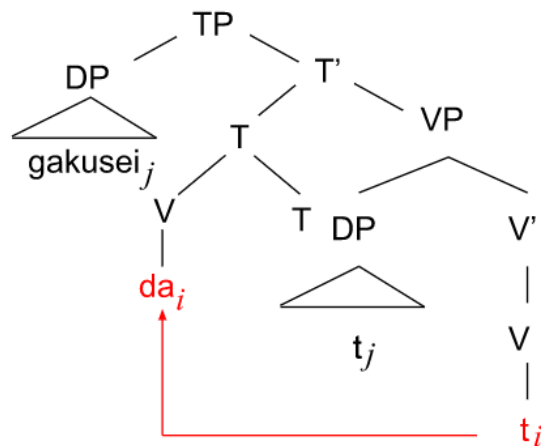


Figure 9: HonP remains inactivated and *da* moves to T.

Finally, Hanako is the topic of the sentence. Therefore, I merge Top with TP and put Hanako in the specifier of the TopP (as is shown in Figure 10).

The complete derivation in Tree d translates into the correct linear order, namely, *Hanako-wa gakusei da*. “Hanako is a student”.

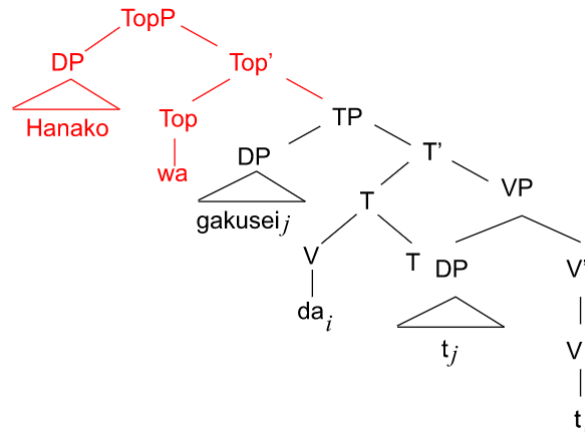


Figure 10: Hanako is externally merged in spec of TopP.

5. Presentation and Summary of Results

On the basis of the analysis above, we can make a summary as follows:

The hierarchical structure of a sentence with *desu* and a sentence with *da* can be shown in Figure 11:

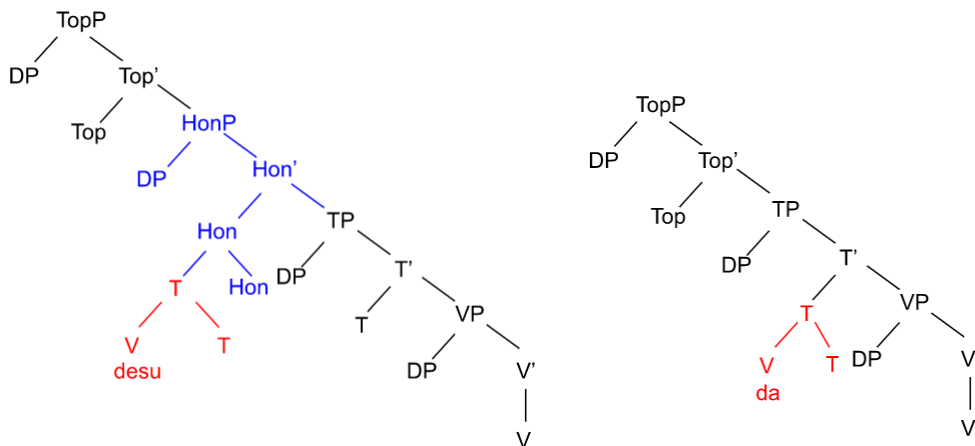


Figure 11: The sentence with *desu* has a bigger structure in the left periphery.

As we can see from Figure 11, the sentence with *desu* has more structure activated than the sentence with *da*. There is an honorific layer motivated in the sentence with *desu*, while in the sentence with *da*, the honorific layer remains inactivated.

Moreover, the copula in the sentence with *desu* is “higher” than the sentence with *da*. In the sentence with *desu*, the copula is in the HonP layer, whereas in the sentence with *da*, the copula remains in the TP layer.

Therefore, besides the difference in the amount of structure between a sentence with an honorific copula and a non-honorific copula, another interesting thing that we can observe from the analysis is the position of the verb in Japanese. In the case of languages with tense morphology such as English, Italian or Russian, the verb usually moves as high as T (or even higher) to get the tense feature and inflection morphology, yet it is possible that Japanese verb actually also moves higher than T, considering that Japanese language has honorific forms.

Therefore, based on the analysis above, we can assume that in Japanese, verbs are allowed to move even higher than T. This is because Japanese verbs have honorific morphology that carries politeness information. And the position of tensed verbs in Japanese is left for further exploration.

6. Conclusion

In the analysis conducted above, I showed that one Japanese copular sentence with *da* and one with the honorific *desu* do not actually have the same underlying syntax. Here are the differences in the inner structure between a sentence with *desu* and a sentence with *da* reflected from the analysis:

A copular sentence with *desu* has more structure than a copular sentence with *da*. In a sentence with the honorific copula *desu*, there is an honorific layer activated. In contrast, in a sentence with the normal copula *da*, there is no honorific layer activated, which shows that a copular sentence with *da* has less underlying structure than a sentence with the honorific copula *desu*.

Besides the main difference in structure, the analysis points to a different position of honorific “be” and a non-honorific “be”. In a copular sentence with *desu*, the verb moves higher than the TP layer. By comparison, the verb moves as high as the TP layer in a copular sentence with *da*. This also draws our attention to the position of verbs in a Japanese sentence.

The syntactic analysis proposed above shows how different morphological forms of “be” are connected to different social contexts and grammatical structures and convinces me that we should start teaching honorifics with copular sentences. It is better for beginners learning Japanese as the second language to start learning honorifics from copular structure than from the rules of affixation. I suggest that modern Japanese second language education should prioritize the introduction to copular structure so as to enable Japanese honorifics to be taught in a more vivid, impressive and effective way.

In the analysis conducted above, I assumed that the honorific layer is above the TP layer. However, the exact location of HonP in Japanese syntax is left for further investigation.

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