

Deixis in motion: Addressee surfacing and the politeness path

Iarina Abu, Gabriel Carlin-Coleman, Idan Caspi,
Laia Colina Fortuny, Roberta D’Alessandro

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Abstract

In this paper, we provide a formal analysis of the development of polite address during conversation. Starting from the analysis of two very distinct strategies of polite address, we show that they follow a common path towards reinstating deixis throughout the conversation. More specifically, we show that within a couple of conversation turns, those forms that start out as expressing maximal distance between the speaker and the addressee gradually become less marked, and ultimately end up expressing only the addressee feature. In general, we observe a progressive switch from minimal and distal person and event deixis to maximal and proximal person and event deixis. While simplification throughout an interaction is expected, we show that there is a clearly identifiable unidirectional politeness path, which can be observed cross-linguistically.

1 Introduction

Honorificity and allocutivity are linguistic strategies intended to express reverence, politeness, or deference towards an addressee in discourse. Allocutivity is intended as a special kind of politeness expression dedicated to expressing deference and respect towards the addressee even if someone or something else is being talked about. We will not be concerned with it specifically, but will concentrate on honorificity, intended here as deference directed towards an addressee when they are the interlocutor.

Honorificity can have dedicated morphology. In Japanese, for instance, a very complex system is at work, whereby dedicated verb forms are used to express the fact that the interlocutor is higher in status than the utterer, or to lower the status of the utterer (to express humility), or in general to express politeness. Other languages, such as French (1 and 2, or Romanian (Geană 2024), do not. They simply encode honorificity through other strategies, such as agreement mismatch or a different use of an already existing pronoun; they often recycle already existing morphological material to encode honorificity (Wang, 2023):

- (1) As tu le livre?
 have.PRS.2SG 2SG the book
 Do you have the book? (plain singular address)

- (2) Avez/*As vous le livre?
have.PRS.2PL/*SG 2PL the book
Do you (HON) have the book? (polite singular address)

In the case of French, the pronoun *vous* usually indicates a 2nd person plural. Honorifically, it is used to refer to one person: the addressee. While at first glance the use is the same, the agreement patterns for honorific *Vous* differ from those of referential *vous*, as illustrated in 4.

- (3) Vous êtes belle.
you.2PL are.2PL beautiful.F.SG
'You are beautiful' (referred to one person)
- (4) #Vous êtes belles.
you.2PL are.2PL beautiful.F.PL
'You are beautiful' (not ok referred to one person)

This paper presents two observations: a more general one regarding the evolution of politeness through a conversation, and a more specific one regarding the nature of the recycled elements used by languages to express honorificity. We will focus on those languages that do not have a dedicated morphology to express honorificity, but recycle existing forms in the language, as observed by Wang (2023) among others. In the case of honorificity, Wang (2023) proposes that the features recruited to express additional pragmatic functions are semantically unmarked, leading to indirectness and vagueness. As a consequence, they are more permissive in interpretation range and allow multiple functions, including politeness. While this is a well-received generalization, we will show that it does not work in all cases, most notably in Hebrew. We will return to this in section 3.1.

The other point that we make regards the "path" that honorific exchanges follow in a conversation. Through the observation of a number of languages that do not have dedicated morphological markers for politeness, it will be possible to follow the development of ϕ -features during the progress of the conversation. A progressive reduction in complexity will be identified, ultimately ending in a total overlap between ϕ -features and participant features. We call this process *Addressee Surfacing*. We refer to the path followed from maximal to minimal honorificity, which we identified, as *the Politeness Path*. The speaker, we observe, is unable to maintain the discrepancy between the syntactic person and the referential addressee for too long, especially if honorificity is expressed through a number of different concomitant strategies, and tries to solve the mismatch while the conversation is unfolding. The languages that we use to illustrate this are Hebrew and Romanian. Then, we will turn to a different kind of politeness, in English and Spanish, *Politeness we*, and show that it follows the same path. Finally, we will present the syntactic analysis of this phenomenon.

The path we identified is presented in Figure 1:

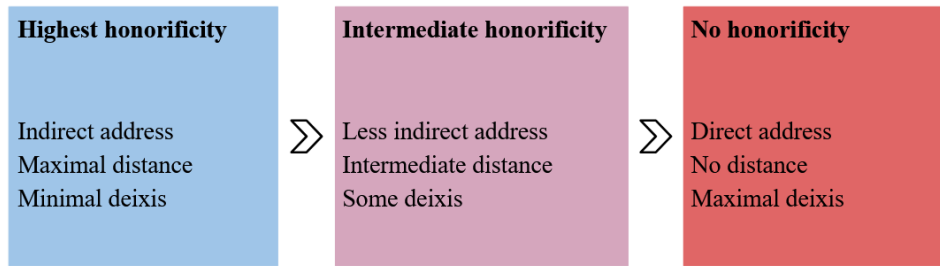


Figure 1: Feature path for addressee surfacing.

A disclaimer is in order at this point: the switch from formal to informal has been observed before in several works (see for instance the seminal work by Irvine (1979), and especially Leech’s (1983) *gradual informality*); what we wish to show in this paper is that this switch is reflected in the syntax; we will be offering a formal model of this path and its reflection in the featural inventory of the elements involved. We show that there is a progressive convergence towards maximal deixis and a one-to-one mapping of ϕ -features and participants in the conversation.

Before moving to the description of the data, some terminological and historical background is necessary. Throughout this work, we will make reference to deixis, understood as the dependence of an expression on the context in which it occurs. Our focus will be primarily on person and temporal deixis, and more specifically on how linguistic elements are anchored to the discourse participants at the time of utterance.

The term *addressee* is rather vague and usually employed in linguistics to refer to different entities: the 2nd person pronoun, the addressee in a conversation, or the referent towards which the speaker is directing their speech. In fact, the confusing nature of this term was already noted in the famous work by Benveniste (1971), who highlighted the need for greater clarity. We will reproduce Benveniste’s reasoning before moving on to discuss our data.

1.1 Benveniste's tripartition

We start by reproducing one of Benveniste’s key quotes:

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)

In this quote, Benveniste highlights the multifaceted nature of pronouns, which are syntactic items, as well as discourse items. In fact, one of the most famous insights by Benveniste regards the presence of “person” in 3rd person pronouns, often dubbed as “3rd person = no person”. This observation is strictly linked to the previous one, regarding the nature of pronouns. It is reproduced here:

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 il¹. (Benveniste, 1966: 251)

¹“One must note that the ordinary definition of personal pronouns as comprising the three terms I, you, he

In sum: In the discourse dimension concerning speaker and addressee, the category ‘person’ is only present in I and you, and is lacking in s/he. In addition to the syntactic person and the discourse person, a third dimension is at play in pronouns, namely the real world referents:

It is thus necessary to stress this point: *I* can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone. [...] the form of *I* 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 *I* as referent and the instance of discourse containing *I* as a referee [...] The definition can now be stated precisely as: *I* is "the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*". (Benveniste, 1971: 218)

Thus, Benveniste calls up our attention to the fact that pronouns actually have three dimensions: they indicate the referents, they are syntactic objects interacting syntactically (via agreement, for instance) with other elements in the clause, and they are discourse elements, encoding, for instance, the speaker or the addressee. Keeping these three dimensions separate will be crucial when discussing honorifics, as each of these acts on a different plane. The claim here is that there is a path towards the convergence of elements on the three planes, or dimensions.

To get a grasp of what these three dimensions exactly represent, we can consider some binding facts that highlight their independence.

1.1.1 The three dimensions

To highlight the difference between the three different dimensions that pronouns encode, we will consider binding and co-reference in a simple declarative clause, (5), in a direct speech environment, (6), and in a heritage speaker’s production where co-reference is kept separate from binding (7). In all cases, we will consider a 3rd person singular pronoun. The first example, (5), shows that the two occurrences of *he* have the same referent; they are syntactically identical and they are also the same with respect to discourse, namely a 3rd person, which is neither the speaker nor the addressee.

Examples (6) and (7) are more interesting: in (6), the referent in the two clauses is the same but the features used are different (3rd person vs. 1st person). Within the discourse, *I* is the speaker, but the referent is not to the speaker/utterer of the clause: the referent is "he", who is neither the speaker nor the addressee (a non-participant, 3rd person); the features to refer to this non-participant are different: once a 3rd person, once a 1st person.

The third example, from heritage Icelandic, shows that while syntactically a 3rd person pronoun would be required, the discourse allows a 1st person even in the absence of direct speech. The examples make it evident that, keeping the referent constant, the choice of the syntactic features or the discourse function can be different.

(5) He_{*i*} said that he_{*i*} would come.

(6) He_{*i*} said: "I_{*i*} will come".

(7) Icelandic, Putnam & Arnbjörnsdóttir (2015: 212)

Hann_{*i*} segir alltaf að mamma hafi verið svo vond við mig_{*i*} (sig_{*i*})
he says always that mum had been so mean to me

precisely abolishes the notion of person. This notion properly applies only to I/you, and is lacking in he". [our translation]

'He always says that mom was so mean to him.'

In this paper, we will focus on the difference between the *syntactic* codification of the referent and the *discourse* role of the referent. While the actual referent is always the interlocutor, we will show that the discourse role of the *addressee* is always present, and it will eventually also surface syntactically, at the end of the honorificity path. Further, we show that the path moves towards maximal deixis and minimal complexity, which is reached when the three dimensions overlap: there is a referent in the speech space, the referent is the addressee, and the addressee is referred to with the 2nd person feature.

2 Syntactic honorificity

In a very well-received work, Brown & Levinson (1987) identify several strategies for expressing politeness. Moving from the core concept of *face*, intended as the person's self-image, reputation and social identity, they divide this into two parts: positive face, i.e. the desire to be liked and included; and negative face, i.e. the desire for autonomy and avoidance of social imposition. Positive politeness strategies aim at inclusion in the group, being liked, and being accepted. Negative politeness is instead geared towards deference and distancing.

The main question that syntacticians have tried to answer is how to encode these notions syntactically. Starting from the (largely questioned) assumption that syntax also encodes discourse-related information, different solutions have been proposed, all of which start from the basic assumption that a specific part of the syntactic spine is dedicated to the encoding of discourse-related information (Speas & Tenny, 2003; Speas, 2004; Sigurðsson, 2004).

2.1 Syntactic encoding of honorificity

One of the most influential studies of honorificity is that put forth by Portner et al. (2019, 2022), who argue for the existence of a dedicated projection that encodes politeness and, more specifically, the social relation between the speaker and the interlocutor. The *c* head takes the speaker and the addressee as its arguments, as illustrated in Figure 2. The value of [status] relates to the hierarchical standing of speaker and addressee with respect to each other, and the value of [formal] indicates the level of honorificity of the utterance.

A system involving the interaction of speaker and addressee is also at work in Wiltschko (2021). This system is built on an entirely different conceptualization of the sentence, which includes a Common Ground that can be shared by the participants in the Speech Act. Our analysis will be largely based on Wiltschko's system, which is briefly described in the next section.

2.2 The Interactional Spine Hypothesis (ISH)

Wiltschko (2021, 2022) argues that sentence structure expressing propositional meaning is embedded within a larger structure for syntax-pragmatics interaction: the interactional spine, illustrated in Figure 3. This spine is made up of two functional layers. One layer is called the *Grounding* layer and its function is to regulate common ground. The layer above is the *Response* layer and is responsible for regulating turn-taking. Each layer reflects the speaker and addressee differently. The grounding layer is realized in two forms: the lower grounding layer (Ground-Spkr), which encodes how the speaker relates to the

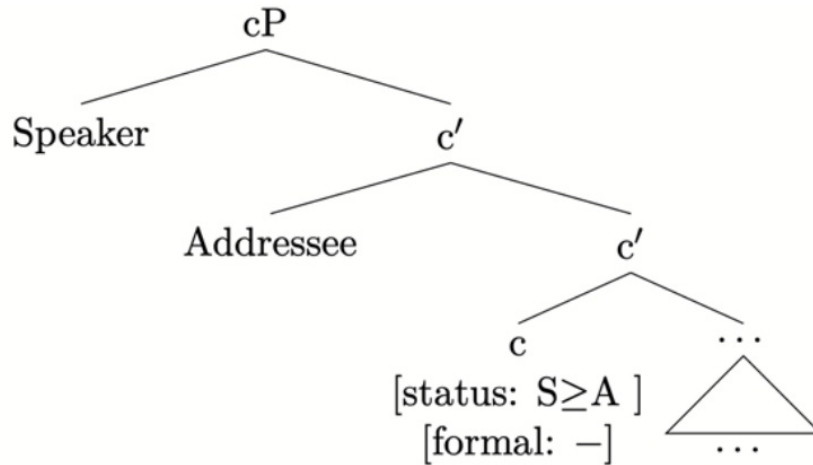


Figure 2: The c projection, from Portner et al. (2022: 4)

propositional content, and the higher layer (Ground-Adr), which reflects the speaker's assumptions about the addressee's relation to and knowledge of the propositional content. The response layer also has two forms, although they do not usually co-occur in a conversational turn: an addressee-oriented response layer indicates if a response is expected, while a speaker-oriented response layer marks if an utterance is a response itself.

The head of each phrase is associated with a binary coincidence feature, namely [+/-coincidence], which orders the two arguments it relates: its complement and its specifier. A positive value indicates that these arguments coincide, while a negative value means they do not. In the case of the grounding layer, the coincidence feature relates the propositional content to the believed knowledge state of the interlocutor. This means that, when positively valued, the propositional content is known by the addressee or speaker, while, when negatively valued, the propositional content is not believed to be known. We take this to mean that the participants have or lack access to the common ground.

When it comes to the response layer, a positive and negative valuation of the coincidence feature adopt different meanings. As mentioned, the response layer can be indexed to the addressee or to the speaker. If it is addressee-oriented, a positive valuation of the coincidence feature means that the speaker calls for a response from the addressee, while when negatively valued, a response is not required. In the case of a speaker-oriented response layer, a positive value means that the utterance constitutes a response, while a negative value indicates that it is not in the speaker's response-set.

Regarding politeness, Wiltschko further proposes that the Addressee ground is the equivalent of face (in a Brown & Levinson (1987) sense); distance is obtained by restricting access to the Addressee ground (see 3 for a rough illustration of Wiltschko's system).

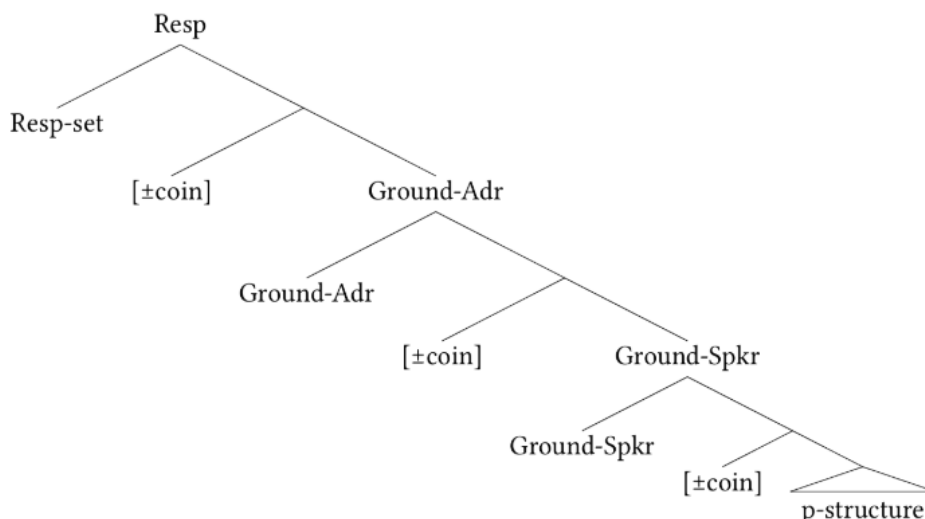


Figure 3: Interactional structure (Wiltschko, 2022).

In a recent elaboration of this system, Ritter & Wiltschko (2025) classify pronouns depending on their syntactic vs. pragmatic behaviour. On the basis of Japanese pronouns, they show that some pronouns, such as those expressing politeness, are derived differently from more general ϕ -pronouns. Politeness, according to Ritter & Wiltschko (2025), enters syntax through two different paths: the ϕ -path and the link to the Addressee ground. Severing the access of a pronominal argument to the Addressee ground is equivalent to establishing distance, to creating negative face in a Brown & Levinson (1987) sense; facilitating access to the Addressee ground creates positive face. We will be exploring this intuition by showing that this mechanism of manipulating the access to the Addressee ground, which is roughly equivalent to linking to the left periphery, is progressively abandoned, and speakers re-establish the link by reverting to non-polite forms.

One important observation that both Portner et al. (2019) and Wiltschko (2021); Ritter & Wiltschko (2020) make regards the fact that in languages with ϕ -honorificity, i.e. languages where honorificity is mainly expressed syntactically through the use of agreement, honorificity is non dynamic (in Wiltschko's terms). This means that this sort of honorificity does not change through discourse. Specifically, one does not use an honorific form to ask for something politely in a language like French or German: politeness is established once and for all. This paper will show that while this is true for polite requests, it is not true in general: politeness shifts through discourse, and it shifts always in the same direction, i.e. from more formal to less formal, from more complex in terms of syntactic operations to less complex. There is thus evidence that ϕ -honorificity languages have dynamic politeness, too, albeit of a different sort. We now first introduce the honorificity patterns and then move to highlight this path.

We will start with two varieties that do not express honorificity through a dedicated morpheme: Hebrew and Romanian. Like many other languages, Hebrew and Romanian make use of a 3rd person form and a possessive to express negative-face politeness. 3rd person is usually considered to be a strategy to encode distance (Ritter & Wiltschko, 2019; Wang, 2023).

3 Honorificity in Hebrew and Romanian

3.1 Honorificity in Hebrew

In Hebrew, politeness is encoded through a construction we will refer to as the ‘Possessive Honorific’ (PH henceforth), formed through a nominal element followed by a possessive particle, as illustrated in (8). This way of encoding politeness requires a 3rd person agreement and future tense on the verb. Both the use of the 3rd person and the future are part of the distancing strategy just mentioned: the addressee is referred to as if they were not part of the conversation.

From the example in (8), after a start in the 3rd person + possessive + future tense, the utterance continues with a mandatory switch in verbal agreement to 2nd person future and a *pro* or an overt subject. Despite this switch, politeness is maintained, albeit to a lower degree of formality.

- (8) Im [adon-i]_i yuxal le-xakot 2 dakot, az [___/ata]_i
 if sir-my.1SG.POSS be.able.FUT.3SG.M to-wait 2 minutes then pro/you
 tuxal li-Stot kafe.
 be.able.FUT.2SG.M to-drink coffee
 ‘If you (HON) could wait for 2 minutes, then you could have coffee.’

This switch is unidirectional, as can be observed in (9). It would be ungrammatical to begin with 2nd person agreement and a *pro* or an overt pronoun as the subject, and then to move on to 3rd person + future agreement and an honorific possessive as a subject.

- (9) *[__/ata]_i tuxal li-Stot kafe im [adon-i]_i yuxal
 pro/you be.able.FUT.2SG.M to-drink coffee if sir-my.1SG.POSS be.able.fut.3SG.M
 le-xakot 2 dakot.
 to-wait 2 minutes
 ‘*You could have coffee if you (HON) could wait for 2 minutes.’

If the utterance were to continue, a switch to complete agreement between the syntactic and pragmatic person is permitted, i.e., the use of an overt pronoun as a subject and 2nd person present agreement on the verb. A schematic representation of the phenomenon described above is provided in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Hebrew honorificity distinctions

	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

■ Honorificity
■ No honorificity

Politeness is maintained by the use of future tense throughout the conversation turn, but, as the utterance goes on, the syntactic addressee surfaces progressively. This happens through the use of 2nd person agreement, an overt pronoun in the subject position, and, finally, present tense. The Intermediate Honorificity stage is also layered in Hebrew – the use of *pro* in the subject position is slightly more polite than the use of an overt pronoun. In the last stage, *pro*-drop is not permitted because Hebrew only allows *pro*-drop when using past and future tense. Before moving to the discussion of Romanian, an additional observation is in order: while the use of 3rd person and of speaker-oriented possessives can definitely be considered semantically unmarked, the use of future tense cannot. In this sense, Hebrew offers a counterexample to Wang’s (2023) generalization about recycled features in honorifics.

3.2 Romanian

In Romanian, the polite form to address a member of the royal family or of the clergy is in example (10).

- (10) Măria Sa poate aștepta 2 minute? Atunci __ vă puteți primi
 highness 3SG.POSS could.3SG wait 2 minutes then pro 2PL.ACC could.2PL get
 cafeau-a.
 coffee-the
 ‘Can His Highness wait for 2 minutes? Then You can get your coffee’

The highest level of honorificity is encoded through PHs in Romanian as well, but unlike Hebrew — where PHs can be used to address anyone politely — they are only used to address members of the royal family and clergy. The verbal agreement pattern for this construction is illustrated below, in Figure 5. The 3rd person possessive can also be used for direct address, if the context allows it. However, as the utterance goes on, there is a mandatory switch to 2nd person plural agreement, which is the default polite address in Romanian (used to address anyone else). This can be observed in (11).

- (11) [Măria Sa]_i poate aștepta 2 minute? Atunci [_i] vă puteți
 highness 3SG.POSS could.3SG wait 2 minutes then pro 2PL.ACC could.2PL
 primi cafeau-a.
 get coffee-the
 ‘Can His Highness wait for 2 minutes? Then, you could have coffee.’

Below, example (12) shows that this switch is unidirectional in Romanian as well:

- (12) * [_i] Puteți aștepta 2 minute? Atunci [Măria Sa]_i își poate
 pro could.2PL wait 2 minutes then highness 3SG.POSS 3SG.ACC could.3SG
 primi cafeau-a.
 get coffee-the
 ‘*Can His Highness wait for 2 minutes? Then, you could have coffee.’

High Honorificity is not used very often in Romanian (see the many forms of politeness and their evolution in (Geană, 2024)), as the monarchy does not exist anymore and laymen rarely interact with high-level clergy, so optionality in verbal agreement became the norm. This optionality is schematized in Figure 5. 3rd person singular agreement is permitted regardless of the person or number of the possessive. Some speakers accept 2nd person singular agreement on the verb when the discourse takes place between equals. Others, however,

reject it, as they perceive a mismatch between the level of politeness conveyed by the possessive host and the informal tone of 2nd person singular verbal agreement. However, all speakers accept 2nd person plural agreement as well as 3rd person singular agreement in this case.

	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 2SG*

Figure 5: High Honorificity in Romanian

Below, figure (6) provides an overview of the honorificity path in Romanian.

■ Honorificity
■ No honorificity

	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

Figure 6: Honorificity patterns in Romanian.

Similarly to Hebrew, Highest Honorificity is encoded using a possessive honorific and 3rd person singular agreement on the verb, the difference being that tense is not active in Romanian as a means to create distance. As the utterance goes on, politeness is maintained through the use of a *pro* and plural agreement on the verb, while the addressee surfaces through 2nd person agreement. In Romanian, the switch to No Honorificity in the same utterance would not be possible. Informal address is encoded by either a *pro* or an overt pronoun together with 2nd person singular agreement on the verb. The presence of *pro* is a first step towards the decrease of honorificity; *pro* is also the first instance of a 2nd person pronoun, albeit covert; while it is straightforward that *pro*, in this context, is clearly referring to the addressee, we can show more explicitly that it actually encodes a syntactic 2nd person feature. We will show this in Section 3.3. The appearance of this *pro* is a first step towards increasing deixis, and therefore the coincidence of the three dimensions.

3.3 Towards addressee surfacing: the features of *pro*

As observed above, continuing to speak when the discourse has started with High Honorificity will require a shift in agreement in Hebrew and Romanian. In both languages, the clausal continuation involves the use of a null pronoun, *pro*. This *pro* is a 2nd person pronoun, as evident from observing the agreement patterns as well as its co-occurrence with anaphors. Anaphor binding is particularly telling as it helps ascertain that the shift is not just in the agreement pattern but in all three dimensions (most notably, the discourse and the syntactic ones, as the referent remains the same throughout. Observe that this statement is true for person but not for number, which in Romanian remains plural). Examples (13) and (14) illustrate the feature specification of *pro* through reflexive binding. In Hebrew, the reflexive appears in the 2nd person singular (13), while in Romanian it is in the 2nd person plural (14).

(13) Hebrew

im [adon-i]_i yenake kan [be-'acmo]_i, az [pro]_i tire
if sir-1SG.POSS clean.FUT.3SG.M here in-him.REFL.3SG then *pro* see.FUT.2SG.M
et acmexa / (*'acmo) ba-mar'a.
ACC you.REFL.2SG.M / him.REFL.3SG in+the-mirror

If you (HON) clean here, then (you) will see yourself in the mirror.

(14) Romanian

[Măria Sa]_i se poate pieptăna? [pro]_i Vă/*Se puteți/*poate
highness 3SG.POSS refl can.3SG comb *pro* ACC.2PL/ACC.3SG can.2PL/can.3SG
vedea în oglindă?
see in mirror

'Can His Highness brush His hair? Can you see yourself in the mirror?'

Interestingly, the reflexive can be a 3rd person singular in the first clause, while it must become a 2nd person in the subsequent clauses.

So far we have examined strategies for expressing honorificity. If we move from honorificity into politeness, we can identify similar paths. In what follows, we will present some data from English and Spanish Politeness *we*, further illustrating the existence of a politeness path.

3.4 Politeness *we*

Another politeness strategy expressed stepwise in discourse is what we call Politeness *we*, a non-prototypical use of the 1st person plural pronoun observed cross-linguistically in languages such as Spanish, Romanian, Hebrew, Mandarin, and English (see 15 and 16 for English and Spanish, respectively). Politeness *we* serves as a strategy used to avoid directly referencing the hearer (De Cock, 2011), reducing the distance between the speaker and hearer by seemingly including both within the same group. While *we* normally includes the speaker in these languages, this pragmatic usage *de facto* excludes them. In following clauses, it is necessary to continue using the 1st person plural form to maintain the polite reading. The use of a 2nd person will result in addressee surfacing, canceling the politeness reading. Like for Hebrew and Romanian, it is not possible to reverse the path: one cannot start with a 2nd person and move to politeness *we*.

(15) John, we have to stop. (father to son)

(16) Spanish

[/ #Nosotros]_i tenemos que parar. []_i No me estás escuchando.
 pro we have.1PL.PRS to stop pro not 1SG.ACC are.PRS.2SG listening

‘We have to stop. You are not listening to me.’ (teacher to students)

Addressee surfacing is clearly shown in 16. The 1st person plural pronoun is used to refer to a single addressee, as evidenced by the use of the 2nd person singular in the subsequent clause. However, since Spanish, unlike English, is a *pro*-drop language, the politeness *we* can only arise with a *pro* subject. Making the subject overt cancels the polite interpretation.

3.5 Summary

Although PHs and politeness *we* differ in terms of agreement, both strategies follow the same politeness path. A schematic representation of this path is provided in Figure 7. PHs begin at the highest stage of honorificity, which encodes the highest distance through 3rd person and future tense. As the utterance progresses, distance decreases and so does honorificity. Politeness *we* starts from an intermediate distance stage and, similarly to PHs, moves on to the next stage down, which in this case is the explicit expression of the addressee. This third stage is characterized by the absence of honorificity and distance.

		Highest distance	Intermediate distance	No distance
φ-features	Tense	future	future	present
	Person & number	3SG	1PL 2SG 2PL	2SG

■ Honorificity
■ No honorificity

Figure 7: Features of the politeness path.

4 Addressee surfacing, deixis, and common ground

4.1 Person and event deixis

In the previous section, we characterized addressee surfacing as a reduction of honorificity, related to social distance. The most polite forms appear to correspond to the greatest social distance. This correspondence becomes evident when the speaker deviates from the prototypical expression for the addressee, namely the second person singular. When such a deviation occurs, the deixis of the expression is shifted, as the syntactic expressions refer to something else than the discourse participants; the expression ‘points’ to something other than the utterance time and participants. This shift in deixis entails a mismatch between syntactic features and their derived pragmatic meaning — or, in Benvenistean terms,

between the speech-act participant and the syntactic features that encode it. The greater the mismatch between the ‘here and now’ of the discourse and its feature expression, the greater the impact on social distance. Reducing this mismatch is equivalent to reducing the change in social distance.

The deixis we are concerned with here is along two dimensions: personal and temporal (i.e. referring to the time of the event), according to Fillmore’s (1997) definition. Personal deixis refers to the actual participants in the speech event *addressee*. Temporal deixis refers to the time of the utterance.

4.2 Deictic path

As previously mentioned, grammatical features are recycled to express new or additional pragmatic functions. The deictic system is at least partially pragmatic in nature, because it interacts with the spatial and temporal context (Levinson, 2004). Honorific syntactic features contribute person — and event — related deictic meaning by situating utterances in specific interactional settings. For instance, a 3rd person inflection can be said to point at a non-addressee, even if, in the case of Romanian and Hebrew PHs, the pragmatically and discourse-determined referent is the addressee. This is an example of personal deictic shift, triggered by a syntactic feature. One notable example of temporal deictic shift is instead the use of future tense in polite Hebrew address; future ‘points at’ a time later than the present, and therefore shifts the event forward and detaches it from the present. Both usages distance the utterance from its actual interactional setting, and both result in an honorific interpretation.

The relation between honorificity and deixis is therefore one of opposition: as honorificity increases, deixis shift with respect to the actual participants and time of the utterance reduces. We refer to the shift to the future and to a different discourse referent as *distal deixis*, while the ‘here’ and now is *proximal deixis*. The deictic shift serves to mitigate the threat or imposition generated by a speakers utterance in conversation. In the terms of Brown & Levinson (1987), decreasing proximal deixis reduces the threat of face-threatening acts.

Figure 8 captures the features that, together, can increase and reduce proximal deixis. The use of 3rd person and PHs allow speakers to appear as if they are not actually speaking to the addressee but to someone else. In the same way, *pro* and the polite *we* avoid directly interpellating the addressee, leaving them vague or implicit. Finally, strategies using tense and mood displace the current conversation event to a different, imagined, or hypothetical place and time, allowing speakers to refer not to the actual addressee but to a possible version of them.

Minimal deixis	Some deixis	Maximal deixis
3SG	1PL, 2PL	2SG
Possessive honorifics	<i>pro</i>	Overt pronoun
Future tense; conditional mood	Future tense; conditional mood	Present tense



Figure 8: Features of the deixis path.

4.3 The Common Ground

It is not deixis that is syntactically embedded in Wiltschko's Interactional Spine Hypothesis, but rather 'common ground', i.e. shared knowledge between discourse participants. We show that the maximisation of proximal deixis corresponds to (re)connecting the discursive speech act participant (in Benvenistean terms) with the common ground, syntactically realised as Ground-Addressee and Ground-Speaker in the ISH. Ground-Addressee holds information that the speaker takes to be known by the addressee, while Ground-Speaker contains information that the speaker represents themselves as knowing. Features that reduce proximal deixis push the addressee out of the common ground by treating them as increasingly exterior to the conversation. As non-addressees, syntactically speaking, their connection to Ground-Addressee is necessarily severed (Wiltschko, 2025)

This explanation works most obviously and naturally for honorific 3rd person and other features that manipulate person deixis. But event deixis also works to displace addressees from the common ground. The use of conditional, for instance, sets up a state of affairs which the speaker may accept as true but which it cannot be assumed the addressee agrees with. Similarly, the use of the future entails a prediction by the speaker that the addressee may not share. Whether we express the concept in terms of Wiltschko's exclusion from the Common Ground or in more traditional Fillmorean terms as deictic shift, it is clear that the use of 3rd person and future tense are strategies to create distance between the speaker and the addressee. In what follows we will outline a formal representation of the path that goes from maximal distance/distal deixis/positioning outside of the Common Ground to minimal distance/proximal deixis/positioning inside the common ground. While distal and proximal are in opposition, and so is being situated inside or outside the common ground, we will show that this process towards reinstating proximal deixis is gradual, and does not behave like a two-way switch.

5 Addressee surfacing: Feature path

In the first part of the article we have shown that, although PHs and Politeness *we* differ in terms of agreement, both politeness strategies follow the same politeness path (see Figure 1, here repeated as Figure 9). This path goes from Highest Honorificity to No Honorificity, with different features encoded in each stage.

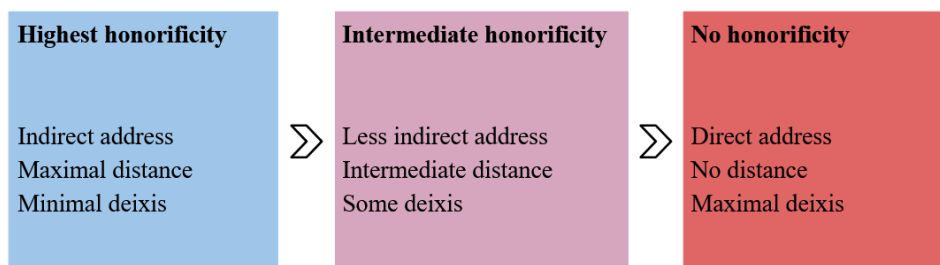


Figure 9: Feature path for addressee surfacing.

The first stage, related to the highest level of honorificity, encodes maximal social distance/distal deixis. The speaker distances themselves from the addressee and, in doing so, also distances both the event and person features from the addressee, which results in minimal proximity. Because of this deictic distance, reference to the addressee becomes indirect.

The second stage is related to an intermediate level of honorificity. At this stage, the social distance starts to decrease, and, in turn, person and event proximal deixis increases. As a result, the addressee begins to surface in its default syntactic occurrence (e.g., 2nd person pronoun) and becomes less indirect. This is also the starting stage for Politeness *we*.

Finally, the last stage of the politeness path is characterized by the loss of formal honorific encoding. The social distance between the speaker and the addressee disappears and the addressee is then anchored in the 'here and now', resulting in maximal person and event proximal deixis. At this stage, the addressee has completely surfaced, and honorificity is lost; that is, it is no longer grammatically encoded.

5.1 Addressee surfacing: on access to the interactional structure

In this section, we demonstrate how the politeness path is derived over the course of the conversational discourse through restricted or available access to the interactional layer by means of valuing negatively or positively the coincidence feature [\pm coin], respectively. We use the Hebrew example given in 8, repeated here as 17, and the Romanian example given in 10, repeated here as 18, to illustrate its syntactic analysis.

- (17) Im [adon-i]_i yuxal le-xakot 2 dakot, az [__/ata]_i
 if sir-1SG.POSS be-able.FUT.3SG.M to-wait two minutes then pro/you
 tuxal liStot kafe.
 be-able.FUT.2SG.M to-drink coffee
 'If you (HON) could wait for two minutes, then you could have coffee.'

- (18) Măria Sa poate aștepta 2 minute? Atunci __ vă puteți primi
 highness 3SG.POSS could.3SG wait 2 minutes then pro 2PL.ACC could.2PL get
 cafeau-a.
 coffee-the
 'Can His Highness wait for 2 minutes? Then You can get your coffee'

Importantly, we will decompose the politeness path at the phrasal and the clausal level. At the phrasal level, the Hebrew PH *adon-i* and the Romanian PH *Măria Sa* will be shown to be associated with the interactional structure above the DP layer, as indicated in Figure 10a. At the clausal level, the two languages encode honorificity slightly differently. In Hebrew, as we show below, the speaker encodes Highest Honorificity through the use of an *if*-clause embedding an atypical ϕ -path (e.g., 3rd person) together with future tense specification. In Romanian, HH is encoded through the use of an interrogative clause that clearly requires a response, and a similarly atypical ϕ -path - 3rd person singular agreement - excluding the need for a specific tense. Both are illustrated in Figure 10b.

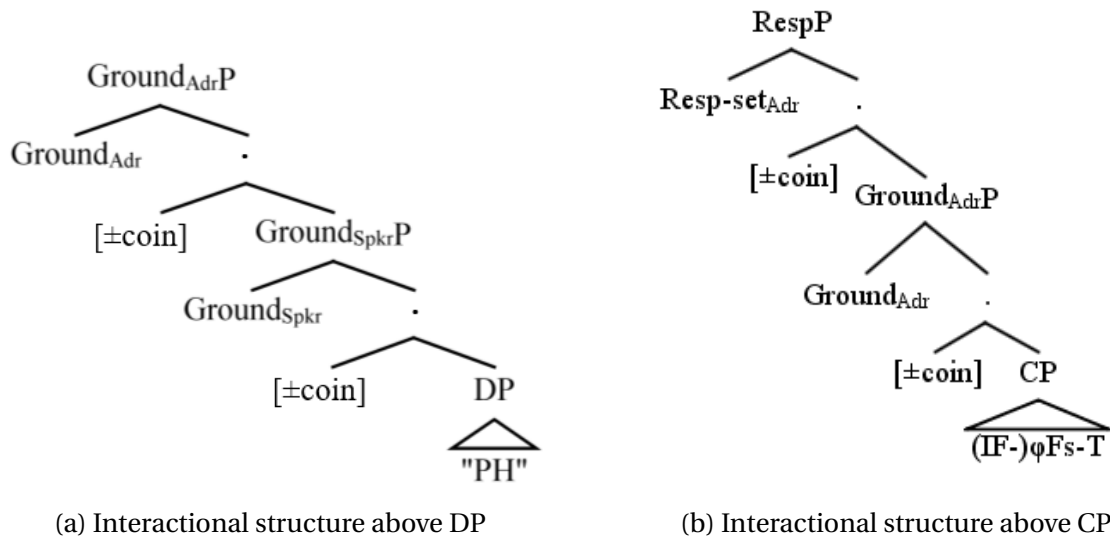


Figure 10: Comparison of interactional structures above DP/CP.

More specifically, as previously illustrated in Figures 4 and 6, in the decomposition of the politeness path at the DP level, the speaker initially refers to their addressee using the PH (*adon-i* and *Măria Sa*). This step corresponds to the stage of Highest Honorificity. As the discourse unfolds, the speaker reduces the distance from the addressee by using a null pronominal, namely *pro*, in the subject position. This stage corresponds to the intermediate level of honorificity. Finally, in the stage of No Honorificity or distance, the overt 2nd person pronoun surfaces. This final stage is attained in Hebrew during the same utterance. In Romanian, while an address beginning with the Highest Honorificity form is followed by the use of Intermediate Honorificity, one can never continue by using No Honorificity. However, we will illustrate all three stages below for a complete comparison of the two languages.

Hebrew and Romanian differ at the CP level because the latter requires the utterance to be clearly addressed, while the former does not. Therefore, in Hebrew the speaker initially uses an *if*-clause embedding 3rd person agreement together with future tense specification to encode Highest Honorificity. This is not possible in Romanian, as an *if*-clause does not imply a direct address. In Romanian, in order to encode High Honorificity, the clause is a question that also embeds 3rd person agreement, along with the PH. This maintains maximal distance from the addressee. As the conversational discourse continues, the speaker then shifts to 2nd person agreement (plural in Romanian and singular in Hebrew) at the intermediate stage in both languages. Finally, the last stage, No Honorificity, can only be reached within the same conversation turn in Hebrew. This is encoded by a switch to the present tense. In Romanian, No Honorificity would be encoded using 2nd person singular agreement.

In what follows, we formally illustrate how the interplay between the interactional structure above the DP/CP level is mediated over the course of the politeness path. We begin with the decomposition of the politeness path at the DP level.

5.2 Decomposing the politeness path in the nominal spine

In the nominal spine, the politeness path unfolds in three stages. The first stage encodes the highest level of honorificity through the speaker's use of the PH toward the addressee. Specifically, we propose to decompose the PH into a lexical honorific item and a posses-

sive element. In Hebrew, the lexical honorific item *adon* 'sir' is combined with a 1st-person pronominal possessive suffix *-i* 'my'. In Romanian, the 3rd person possessive element *sa* 'their' is added to the the lexical honorific item *Măria*, meaning 'highness'. When the speaker uses the lexical honorific item, a negative relation is established between the addressee and the Ground-Addressee layer, which is expressed through the [-coin] value (which means the addressee is NOT coincident with the Ground-Addressee layer). This corresponds to the speakers intention to attribute an honorific status to the addressee by establishing social distance.

The two languages differ in the encoding of the possessive form. In Hebrew, the 1st-person possessive suffix *-i* is associated with a different relation established with the Ground-Speaker layer, as it constitutes an addition to the core lexical part of the honorific item that the *speaker* adopts to refer to their addressee. This, in turn, has the effect of a (formal) inclusion of the addressee in the Ground-Speaker layer; it is expressed through the positive value of the [\pm coin] feature. It is important to emphasize that this pronominal suffix is obligatory for establishing a degree of common ground between interlocutors in discourse. Without it, the lexical honorific item *adon*, when used on its own, receives a purely referential interpretation: the speaker refers to some sir in general, rather than addressing a specific interlocutor in discourse.

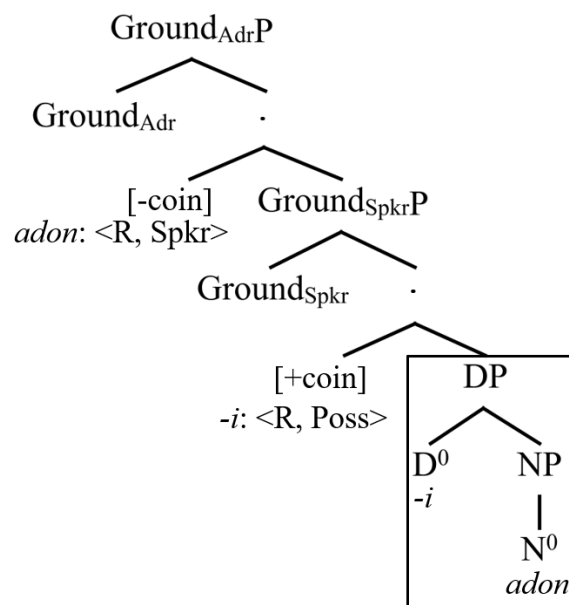


Figure 11: Nominal spine: Highest Honorificity in Hebrew

Although the possessive is mandatory to form honorific address in Romanian as well, unlike Hebrew, it uses a 3rd person singular possessive. A 2nd person possessive could also be used (singular or plural), but the distance established between the speaker and addressee would decrease. Therefore, the 3rd person possessive increases the distance between the speaker and addressee. This is expressed through the negative value of the [\pm coin] feature.

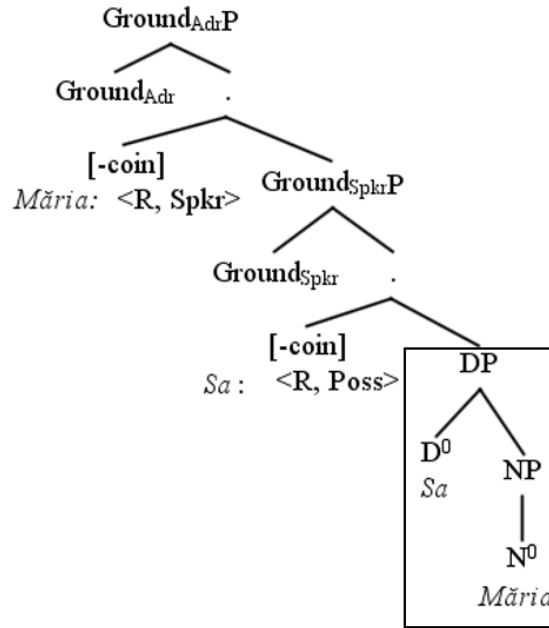


Figure 12: Nominal spine: Highest Honorificity in Romanian

In the next stage, the intermediate level of honorificity, the speaker refers to the addressee through the use of *pro*, the null realization of the speaker's interlocutor. As we have previously shown through binding patterns, the ϕ -features of *pro* are 2nd person singular in Hebrew, and 2nd person plural in Romanian. As such, some deixis begins to surface within the DP. However, the addressee has not yet appeared in its default syntactic form and, therefore, the $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature in $Ground_{Adr}P$ remains negatively valued. The Intermediate Honorificity stage in Hebrew is illustrated in Figure 13.

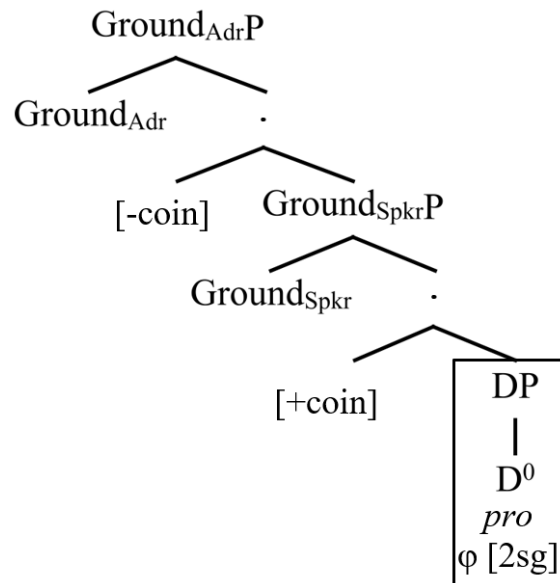


Figure 13: Nominal spine: Intermediate Honorificity in Hebrew

In Romanian, the previously negatively valued $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature in $Ground_{Spkr}P$ becomes

positively valued, as the speaker switches to a polite direct address. This is illustrated in Figure 14.

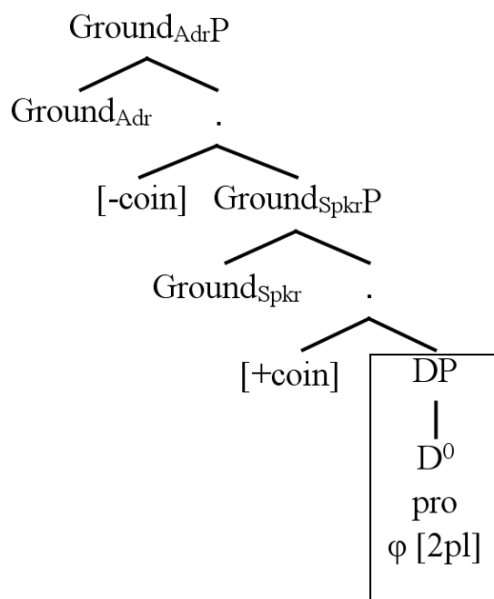


Figure 14: Nominal spine: Intermediate Honorificity in Romanian

Finally, in the last stage, where No Honorificity is encoded, the speaker does not establish any formal engagement with the addressee. Accordingly, the addressee surfaces in its overt, default syntactic form, which results in the $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature in Ground-Addressee being positively valued and leads to maximal deixis in the syntax. This stage can be attained in the same utterance in Hebrew, while in Romanian, as already mentioned, it cannot. The final stage in Hebrew is shown in Figure 15, while the one in Romanian is shown in Figure 16.

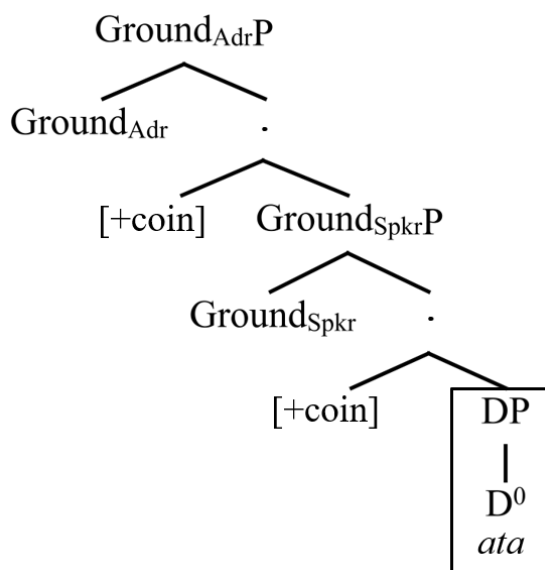


Figure 15: Nominal spine: No Honorificity in Hebrew

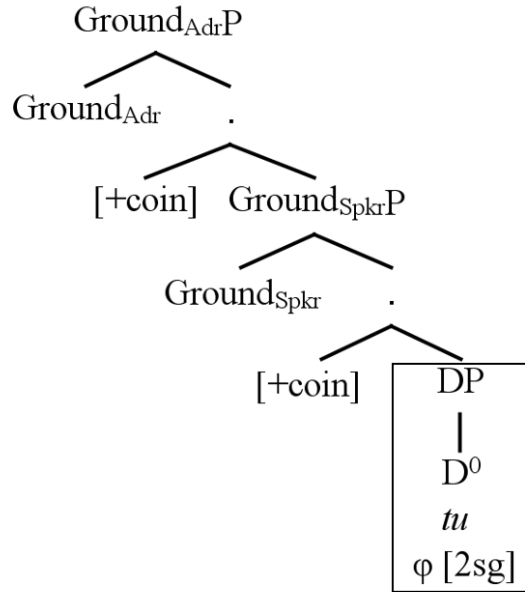


Figure 16: Nominal spine: No Honorificity in Romanian

Next, we illustrate how deictic features gradually increase at each stage in the clausal spine.

5.3 Decomposing the politeness path in the clausal spine

In a manner similar to the way the politeness path unfolds in the nominal spine, three stages involving a gradual unfolding of deixis in the clausal spine occur over the course of the conversational discourse in Hebrew. Just as in the nominal spine, Romanian can only go to the intermediate level in one utterance, but we will illustrate all three stages for it as well.

At the highest level of honorific encoding, the speaker deliberately establishes common ground with the addressee. In Hebrew, this happens by employing an *if*-clause and deixis involving tense and φ -features. Specifically, the speaker establishes a relation with the interactional structure as follows: the use of an *if*-clause is licensed by the *Resp-set*_{Adr} layer. The speaker employs the *if*-clause as a strategy to initiate a conversation with the addressee without expecting an immediate response, unlike in the case of typical vocatives such as *huh?*. Accordingly, it follows that the speaker uses the *if*-clause to create distance from the addressee, while still maintaining a clear intention to facilitate conversation. As such, it is reasonable to associate the *if*-clause with a response set targeted at the addressee (from the speaker's perspective), accompanied by the negative valuation of the $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature, suggesting that an immediate response is not obligatory in this case.

As for the deictic properties employed at this stage, the speaker uses the future tense as well as third-person inflection to encode the highest level of honorificity. This, in turn, results in a negatively valued $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature in GroundAddressee, leading to maximal distance between the interlocutors. Accordingly, the set of all deictic elements involved at this stage is present in the interactional structure in the clausal spine above CP, as illustrated in Figure 17.

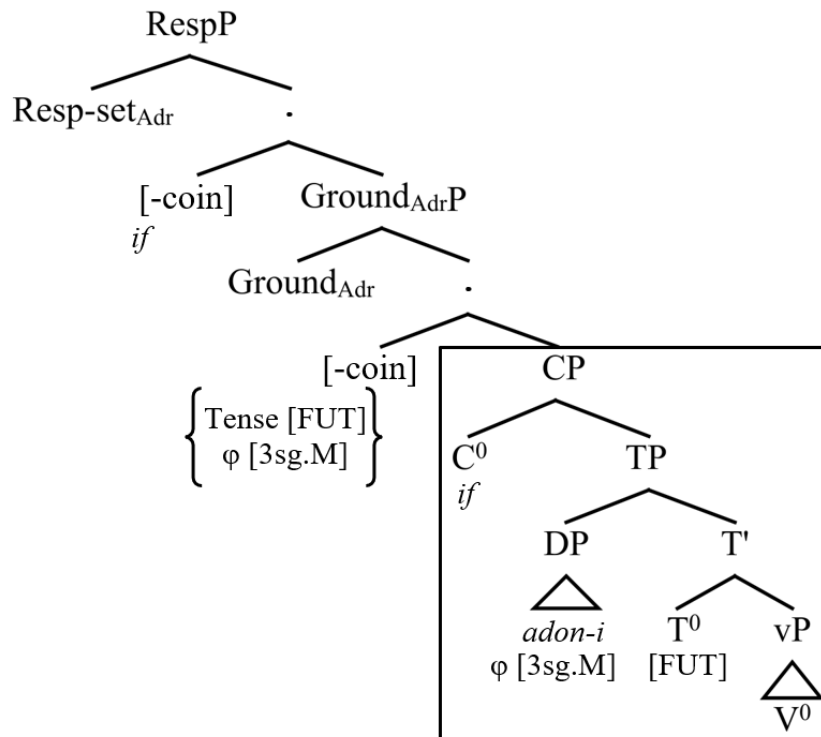


Figure 17: Clausal spine: Highest Honorificity in Hebrew

In Romanian, the common ground with the addressee is established by clearly marking the utterance for a response, while using 3rd-person φ -features to distance the addressee from the speaker. Marking the utterance for a response results in a difference between the two languages, Romanian having the $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature in the *Resp-set_{Adr}* layer valued positively. The use of 3rd-person inflection leads to the maximal distance between the speaker and addressee, thus valuing the $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature negatively in the Ground-Addressee layer. Like in Hebrew, the interactional structure involving these deictic elements is in the clausal spine above CP, as illustrated in Figure 18.

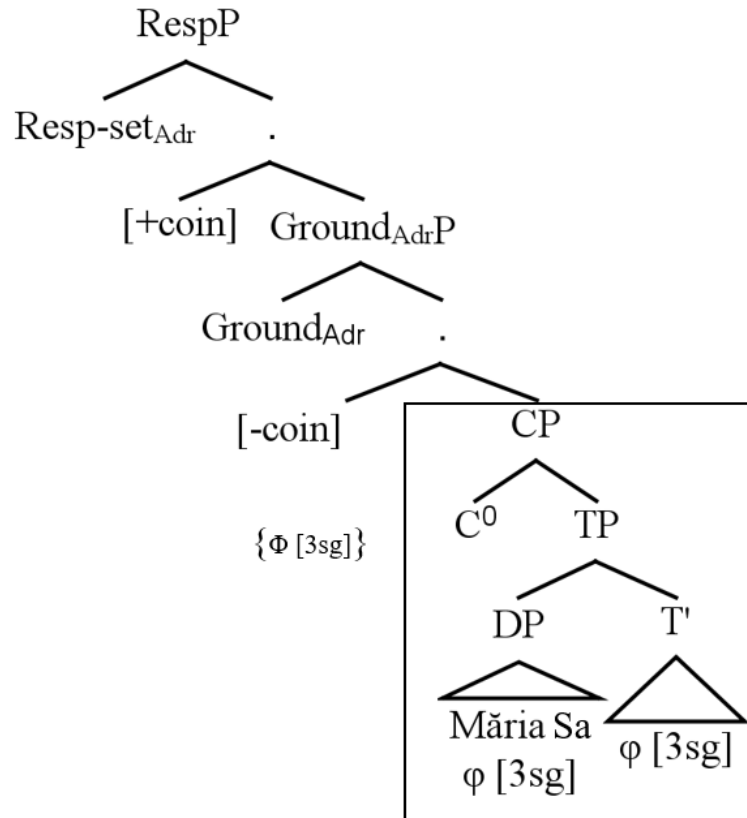


Figure 18: Clausal spine: Highest Honorificity in Romanian

As the conversational discourse between the interlocutors continues, the speaker re-establishes common ground with the addressee by switching from 3rd to 2nd person address, resulting in the surfacing of person deixis internal to the TP layer. This creates a deficient set of deictic properties in the interactional layer, leaving only tense [FUT] in that set in Hebrew and switching to the default polite address in Romanian - 2nd person plural inflection. This still maintains some distance between the interlocutors; consequently, the $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature remains negatively valued. This intermediate stage of honorific encoding is shown in Figure 19 for Hebrew, and in Figure 20 for Romanian.

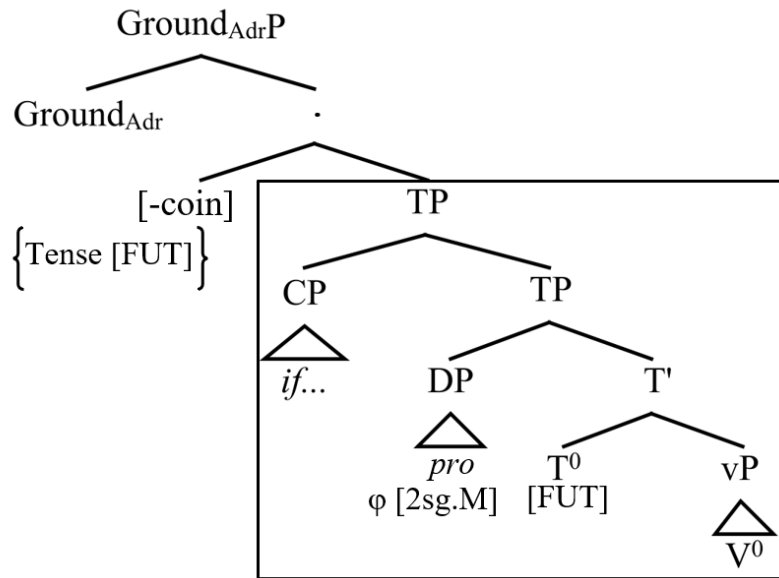


Figure 19: Clausal spine: Intermediate Honorificity in Hebrew

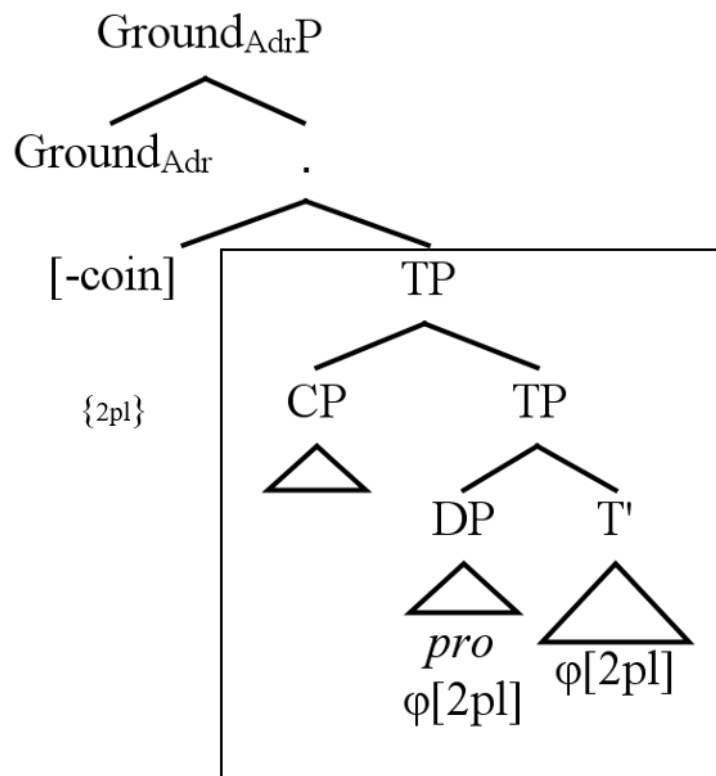


Figure 20: Clausal spine: Intermediate Honorificity in Romanian

Finally, in the last stage, no honorific distance is mediated, as maximal deixis surfaces in the syntax through the change in tense from future to present in Hebrew and through the use of 2nd person singular inflection in Romanian. This results in the syntactic default pattern of addressing an individual (i.e., a non-honorific addressee). As shown in Figures

21 and 22, at this stage, the set of deixis in the interactional structure is empty, positively valuing the $[\pm\text{coin}]$ feature.

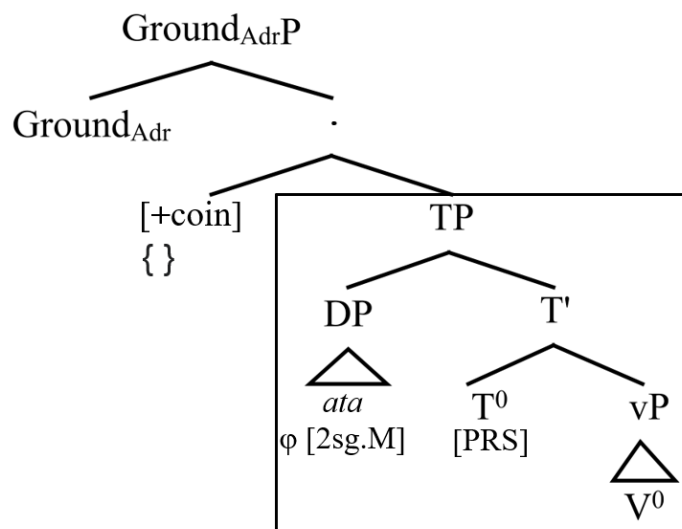


Figure 21: Clausal spine: No Honorificity in Hebrew

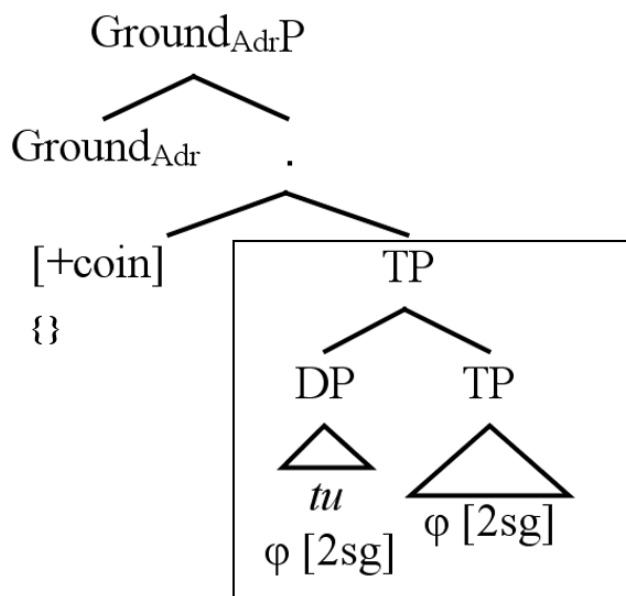


Figure 22: Clausal spine: No Honorificity in Romanian

In summary, addressee surfacing follows a path from Highest Honorificity - with indirect address, maximal distance, and minimal deixis -, through Intermediate Honorificity - with less indirect address, intermediate distance, and moderate deixis -, to No Honorificity - with direct address, no distance, and maximal deixis.

The politeness path is not unique to PHs but, as we have argued, underlies other politeness strategies. In the next section, we will show how it unfolds in Politeness *we*.

5.4 Extending the politeness path to other politeness strategies: Politeness *we*

In this section, we will present the syntactic analysis of Politeness *we*. As in PHs, we will decompose it at the phrasal and clausal level. To do so, we will use example 19, an extension of 15:

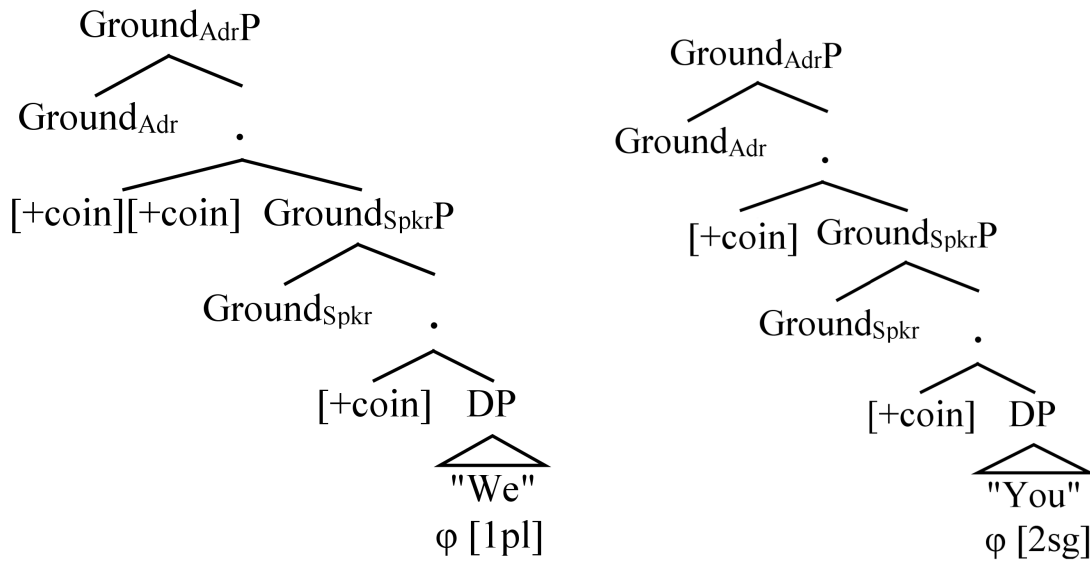
- (19) John, we have to stop. You have to behave. (father to son)

Politeness *we* unfolds in two stages. In the first stage, it encodes an intermediate level of honorificity: person and event deixis increase, thereby reducing the social distance. At this stage, the addressee begins to surface, which is reflected in the use of the 1st person plural pronoun, which syntactically includes the speaker and the hearer. However, as in PHs, there is a mismatch between syntax and discourse: a 1st person pronoun is employed to refer to the addressee, a 2nd person. It is precisely this mismatch that gives rise to the politeness.

As shown in Figure 23a, when the speaker uses *we* to refer to the addressee, a positive relation is established between the addressee and the Ground-Addressee layer, as well as between the speaker and the Ground-Speaker layer. This relation is encoded through the [+coin] value, which means that the addressee does coincide with the Ground-Addressee layer and the speaker with the Ground-Speaker layer. However, unlike the honorificity patterns, a sentence like 19 can be interpreted at face value: it can also simply mean that the father means for both his son and himself to stop. We propose that pragmatics imposes a more marked strategy when the intended reading is meant, as the simple mismatch is not enough. We postulate the presence of a second [+coin] feature, which makes no difference syntactically but has the pragmatic effect to make it clear that politeness *we* actually refers to the *addressee*. The intermediate level of politeness is reached by adding an extra [+coin] feature towards the Ground-Addressee layer, the loss of which will make the conversation "return" to normal degrees of politeness.

A key difference between PHs and Politeness *we* lies in the [\pm coin] valuation: while in the former, a negative relation is established between the addressee and the Ground-Addressee layer, this relation is already positive in the latter by virtue of the use of an inclusive 1st person plural pronoun. We propose, following Ritter & Wiltschko (2025), that this contrast reflects the type of politeness strategy and, more specifically, the type of "face" involved in the sense of Brown & Levinson (1987). While PHs constitute a negative politeness strategy, oriented towards maintaining the addressee's autonomy and distance, Politeness *we* is a positive politeness strategy, fostering solidarity between interlocutors. We express this additional positive feature through an additional marking of [+coin]:

As the discourse unfolds, one of the two [+coin], the one that induces the positive pragmatic interpretation, is lost. The [+coin] that belongs to the addressee instead remains: the addressee fully emerges. This is the second and final stage, characterized by the absence of honorificity/politeness. As shown in Figure 23b, both the [\pm coin]coin feature in Ground-Addressee and that of the Ground-Speaker layer are positively valued. This stage does not differ from what is observed in PHs: in both cases, the addressee surfaces in its default syntactic form and there is maximal and proximal person and event deixis. The fact that this stage represents the endpoint of both politeness strategies is central to our analysis: it reveals a unidirectional path that, as the discourse unfolds, leads to syntactic simplicity, which, we argue, is less cognitively costly.



(a) Nominal spine: Politeness *we*

(b) Nominal spine: Default 'you'

Figure 23: Politeness *we*: politeness path

6 Conclusion

The phenomena of Possessive Honorifics and Politeness *we* follow an underlying unidirectional path, where the addressee surfaces in its most explicit syntactic form (second person) as the conversation progresses. Addressee surfacing entails the presence of features that engender the most proximal deixis, which can be person or event related, or both. This pattern is observed across a variety of languages and instantiated by different kinds of linguistic structures. The tendency of the addressee to surface may be explained by the cognitive demand of maintaining a discrepancy between discursive and syntactic meanings. We have argued that the politeness strategies described here require speakers to shrink or expand their perception of the common ground, and this could feasibly strain mental resources. The politeness path is evidence of pressure on speakers to use default forms. Being polite, in short, takes effort.

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