Honorificity and Number Features are Distinct Processes: A Case in Assamese Pronouns

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is the relationship between honorificity and number in Assamese. The language shows a three-tiered system of honorific pronouns, while verbs mark honorific distinctions only in the second person (Masica 1991; Palash et al. 2019). Number, by contrast, is marked exclusively in the pronominal system and has no effect on verbal agreement. In particular, plural suffixes never change the honorific value of a pronoun, and verbal honorific markers remain unchanged regardless of number. These patterns indicate that honorificity and number are computed by separate processes in the grammar. I propose in Assamese, within a Minimalist framework (Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001), that honorificity is encoded in its own functional projection (HonP) and checked via Agree (Alok 2021), while number is introduced in a higher NumP (Ritter 1991, 1992). The findings here raise a possibility that [HON]-[NUM] independence holds more widely than hitherto assumed.

1 Introduction

In theoretical syntax, agreement remains a central issue, since it shows how languages organize formal features like person, number, and gender. Although φ-features are traditionally understood to include person, number, and gender (Chomsky 1995; Adger 2003), recent work has raised the possibility that honorificity should be treated as an independent feature with its own morphosyntactic processes (cf. also Alok 2020, 2021; Kaur & Yamada 2022; Niinuma 2003). Indo-Aryan languages provide especially useful evidence for this claim, since they employ a wide range of strategies for encoding politeness, from the use of honorific suffixes on nominals to specialized pronominal forms and agreement patterns on verbs (Bhatt & Davis 2023; Wang 2023).

Within this view, Assamese presents an especially notable case. The language shows an elaborate three-tier honorific system in the pronominal paradigm (non-honorific, honorific, and high-honorific) while simultaneously showing restrictions on verbal agreement. Verbs in Assamese inflect for person and honorificity in second-person contexts, but they do not mark number. Instead, plurality is encoded exclusively in the pronominal system, through suffixes (Palash *et al*. 2019; Masica 1991) that are themselves sensitive to the honorific status of the stem. Thus, plural morphology operates independently of verbal agreement, but still interacts with the honorific system in systematic ways. This separation of honorificity and number raises a broader theoretical question: should honorificity and number be modeled as distinct syntactic features, or is one dependent on the other (Bhatt & Davis 2023)?

Earlier work has shown that in some languages, politeness distinctions rely directly on number- such as the use of plural pronouns to mark singular politeness in French or Spanish (Wang 2023), or the plural agreement triggered by the Hindi-Urdu honorific suffix *-jī* (Bhatt & Davis 2023). Assamese, however, stands apart from this cross-linguistic tendency. Plural suffixes leave the honorific value of a pronoun intact, and verbal honorific distinctions do not vary with number. This pattern points to [HON] as an independent feature, separate from [NUM], yet still involved in syntactic Agree relations within the functional spine.

The following discussion develops this claim in detail. It begins in §1 with a typological sketch of Assamese and its pronominal system. §2 reviews the theoretical background in the Minimalist framework and the role of Agree. §3 then situates Assamese within the broader Indo-Aryan context, comparing it with related languages- Magahi and Hindi-Urdu. §4 presents the core analysis, showing that honorificity is encoded on separate functional projections, HonP, and operates independently of NumP in syntactic derivations. §5 discusses the broader theoretical and typological implications of this account, and §6 closes the paper with concluding remarks.

1.1 Typology of Assamese

The canonical word order in Assamese is SOV. But speakers often scramble the order or topicalize arguments. The tense system is past vs. future, while aspect is conveyed through separate morphological markers. The language has a mixed morphological typology which shows both agglutinative and fusional morphology (Masica 1991: 326). Nouns inflect for number, classifiers, and case, but grammatical gender is not marked (Palash *et al*. 2019: 353). Verbs, however, agree with person as well as honorificity using the same morpheme in 2P form, but not with number, so the same form is used regardless of whether the subject is singular or plural. For example, in (1-3), all second-person subject pronouns (singular or plural) take the same second-person verb agreement, as illustrated by the forms of *"*come along*"* in imperative:

(1) tɔi/ tɔ.hɔt bɔl
2P:NH.SG/2P:NH.PL come.along
'You (non-honorific) come along!'

(2) tumi/tuma.lʊk bɔl-a
2P:NH.SG/2P:NH.PL come.along-2P:H.IMP
'You (honorific) come along!'

(3) apuni/apuna.lʊk bɔl-ɔk
2P:HH.SG/2P:HH.PL come.along-2P:HH.IMP
'You (high honorific) come along!'

In (1-3), the subject-verb agreement (in imperative form) *bɔl-ø*, *bɔl-a*, and *bɔl-ɔk* reflects the speaker's attitude as NH, H, and HH towards the 2P, respectively. Again, this is the same regardless of whether the pronoun is singular or plural. Likewise, declarative sentences in Assamese show person and honorificity agreement, where *-i* is NH, *-a*: is H, and *-e* is HH, but no number agreement, shown in (4-6).

(4) tɔi/tɔ.hɔt bʰa:t kʰa-l-i
2P:NH.SG/2P:NH.PL rice eat-PST-2P:NH.AGR
'You (hon-honorific) ate rice.'

(5) tumi/tuma.lʊk bʰa:t kʰa-l-a
2P:H.SG/2P:H.PL rice eat-PST-2P:H.AGR
'You (honorific) ate rice.'

(6) apuni/apuna.lʊk bʰa:t kʰa-l-e
2P.HH.SG/2P:HH.PL rice eat-PST-2P:HH.AGR
'You (high honorific) ate rice.'

Thus, Assamese uses pronominal morphology (rather than verb morphology) to encode plurality. But the three tiers of honorificity are morphosyntactically reflected on the verb. In Assamese, subjects agree with the verb in person as well as honorificity only in the presence of 2P pronouns. Otherwise, in 1P and 3P, the subject and the verb only agree in person.

Assamese also distinguishes honorific levels explicitly in the pronominal system. Following Alok (2020), I assume three honor tiers: NH < H < HH. These tiers are apparent in 2P and 3P pronouns (1st person has no honor contrast). For example, the second-person pronouns are roughly: *tɔi* (2:NH), *tumi* (2:H), and *apuni* (2:HH). The plural form of each of them is formed by adding a suffix, but crucially different suffixes are used for NH vs. H/HH. I will discuss below that *-hɔt* suffixes to NH pronoun stems and *-lʊk* to H/HH stems.

In summary, Assamese (i) is SOV (with fluid word order), (ii) has no number agreement, but has person agreement on verbs, and (iii) has an elaborated honorific system in personal pronouns. This serves as the setting for examining how honorific and number features interact.

1.2 Assamese Pronominal Paradigm

This section discusses the relevant pronouns in Assamese, glossed as *2P* for 2nd person, *3P* for 3rd person, *PL* for plural, *SG* for singular, *NH* for non-honorific, *H* for honorific, and *HH* for high honorific in Table 1.

Person	Honorificity tiers	SG form (IPA)	Gloss	PL form (IPA)	Gloss
2P	Non-Honorific (NH)	tɔi	2P:NH.SG	tɔ.hɔt	2P:NH.PL
	Honorific (H)	tumi	2P:H.SG	tuma.lʊk	2P:H.PL
	High honorific (HH)	apuni	2P:HH.SG	apuna.lʊk	2P:HH.PL
3P	Non-Honorific (NH)	ɦi/tai (MASC/FEM)	3P:NH.SG	ɦi-hɔt	3P:NH-PL
	Honorific (H)	teu	3P:H.SG	teu-lʊk	3P:H-PL
	High honorific (HH)	tekʰet	3P:HH.SG	tekʰet-hɔkɔl	3P:HH-PL

Table 1: Assamese pronouns

Table 1 shows, for instance, that the 2P non-honorific singular is *tɔi*, which becomes *tɔhɔt* in the plural form (suffix *-hɔt*). The honorific singular form *tumi* (2P:H.SG) pluralizes to *tumalʊk* (*-lʊk* suffix). The singular high honorific *apuni* (2P:HH.SG) changes to *apunaluk* (with, again *-lʊk* suffix as the plural suffix). Note the suffix *-hɔt* vs. *-lʊk* distinction: *-hɔt* is used with NH stems, whereas *-lʊk* appears on H/HH stems. The 3rd person follows similar patterns. *ɦi/tai* (3P:NH:MSC.SG/3P:NH:FEM.SG) → *ɦi-hɔt* (3P.NH-PL) (note that gender distinction is only in 3P non-honorific singular form), *teu* (3P.H.SG) → *teu-lʊk* (3P:H-PL), *tekhet* (3P:HH.SG) → *tekʰet hɔkɔl*.[1]

Thus, Assamese allows certain combinations of honorific roots and plural suffixes but not others. In particular, pluralization does not change the honorific level. For example, *tɔi* (2P:NH.SG) pluralizes as *tɔhɔt* (2P:NH.PL) without adding honorific distinction. The form **tɔlʊk* (the would-be plural if *-lʊk* could attach to non-honorific *tɔi*) is ungrammatical. Conversely, adding an NH plural suffix to an honorific stem is illicit. Native judgments confirm these patterns, as shown in Table 2 for 2P.

Consider the honorificity statuses of the pronominal stem and the plural suffix in columns (ii) and (iv), respectively, in Table 2. The honorificity mismatch between the pronoun form and the plural suffix results in the ungrammaticality of the plural forms of pronouns. The same is true for 3P pronouns. These illustrate that *plural markers do not introduce honorificity status*. Instead, the honorific level of the singular root persists in the plural, and the plural markers themselves carry honorificity status: *-hɔt* (NH.PL), and *-lʊk* (H/HH.PL). I will analyze this asymmetry in §4.

[1] *hɔkɔl* in 3P high honorific plural form is not a plural marker, rather a quantifier construction like 'they all' in English. This is only true for 3P high honorific pronouns. This comes from Assamese NPs like *hɔkɔl-(u)e hukhi (hoi)* 'everyone/all-EMP happy (exist)'. In brief, the 3P:HH pronoun does not follow the paradigm of *typical* plural formation of pronouns in Assamese; hence, I exclude *hɔkɔl* from this analysis. Note that 3P:HH pronoun tekhet 'they' is singular. To refer to a 3P.HH plural subject, the speaker must use *tekhet-hɔkɔl* . (EMP= emphatic)

(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)	(vi)
SG stem form	Stem honorificity status	Plural suffix form	Suffix honorificity status	SG → PL	Matching honorificity (ii & iv)
tɔi	NH	*-hɔt*	NH	*tɔi* → *tɔhɔt*	Yes
tɔi	**NH**	*-lʊk*	**H**	*tɔi* → ****tɔlʊk***	No
tumi	H	*-lʊk*	H	*tumi* → *tumalʊk*	Yes
tumi	**H**	*-hɔt*	**NH**	*tumi* → ****tumahɔt***	No
apuni	HH	*-lʊk*	HH	*apuni* → *apunalʊk*	Yes
apuni	**HH**	*-hɔt*	**NH**	*apuni* → ****apunahɔt***	No

Table 2: Mismatch of honorificity between pronoun root and plural suffix

Additionally, Assamese verbs in declarative sentences show honorificity agreement with the subject in three tiers. But this subject-verb agreement in honorificity is restricted only to 2P subjects (see 4-6). Examples (7-8) show that 3P subjects with NH, H, and HH levels of honorificity are not sensitive to subject-verb honorificity agreement.

(7) ɦi/tai/ɦi-hɔt — bʰa:t — kʰa-l-e
3P:NH:MASC.SG/3P:NH:FEM.SG/3P:NH-PL — rice — eat-PST-3P.AGR
'He/she/they (non-honorific) ate rice.'

(8) teu/teu-lʊk — bʰa:t — kʰa-l-e
3P:H.SG/3P:H-PL — rice — eat-PST-3P.AGR
'He/she/they (honorific) ate rice.'

(9) tekhet/tekʰet-hɔkɔl — bʰa:t — kʰa-l-e
3P:HH.SG/3P:HH-PL — rice — eat-PST-3P.AGR
'He/she/they (high honorific) ate rice.'

In the third person, the verbal suffix *-e* does not change: it appears with both singular and plural subjects, and it remains the same no matter what the honorific level of the subject is (7–9). What stands out is that exactly this morpheme also shows up with second-person subjects when they are high-honorific. This is illustrated in (10), a repetition of (6).

(10) apuni/apuna.lʊk — bʰa:t — kʰa:-l-e
2P:HH/**2P**:HH.PL — rice — eat-PST-**3P**:HH.AGR
'You (high honorific) ate rice.'

At first glance, the 3P agreement morpheme *-e* appears to be an agreement mismatch, since a 2P.HH subject co-occurs. A closer look at the imperative paradigm (1-3) points in a different direction. In these forms, the verb shows regular agreement with the subject in both person and honorific status. The dedicated 2P.HH imperative marker *-ɔk*, for instance, attaches only when the subject is second person high-honorific, and it never appears with third-person subjects. If the form in (10) really involved a mismatch between subject and verb, we would expect a similar anomaly to surface in the imperative domain. No such

anomaly is found. Instead, the facts indicate a case of syncretism: the morpheme *-e* expresses 3P agreement, and it is also used to index 2P high honorific subjects.

2 Theoretical Background

I situate the analysis within the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995), following later developments in feature-checking theory (Chomsky 2000; 2001). On this view, lexical and functional heads carry bundles of features. Not all features come fully specified; some features are unvalued. The mechanism that matches these valued and unvalued features is Agree: a probing head searches its c-command domain for a suitable goal and, once a match is found, any unvalued features on the probe are specified with values from that goal. Formally (Adger, 2003: 169), in any configuration

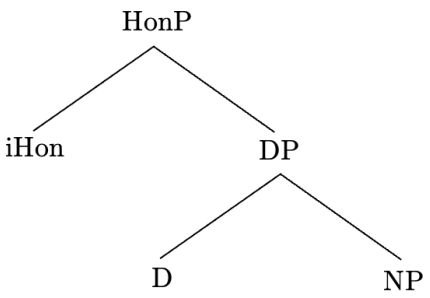
(11) X[F:**val**] … Y[*u*F: __]

> Where, if "…" represents c-command, then valued interpretable feature F with the value "val" checks and values the unvalued uninterpretable feature *u*F with "val", resulting in:
>
> X[F: **val**] … Y[*u*F: **val**]

That is, where X c-commands Y, the valued probe feature F on X can check against the unvalued feature *u*F on Y, resulting in Y[*u*F:val]. Unvalued uninterpretable features [*u*F] must be checked and deleted by this mechanism (Chomsky 1995; Adger 2003) for a successful derivation in the syntax.

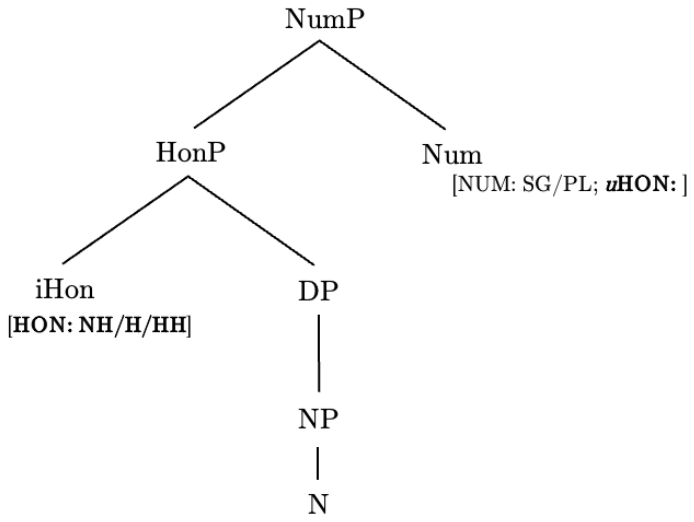
Following much recent work, I posit dedicated projections for honorificity and number features. Building on Alok (2020), I posit a HonP above the DP (Abney, 1987) for Assamese that hosts semantic feature [iHON] on a functional head: it takes a DP as argument and yields a relation indicating whether the speaker stands above or below the addressee in honorificity/social status. This is schematically represented in (12).

(12)



Also, following Ritter (1991, 1992), I assume a projection NumP above the DP that hosts plural number features for Assamese in (13).

(13)



In syntax, this is implemented by a Hon head with features [HON: NH/H/HH] (where either NH, H, or HH are its values or "val"). I adopt a similar approach for Assamese. The valued interpretable [HON: NH/H/HH] feature probes a corresponding unvalued uninterpretable [*u*HON:__] on another element, which, in the case of Assamese, is on the Num head. Here, the Num head carries two features- a valued interpretable [NUM] feature with its values either as [NUM: SG] or [NUM: PL], and an unvalued uninterpretable [*u*HON:__]. In the structure I present here, the [HON] feature on Hon head engages in an Agree relationship with the [NUM] feature on the Num head that bears [NUM: SG/PL; *u*HON: __].

When we extend the schema in (11) to Assamese, the Hon head already bears a valued [HON] feature. This value is then transferred to the Num head through Agree, so that the unvalued [*u*HON] feature on Num is properly specified. In effect, the honorific property of the root is first fixed in Hon and subsequently passed upward to Num, ensuring that the plural form receives the correct honorific interpretation. Thus, adding plural does not automatically change the [HON] value; it simply changes to [NUM:PL] from [NUM: SG].

In sum, the analysis here uses (i) a HonP above DP to introduce the interpretable honorific feature, (ii) a NumP (or Num head) above DP (subsequently above HonP) that has [NUM: SG/PL; *u*HON:__], and (iii) feature-checking via Agree (Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001; Adger 2003) to value [*u*HON: __] on the Num head. This setup explicitly treats honorificity and plurality as separate syntactic elements.

3 Comparative Evidence from Magahi and Hindi-Urdu

In Magahi, honorificity is encoded in two domains- (pro)nominal and verbal. Honorificity is seen in two types within the verbal domain, involving verbal agreement- subject honorificity and addressee honorificity. Subject honorificity is when the subject agrees in

honorificity with the verb. The subject agrees with the verb in person and honorificity. In Magahi, addressee honorificity is a social relationship between speaker and hearer that is optionally encoded via a morphosyntactic presence on the verbal stem, even when the hearer (or addressee) is not the subject of the sentence. This is called allocutive agreement (Miyagawa 2012, 2017; Miyagawa & Saito 2008; Oyharçabal 1993; Portner *et al*. 2019) or *addressee agreement* (Verma 1991). In short, finite verbs encode both person and honorificity features of the subject, and optionally the honorificity status of the addressee (Alok 2020, 2021). Building on this observation, Alok (2021) proposes a formal account for allocutive agreement in which the clause contains a covert second-person addressee, written as *Hr*, in a designated Hearer position located at "a specifier of FinP". The Finite head, written as *Fin*, bears an uninterpretable honorific feature [*u*HON] (*i.e.,* ε). There is a corresponding interpretable honorificity feature on Hr as [iHON], which is a semantic honorificity feature on every DP that represents the addressee's honorific status. In this system, the uninterpretable [*u*HON] on Fin probes the interpretable [iHON] feature on Hr. Fin[*u*HON] Agrees with Hr[iHON] in every finite clause, thereby matching honorificity features on both heads- Fin and Hr. This explains allocutive agreement in Magahi. Note that in the syntactic processes involved here, the number feature [NUM] does not play any role.

In the same proposal, to explain the subject honorificity, Alok proposes a system where the subject DP carries an interpretable honorificity feature [iHON]. Often, this feature is a result of T/V distinction in pronouns, projected as [iHON] in the syntax on DPs. The tense head T carries a corresponding uninterpretable honorificity feature [*u*HON]. When the uninterpretable feature [*u*HON] on T Agrees with interpretable [iHON] feature on DP, the system attains at a successful derivation, which results in subject and verb agreeing in honorificity. In the same way, subject and verb agree in person where T carries [*u*P(erson)] and the DP a [iP] features. Again, note that the number feature does not play any syntactic role here in the honorificity process. Magahi therefore provides evidence that both subject and addressee honorificity are encoded in the syntax, and that the [HON] feature is independent of number. This supports the view that honorificity is a syntactic feature distinct from the canonical Phi (φ)-features (person, number, gender). Although Assamese lacks allocutive agreement like Magahi, Alok's HonP analysis can be extended to the subject honorificity in the case of 2P (as seen in 1-6) as well as the pronominal domain as: the [HON] feature of the pronoun is hosted on a Hon head and is checked via an Agree relation, in a parallel manner to clausal domain in Magahi.

Hindi-Urdu shows a point of contrast. Here, the suffix *-jī* is attached to nouns as a marker of respect. Once it is present, the verb no longer agrees as singular but instead takes plural marking, even when the noun clearly refers to just one person (Bhatt & Davis 2023) (see 14-16).

(14) *mina lambi hai*
Mi:na lambi hɛ
Mi:na.F tall.F be.PRS.3.SG

‘Mina is tall.’ (Bhatt & Davis, 2023: 22)

(15) *minaji lambi hain*

Mi:na-ji	lambi	hɛ̃
Mi:na.F-**HON**	tall.F	be.PRS.3.**PL**

‘Mina is tall.’ (Bhatt & Davis, 2023: 23)

(16) ***minaji lambi hai***

Mi:na-ji	lambi	hɛ
Mi:na.F-**HON**	tall.F	be.PRS.3.**SG**

‘Mina is tall.’ (Bhatt & Davis, 2023: 23)

The presence of *-jī* changes how the verb agrees. When the plain name *Mīnā* is used, the verb shows singular agreement. Adding the respectful suffix *-jī*, however, alters the agreement pattern, and the verb surfaces in the plural even though the referent is still one individual. To account for this, Bhatt & Davis (2023) interpret *-jī* as a Hon head inside the nominal phrase that carries a formal [+PL] feature. This feature is what causes the verb to appear in the plural, but its meaning contribution is one of respect rather than actual plurality. Bhatt & Davis interpret the same formal plural feature in Hindi-Urdu in two ways: a genuine plurality, or as a politeness marker. They further propose that due to the presence of Hon, the interpretation of genuine plural is blocked and vice versa. This keeps the nominal component of Hon morpho-syntactically singular (which is often the case in oblique form.)

Bhatt & Davis describe a system where honorificity and number are tightly linked, so that the two features cannot easily be teased apart. The Assamese pattern does not work this way. When a plural marker is added, it simply contributes number and leaves the honorific value of the root unchanged. A non-honorific stem, for instance, only combines with a non-honorific plural suffix, and the result is still interpreted as non-honorific. For example, singular to plural in (17) does not change the honorificity status.

(17)

toi	→	*tohot*
tɔi		tɔ.hɔt
2P:**NH**.SG		2P:**NH**.PL
‘You’		‘You’

This suggests that in Assamese, [HON] and [NUM] are independent features, as suggested in Alok (2020, 2021) for Magahi, contra [HON] tied to [NUM] in Hindi-Urdu (Bhatt & Davis 2023). Assamese clearly has distinct plural suffixes depending on honorificity level. Nevertheless, the insight that a Hon element can bear a formal plural feature may be useful, but not in the analysis I present here. I view Assamese plural suffixes as carrying number features, and also an honor feature that must match the root/stem’s.

In a large typological study covering 120 languages, Wang (2023) notes that honorific systems frequently draw on categories that are semantically unmarked, *e.g.,* plural number, third person, or indefiniteness. One familiar illustration is the use of a plural pronoun for a single polite addressee, as seen in French *vous* or Spanish *ustedes*. Wang takes this to be a pragmatic strategy based on feature markedness, rather than evidence for a distinct [HON] feature in the grammar.

Assamese seems to partly fit this pattern. *i.e.*, second-person high-honorific subjects trigger the use of the third-person agreement marker *-e* on the verb, a clear example of an unmarked category being pressed into the service of politeness. At the same time, Assamese does not reduce honorificity to such strategies. The pronominal system demonstrates that honorificity and number are kept apart: forms like *təhɔt* and *tɷmalʊk* are used in polite reference, and while the suffixes they carry unambiguously express plurality, the honorific value of the root remains intact.

Assamese, therefore, illustrates that plural morphology is recruited for plural functions only. From this perspective, the use of *-e* with 2P high-honorific subjects is best analyzed as syncretism with 3P agreement morpheme, rather than as true mismatch. At the syntactic level, the distinction among honorific tiers in 2P subject-verb agreement is derived through the Agree mechanism, a point to which I return in the next section.

4 [HON] is independent of [NUM]

I now present my approach that honorificity and number features are distinct from one another in Assamese. Honorification, thereby honorificity, is a syntactic process, while number features (singular and plural) are not. The evidence comes from the mismatch patterns observed in pronouns and from subject-verb agreement in second person and honorificity.

4.1 Honorificity in pronominal plural marking

As noted above in §1.2, pluralizing a non-honorific (NH) pronoun preserves its NH status, and pluralizing an honorific pronoun preserves its honor. I restate the crucial cases from Table 2 below:

(18)	*təi* '2P:NH.SG' +*-hɔt* 'NH PL suffix'	→ *tɔ.hɔt* '2P:NH.PL'	(grammatical)
(19)	*təi* '2P:NH.SG' + *-lʊk* 'H PL suffix'	→ **tɔ.lʊk*	(ungrammatical)
(20)	*tumi* '2P:H.SG' + *-lʊk* 'H PL suffix'	→ *tuma.lʊk* '2P:H.PL'	(grammatical)
(21)	*tumi* '2P:H.SG' + *-hɔt* 'NH PL suffix'	→ **tuma.hɔt*	(ungrammatical)

In (18-21), adding *-hɔt* or *-lʊk* to the root never changes the root's honorificity status, nor does it change the honorificity status of the output. The ungrammatical examples (19 & 21) show that attempting to override the root's honorific level yields a bad form. They serve as the empirical foundation. Any analysis of these instances must ensure that plural morphology is licensed only when honor features match. Importantly, the form *təhɔt* is

grammatical despite *tɔi* being NH; if Assamese had required plural suffixes to add honorificity status, *tɔhɔt* would incorrectly receive H status. Instead, *-hɔt* here simply pluralizes without changing honorificity, given that the honorificity status of the stem matches with that of the plural morpheme. To explain this mechanism formally, I propose the following feature specifications for Assamese-

(i) The pronoun root (DPs) carries an honorificity feature projected as HonP above DP with an interpretable [HON:][2] feature, valued as NH, H, or HH *wrt* the speaker's social status to the referent of the DP.

(ii) The plural suffix, projected as NumP above HonP, carries two features: an unvalued uninterpretable [*u*HON] feature and a valued [NUM:] feature. The [NUM:] is inherently valued as SG or PL depending on the pronominal, and it is not involved in syntactic processes. The [*u*HON] feature on Num head must be valued and checked for a successful derivation.

Under this system, the projections of the syntactic elements in question are in c-command relationship. This is schematically represented in (22) and hierarchically in (23), where angular parentheses (>>) represent structural hierarchy.

(22) [NumP [Num] [HonP [Hon] [DP]]]

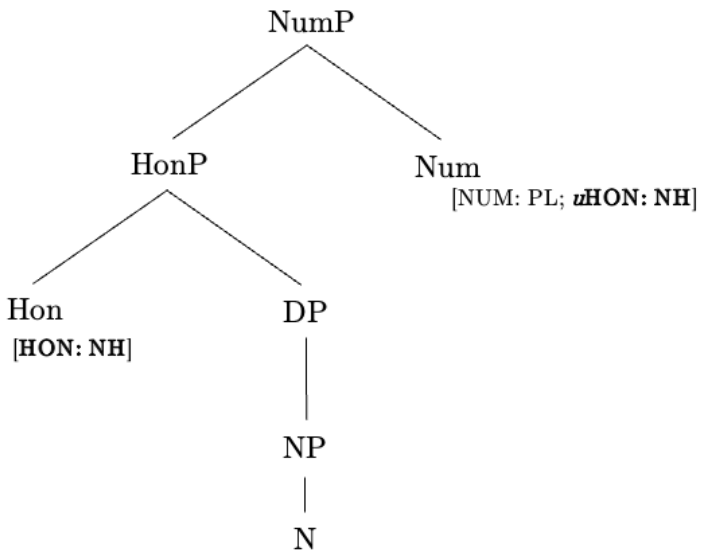
(23) NumP >> HonP >> DP

In Assamese pronominal forms, the plural morpheme comes last in the structure. What is interesting is that the exact shape of this plural marker depends on the honorific status of the base it attaches to. This ordering points to a hierarchy in which honorific information is settled closer to the noun root, and the projection of number takes place higher up. Following Ritter (1992), I assume that Number is represented as a functional head NumP dominating NP/DP. Since I take Abney's (1987) approach, on this view, HonP is structurally between NumP and DP, where HonP encodes the honorific distinctions (yielding *tɔi* vs. *tumi*), and NumP above introduces plural morphology (*e.g.*, *tɔi* vs *tɔhɔt*). Cross-linguistically, similar functional splits are attested. For instance, the honorific suffix *-jī* in Hindi-Urdu triggers plural agreement even on singular nominals, and Bhatt & Davis (2023) treat honorificity as occupying the Num slot. But Magahi explicitly encodes honorificity on an Hon head within the nominal spine (Alok 2021). These patterns accord with the general idea that morphemes closer to the root correspond to lower functional projections, which, in Assamese, is the fact that number suffixes are always outermost,

[2] In §2, I use "Hon" as the daughter branch of HonP instead of "iHon" as in (12) (where "i" is a mnemonic for *interpretable*). For uniformity, I make a distinction between features that are interpretable as X and uninterpretable as *u*X, where the italicized "*u*" in *u*X stands for *uninterpretable*, and where X is a variable for any syntactic element such as [HON].

requiring NumP to dominate HonP, and HonP in turn dominates the DP, validating the hierarchy presented in (23). This is structurally presented in (24) with feature specifications of Hon and Num.

(24)



The Num head with an uninterpretable unvalued [*u*HON:] feature probes for the goal Hon head with the interpretable valued [HON: NH/H/HH], thereby triggering Agree relationship. Since the [HON: NH/H/HH] feature is interpretable and valued, it can value the uninterpretable unvalued [*u*HON] feature on the Num head. For instance, if the DP pronoun root is NH, Hon carries [HON: NH] and it will probe and check [*u*HON:] on Num, resulting [*u*HON: NH]. The [NUM:] feature on Num is valued inherently by the plural meaning of the pronominal form, not via syntactic Agree. The outcome is that the plural form [NUM: PL; *u*HON: NH] is licensed, *i.e.*, *-hɔt* attaches to an NH root. Similarly, an H root leads to [*u*HON:H] on Num, licensing *-lʊ̀k*. The key point is that the [HON] feature is *checked* via Agree, unlike [NUM], so plurality is added independently of honor.

In minimalist syntax, uninterpretable features must be valued and checked against their interpretable counterparts in order for a derivation to converge (cf. Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001). In the present case, the uninterpretable unvalued honorificity feature [*u*HON] on Num must be licensed before further derivation can proceed. This requirement is particularly visible when a pronominal root combines with a plural suffix that is sensitive to the honorific status of the pronominal root. Put differently, the Agree relation between Num and Hon is crucial only in plural forms; in singular forms, honorificity agreement appears redundant. To account for this, I consider two approaches.

The *first* approach treats the Num head as carrying two features: an obligatory [NUM] (valued as SG or PL), and an optional [*u*HON] (to be valued by its corresponding interpretable feature on Hon head). The [*u*HON] feature is triggered only when [NUM] is

plural (or [NUM: PL]); in singular contexts (when [NUM: SG]), it is absent, which explains why no separate honorific agreement appears on the singular pronoun. Earlier discussions of feature checking allow for a certain degree of optionality (Pesetsky & Torrego 2007). In contrast, I adopt the *second* approach, which assumes that Num obligatorily carries both [NUM] and [*u*HON], regardless of the particular number specification. Here, [*u*HON] is always valued by Agree with Hon, even when [NUM] is singular. On this view, singular pronouns lack overt morphology not because [*u*HON] is absent, but because the singular number feature has a null realization (cf. Harley & Ritter 2002 on null morphology in feature systems). This account is theoretically more economical: it does not require the grammar to condition the presence of [*u*HON] on the value of [NUM], thereby avoiding unnecessary stipulation. I propose a formal analysis in (25), following the steps of derivation below:

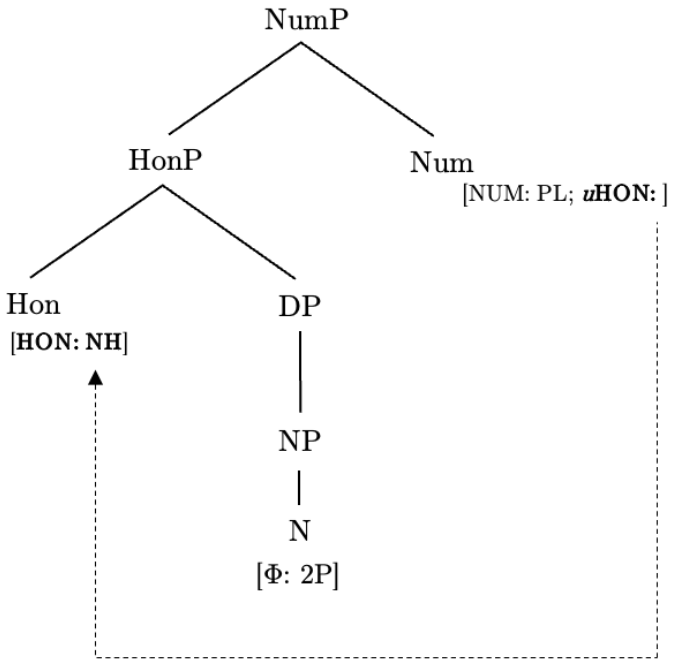
STEP 1: The derivation begins with a DP whose honorific specification is projected in HonP. For instance, a non-honorific (NH) root specifies its feature as [HON: NH] on Hon.

STEP 2: Above this, NumP is merged, introducing number features and an unvalued honorific feature: [NumP [Num $_{[NUM: ; uHON:]}$] [HonP [Hon $_{[HON: NH]}$] [DP]]]

STEP 3: Through Agree, the [HON: NH] feature on Hon values and deletes the uninterpretable [uHON] feature on Num.

STEP 4: The number feature on Num is valued independently. For instance, when Num is specified as [NUM: PL] by the semantics of plurality, the resulting feature bundle on Num is [NUM: PL; HON: NH]

(25)



This configuration yields the grammatical form *tɔ-hɔt*, *i.e.*, the non-honorific root *tɔi* combined with the non-honorific plural suffix *-hɔt*. By contrast, if the Num head hosting the plural suffix *-lʊk* (which carries [*u*HON: H]) were merged with an NH root (*tɔi*), the Agree relation would fail, since Hon [HON: NH] cannot value Num as [*u*HON: H]. This predicts the ungrammaticality of *tɔ-lʊk*. Assamese handles plural and honorific marking in a way that sets it apart from Hindi-Urdu. The two categories are realized independently.

Even though (25) abstracts away from some details, the core idea is that Num, bearing an unvalued [*u*HON] feature, probes downward to find a matching interpretable feature on Hon. When Hon is specified as [HON: NH], it values [*u*HON:] on Num accordingly. Number, by contrast, is introduced independently on Num and is valued by the semantics of plurality. In this view, honorificity is a syntactic feature that participates in Agree, whereas number is a feature whose valuation is determined compositionally by the semantics of pluralization. This analysis is consistent with Adger's (2003) characterization of Agree as feature valuation under c-command, and with Alok's (2020) proposal for Magahi, where honorificity is checked by a functional head in the clausal domain.

4.2 Honorificity in subject-verb agreement

As noted in §1.2. Assamese finite verbs show a three-way person/honorific agreement paradigm only for second-person subjects. In particular, 2P non-honorific (NH) subjects (*e.g.*, *toi/tohot*) trigger the suffix *-i* on the verb, 2P honorific (H) subjects (*tumi/tumaluk*) trigger *-a*, and 2P high-honorific (HH) subjects (*apuni/apunaluk*) trigger *-e*. Notably, these

markers encode person plus honorificity, not number: the same verbal morphology is used for singular vs. plural (no number inflection). Thus, verbs agree with the subject in [Person: 2] and [HON: NH/H/HH] with the subject, independent of any number feature. I repeat (4-6) below as (26-28).

(26) tɔi/tɔ.hot b^ha:t k^ha-l-i
2P:NH.SG/2P:NH.PL rice eat-PST-2P:NH.AGR
'You (hon-honorific) ate rice.'

(27) tumi/tuma.lʊk b^ha:t k^ha:-l-a
2P:H.SG/2P:H.PL rice eat-PST-2P:H.AGR
'You (honorific) ate rice.'

(28) apuni/apuna.lʊk b^ha:t k^ha-l-e
2P:HH.SG/2P:HH.PL rice eat-PST-2P:HH.AGR
'You (high honorific) ate rice.'

In (26), the subject is the 2P non-honorific pronoun *tɔi*. Here, a morphological agreement is inflected on the verb stem: the *-i* morpheme encodes both 2P and non-honorific status of the subject. In the same way, in (27), the subject is the 2P honorific pronoun, and the verb agrees in person and honorificity using the morpheme *-a*, used for 2P honorific subjects. Similarly, for 2P high honorific subject in (28), the verbal agreement is *-e*. This distinction in parallely maintained in imperative forms, as shown in (1-3). I summarize these morphemes in Table 3.

Subject		Verbal agreement	
2P form	Honorificity		
tɔi	NH	∅ (null)	-i
tumi	H	-a	-a
apuni	HH	-ɔk	-e

Table 3: Agreement morphemes on the verb based on the honorificity of the subject

Under the Minimalist framework, we assume the finite T head carries unvalued φ-features [*u*Person:] (cf. also Chomsky 2000, 2001; Adger 2003) and [*u*HON:] (Alok 2021) that must be valued by the subject. Each second-person pronoun (DP) is taken to project an HonP whose head Hon bears an interpretable [HON: NH/H/HH]. In syntax, T looks for the interpretable [HON: NH/H/HH] of the subject to value its [*u*HON:] (and [*u*Person]) via Agree. This mechanism is parallel to what Alok (2021) proposes for Magahi, where subject honorification and addressee agreement are fused and valued by Agree between functional heads. Because [HON: NH/H/HH] on Hon is interpretable and valued, it licenses [*u*HON] feature on T. The result is that T acquires [*u*Person: 2, HON: NH/H/HH] matching the person and honorific tier of the subject. Here, no [NUM] feature is involved in the verb, consistent with the empirical fact that number is not marked on the verb in Assamese.

5 Implications

The discussion I carry in this paper has implications for both typology and theory. It shows that honorificity in Assamese is not derived from number but instead has a dedicated functional head. In Assamese, the treatment of plural and honorific categories does not follow the pattern familiar from Hindi-Urdu. The two are expressed through distinct means rather than being fused into a single form. This separation adds to the understanding of the range of agreement strategies in the Indo-Aryan family. Once again, this distribution indicates that the language treats NumP and HonP as separate projections. Looking beyond Assamese, this distinction is typologically significant because it avoids a politeness strategy that Wang (2023) shows to be common cross-linguistically, namely the reanalysis of plural morphology as a marker of respect.

Seen in this view, Assamese provides evidence for a system in which [HON] operates alongside [NUM] rather than being dependent on it. Honorific distinctions are added to, rather than substituted for, number. From a theoretical standpoint, this supports the idea that the Agree mechanism can apply to features that encode social meaning. In turn, this strengthens the claim, developed by Alok (2020) and others, that honorificity belongs to the syntactic feature set itself rather than being reducible to pragmatic inference.

Importantly, we see that checking [HON] requires no special mechanism beyond Agree: it is a syntactic operation that requires an Agree mechanism; the number feature does not. This asymmetry- that [HON] participates in syntactic feature checking while [NUM] is not- is reminiscent of how person/gender and number sometimes behave differently in agreement (*e.g.*, Hindi-Urdu lacks explicit plural morphology on verbs for politeness; here Assamese does not use number but still checks honorificity). Finally, the Assamese pattern may generalize to other languages. The findings in this paper raise a possibility that [HON]-[NUM] independence holds more widely than hitherto assumed.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I examine the morphosyntactic encoding of honorificity and number in Assamese, with particular attention to the interaction between pronominal forms and verbal agreement. I show that Assamese organizes honorificity in a three-tier system (non-honorific, honorific, and high honorific), which is expressed in the pronominal paradigm. Number distinctions, by contrast, are encoded in the pronoun system but are not consistently transmitted to the verbal domain.

Assamese finite verbs show honorific agreement only with second-person subjects, where the suffixes *-i*, *-a*, and *-e* directly encode the relative honorific status of the subject. These markers are insensitive to number, which supports the claim that honorificity and number are encoded in distinct functional projections. In analyzing the Assamese facts, I

adopt a Minimalist approach where the head of HonP carries interpretable [HON] features. This feature values the corresponding [*u*HON] on T through Agree (cf. also Chomsky 2000, 2001; Adger 2003; Pesetsky & Torrego 2007). A similar mechanism is argued for in Magahi by Alok (2021), but the Assamese pattern is narrower: only second-person subjects trigger honorific agreement on the verb. At the same time, number does not enter into the agreement relation. Although number morphology is available in the pronominal system, it does not extend to the verbal domain, which suggests that [NUM] projects independently of verbal agreement.

When seen in a broader Indo-Aryan context, Assamese therefore occupies an intermediate position. In Hindi, the highest honorific forms are realized through verbal patterns that overlap with plural agreement, so that respect is formally expressed as number. Magahi shows a different alignment, where the honorific status of the subject is tied together with allocutive agreement. Assamese, however, keeps the two categories apart. Verbal suffixes in the second person reflect only honorific distinctions, while number is marked solely in the pronominal system and never carried over to the verb. Assamese instead encodes a more restricted but structurally transparent system- honorificity is grammatically active only in the second person, and its effect is morphologically confined to verbal suffixes, while number remains pronominal.

By setting apart the role of [HON] and [NUM] features in Assamese, I argue for treating honorificity as an independent grammatical dimension, rather than a derivative of person or number.

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