

McCready, Elin. 2019. *The semantics and pragmatics of honorification: Register and social meaning*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 146.

Reviewed by Valisa Krairiksh

1 Introduction

Elin McCready's book, *The Semantics and pragmatics of honorification: Register and social meaning*, is an innovative and original work that invites discussion in both semantics and sociolinguistics. She proposes boundaries that suggest a definition for honorifics, looking at two case languages: Japanese and Thai, with some comparison to other languages. For the purpose of deriving semantic rules for analysis, these two languages are a good starting point – the languages are not related and thus the honorific systems differ from each other in grammar, even though both languages require the use of honorifics in comparable social situations.

In her introduction, McCready clearly defines her research as being narrowly located in the formal semantic analysis of the mechanics of honorifics. She further narrows down her analysis to three types of honorifics. These will be discussed individually in this review: utterance honorifics, argument honorifics and role honorifics. She also teases apart the notions of honorifics and politeness. She argues that honorifics are to politeness as a hammer is to carpentry (p. 8). In the book, she explores honorifics as a tool to achieve politeness (and other social goals), and thus, chooses to not directly discuss politeness. She also seeks to lay down the foundations for formal semantic analysis of the social hierarchical functions of honorifics. She proposes further research in these topics, utilizing the framework that she lays down in the book.

The book's eight chapters are divided into roughly three parts. The first part of the book is concerned with laying down the foundations for the semantic analysis used in the book. The second part is concerned with applying and further developing the system of semantic analysis to describe honorifics, while the final part relates the system back to its application in sociolinguistics.

2 The formal semantic foundations of the analysis

Chapter 2 lays the foundations for the semantic equations that the author uses for her analysis. She starts by arguing that we should treat honorifics, for the most part, as a type of expressive. This is an interesting line of thought, as expressives are more frequently discussed in works on swearing or ‘heated’ conversation. In effect, McCready places honorifics on a spectrum with taboo or language aimed at insulting. This spectrum that ranges from honorific to insult brings to mind the work of authors such as Allan & Burridge (2006), who point out how role honorifics (titles conveying high status, discussed later in this review) are used in several languages as insults or as a strategy to indicate social distance in conflictive situations (pp. 138–9).

McCready expands her argument by examining the properties of expressives, summarizing the work of other scholars and explaining how these properties apply to honorifics (p. 10). These properties are independence, nondisplaceability, perspective dependence, descriptive ineffability, immediacy, and repeatability. She moves on to argue, in her next section, why honorifics fit these descriptions and should, thus, be treated as a type of expressive, too (pp. 14–24). In the next section, she furthers this line of thought.

3 Description and definition of honorifics

Chapters 3–7 discuss the register of honorifics, and describe utterance honorifics, argument honorifics and finally utterance honorifics. This part of the volume delves into the formal logic of the semantic structures and no doubt makes an important contribution to the field. It is, however, obscure reading to the non-semantician, and one must simply trust that the formulas are correct and, consequently, the subsequent analysis is sound.

In Chapter 3 McCready proposes formulas to determine several aspects of honorifics, including less fluctuating features such as base domains for politeness and global register, as well as more complex ones such as agent-sensitive registers and indexicality of honorification (pp. 29–38).

She touches upon several elements of honorification during the discussion on formal semantics of each of the features above. Especially interesting is how she incorporates the fluidity of registers, and the possibility to strategically attempt to change these during discourse, into her formulas. This

is one of the many times, in this book, that she boldly reduces a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon into a formula.

In this chapter, she also describes the framework for the assignment of honorific value to utterances, arguments and lexical items, which is the basis for analysis in the book. It is an integer-based system, which assigns a range of values that describes the attitude of a person *a* to a person *b* in the form *aIb*, where *I* indicates a numerical range between “a and b”, where -1 is the most negative, and 1 is the most positive. A brief explanation, such as the one above, would have saved the non-mathematician, formal semantician or logician from a lot of mental footwork, but the explanation simply states that the values are expressed “in the obvious way” (p. 26). There is no explanation about the methods used to determine the values used in the equations, either. It seems that the values *a* and *b* are subjective assessments. This does not, perhaps, matter, as the analysis is concerned with formulating a structure for those values, and not the values as such. This, however, is not explicitly stated, and thus makes the text less accessible to the non-semantician.¹

McCready considers honorifics as indicators of social distance, psychological distance, and formality, following Iwasaki & Horie (2000). She states that she does not see honorification as a marker of emotivity for the purpose of this analysis, in contrast to the work of Potts (2007), and thus omits the negative values (-0.1 to -1) for the purpose of this analysis. This is sound if we agree with McCready that the particles can be taken only as indicators of social distance, psychological distance and formality. I am, however, not entirely convinced this applies to the low-register Thai politeness particles she has chosen for analysis in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the applications of formal semantics to utterance honorifics. Utterance honorifics are described by McCready as “honorific forms which seem to act at the utterance level, giving an honorific character to the entire speech act that the sentence is used to perform” (p. 43). Data is drawn from Thai and Japanese. The conclusions drawn from the Thai data seem sound once one has accounted for discrepancies in transcription. However, it should be noted that her phonetic representation of Thai politeness particles seems to belie an assumption that there is only one, and not two female particles relevant to the analysis. Their only phonetic difference is the tone, but one is used in questioning or agreement seeking contexts (*khá*), whilst the other is used in most other contexts (*khâ*). The use of a high register

¹ I thank Dr. Lashi Bandara for the discussion here.

polite particle when two friends are speaking is also unrealistic. It would have been a sound tactic to simply leave tonality out of the data, thereby allowing a Thai speaker to interpret the data with the correct tones. At present, the Thai reader must deduce, by reading the glosses, which politeness particles McCready is referring to.

Also, it would be interesting to know why *wá* and *wóoy* (as well as *wà*, which is omitted) were selected for analysis as the markers of a lower register (p. 44). Where indeed *khâ*, *khá*, *kháp*, *hà*, *há* can be considered indicators of social and psychological distance and formality and stated gender, *wá*, *wà* and *wóoy* do not necessarily belong to this class of politeness particles. While they are, indeed, used to indicate lower register, they are typically tied into emotive contexts, and not used only as markers of register. Assigning these markers to the same class may detract from the argument that politeness particles used for honorification are not emotive. They are often used as particles attached to emotive statements such as the one in the example (my own) below:

- (1) *ai: hîa wóoy!*
 DEM.PART lizard PART
 ‘You fucker!’

Here, it is arguably not being used to indicate social or psychological distance, nor is it an indicator of the formality of the situation. Here, it is being used to magnify a negative emotion. I am not sure whether this poses a problem to the assignment of a positive value – McCready suggests a range of 0 to 0.4 to these particles (p. 46). There are Thai particles, such as *djà*, *djá*, *djâ* and *ná*, that do not serve to multiply the effect of insults and slurs, whilst also serving to indicate a lower psychological and social distance and level of formality. These are not used the same way as *wá*, *wà* and *wóoy* and might be more suitable for comparative analysis to *khâ* and *kháp*. Although the emotive nature of *wóoy* is touched upon in the chapter, it would be useful to understand her reasoning for selecting those particles for her analysis.

The chapter ends with discussion on register-distinguished lexicons, or, simply put, speech elements that change register. There are verbs, nouns, pronouns and adjectives that can only be used by people of a certain class, or in reference to people of a certain class, thus changing the register of the discourse segment.

Chapter 5 dives into argument honorifics, which is a more complex

phenomenon, present in Japanese,² but not in Thai, according to McCready. The form indicates respect for a person who may not be an interlocutor in the current discourse.

I am not certain it is accurate to say that argument honorifics do not exist in Thai. There may, however, be some overlap with role honorifics, which are discussed in the next chapter. One defining feature of an argument honorific, as I understand it, is that it indicates an attitude towards an object or subject of the discourse without changing the register. For example, this means one could respect the subject of a sentence without changing what is otherwise a relaxed informal register of discourse. In the examples below (my own), (a) a person is informally talking to a close friend about the prime minister, who she respects, and (b) a nurse is informally talking about a doctor to another nurse.

- (2) *thân nayók rǒ thân mǎi maa khui kàp mǔng rǒk*
 HON prime.minister Q-PART Mx. no come speak with 2P.RUDE NEG.PART
 ‘The prime minister? He wouldn’t talk to you!’ (+ The speaker honours the prime minister. + The speaker is rude to the interlocutor.)
- (3) *khun mǒǒ Dumrong bòk wā kae khong djà maa sháa*
 Mx. doctor Dumrong said that 3P.HON probably FUT.PART come late
ná thAA
 POL.PART 2P
 ‘Doctor Dumrong said that he will probably be late!’ (+ The speaker honours the doctor. + The speaker is close to the interlocutor.)

In example (2), the speaker is rude to her friend while simultaneously referring to the prime minister using the prefix *thân*, which roughly translates into ‘the honourable’ in the first instance, and ‘Mx.’ in the second. In example (3), the speaker is indicating a closeness and a low register to the interlocutor, while referring to the doctor using an honorific third person register. These do not change the register of the utterance, and thus, I think these examples might fit into the description of an argument honorific as described by McCready, and not so readily into the role honorifics described in the following chapter, nor the utterance honorifics described in Chapter 4.

² There may be typos in the Japanese data. In the first example (5.1b, p. 63), the word *seito* is used in both examples, and in one, it is glossed as ‘student’ and in the other as ‘apple’. I do not speak Japanese, though. This possible error hindered my comprehension of what constitutes an argument honorific.

In Chapter 6, McCready discusses role honorifics, which are expressions that do not, in and of themselves, convey honorific meaning, but rather, have honorific meaning due to social constructs. These are words such as ‘teacher’ in both Thai and Japanese, which can be used to convey honorific meaning only because the role of teacher commands a certain level of respect in these societies. In these languages, these professional titles can be used on their own to refer to honoured people. She points out that role honorifics are particularly fascinating because they reflect the manner any given society views certain classes of people. In this chapter, McCready has described an intersection of sociolinguistics and semantics that may be crossed by future scholars seeking to semantically analyse the inevitability of social and linguistic change over time.

Chapter 7 is about pronouns and their role in honorification. We have seen pronouns in previous chapters, but they have not yet been extensively discussed in this volume or expressed as semantic equations. McCready argues that it is insufficient to limit our analysis of honorifics to a binary high and low register such as that of French with the *tu/vous* system. Thai and Japanese are much more complex in their levels of honorification, and thus, having a value defined as a range, as proposed at the beginning of the volume, is preferable. Furthermore, this chapter explores how pronominals can be used in such a way as to indicate the relative social distance between speakers. In McCready’s examples from Japanese, they can also be used to mix registers in single utterances. Here, young men use them to present themselves as relaxed, but at the same time, honour and respect the young woman they are courting. On the other hand, a VIP can indicate their status and superiority by “talking down” to a person they view as being less important by mixing pronominals. Using purely linguistic means in this manner – by mixing registers to indicate relative social distance – is not possible in Thai the same way it is in Japanese, as McCready points out. Similar phenomena do exist, however, and formally identifying the mixing of registers in one language opens avenues to explore, identify, and apply formal semantic thinking to these sociolinguistic phenomena in other languages.

The discussion on social structure, roles, and meaning are gradually introduced towards the latter half of the book, especially when role honorifics and pronominals are explored. The sociological aspect is made explicit in the final chapter.

4 Social meaning

Chapter 8 is a discussion on the social meaning of honorification. One conclusion McCready draws based on her previous analysis is that honorification serves to make the social context explicit. If the social context is unknown, it is a sound strategy to avoid honorific words entirely (p. 134). This is supported by data from Thai, where interlocutors commonly avoid using any kinds of pronouns at all. Whether or not this is necessarily always a strategy to avoid commitment to register and social hierarchy is questionable. It does, however, play a part in social interaction and cannot be discarded as *not* relevant, as McCready points out.

She makes a second, similar point in the related discussion on gender pronominals. McCready argues that, by using certain pronominals, speakers either place themselves or others within a social structure, and thereby implicitly assign roles to interlocutors. I think these are both very accurate analyses – by determining position in social hierarchy early on, it may become unnecessary to explicitly assign roles and responsibilities, as they are implicit within the social hierarchy. For instance, in many Asian contexts, it is assumed that the oldest or most senior person (consequently, also typically the most important person) is going to take on a leadership role (Hofstede et al. 2010).

5 Conclusion

I read this book from the point of view of a sociolinguist, and as a native speaker of standard Thai. As a sociolinguist, I found the stated aim of the book – to bridge the gap between the study of linguistic honorification as a social phenomenon and the application of formal semantics to its study – fresh and relevant. The author achieves her aim by formulating logical and semantic equations to describe attitudes of speakers towards each other, incorporating factors such as the social register of the situation or event at hand, the perceived or desired social positions of the interlocutors or the speaker, as well as the register of the utterance.

As a native speaker of Thai, I found the Thai transcripts imprecise. While this would not have an impact on the fluidity of the text so long as a person could not understand Thai, the inaccuracies, particularly in tonal transcription, meant that glosses were essential for understanding the analysis, even for a

Thai speaker. The discrepancies, however, are generally not relevant to the discussion on formal semantics, so it is not clear why McCready chose to include tonal markers in her transcription. Tones convey meaning in Thai, and intentional phonetic and tonal variation can convey meaning (Gafaranga 2009; Olson 2012). It would have been wiser to omit tonal markers for Thai in this book since it was not relevant to the discussion and thus distracting. There were also some utterances that seemed unlikely, which were perhaps the result of simplification for the purposes of semantic analysis. This yielded some examples that were missing particles such as question markers. Again, these examples contained items “correct enough” for this volume’s purposes that were, nonetheless, distracting to a Thai speaker. If they were, indeed, authentic examples, there would be room for discussion on the significance of the linguistic variation of the utterances.³

Overall, the book makes an important contribution to cross-linguistic comparison of honorification by developing a system of formal semantic analysis that works across several languages. It lays the foundations for further research work in formal semantics. The inaccuracy of the data used does not serve to weaken her arguments, or the relevance of the discussion, but does make understanding and participating in the discussion more challenging – just as sloppy handwriting does not ruin an essay, but does make it considerably more difficult to understand. Reading the work is a challenge for those outside the field of semantics. However, it is well worth the effort, as it is rewarding for the sociolinguist, too, to see how complex sociolinguistic phenomena can be concisely described. As a non-semantician, I have not questioned or challenged the formulas used, but rather, I have delighted in the work that draws from observable sociolinguistic data and gives it empirical focus.

³ I thank Dr. Chirasiri Kasemsin for the discussion here.

Abbreviations

2P	second person
3P	third person
DEM	demonstrative
FUT	future
HON	honorific
NEG	negative
PART	particle
POL	polite
Q	question

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