

THE CONTEMPORARY USE OF HONORIFICS IN LHASA TIBETAN*

Hanny Feurer

Université du Québec à Montréal

The modern Lhasa dialect (also called U-Tsang dialect) has inherited from its past a complex honorific system. Its complexity is due primarily to its variant verbal and nonverbal forms. The present state of flux of these forms and their functions makes the system even more intricate. More specifically, the contemporary use of honorifics is fluctuating, reflecting ongoing changes in education, technology and industrialization in Lhasa society.

In this paper we present a first analysis of the contemporary use of honorifics in Lhasa, as observed in one particular speech event, that of greetings. The scope of our research was narrowed down to phatic (Jakobson 1960) or initial encounters (often conversation openings) where inevitably respect (honor/non-honor), to various degrees, would be expressed. During the summer of 1995, we collected our data in Lhasa, among its native Tibetan population, by means of informal interviews and participant observation in seven different situations: families, schools, a nationality clothes factory, a monastery, the government, Tibetan Hospital and public places (i.e. the street). In this paper two claims are made about the use of honorifics, one at the formal and the other at the functional level:

1) At the formal level, honorific greeting behavior, as we have studied it in daily initial encounters, cannot be adequately explained without taking into account both verbal and nonverbal components.

2) At the functional level, two overlapping usages of honorifics mark contemporary Lhasa society, one for expressing respect to an interlocutor (major function), the other for self-enhancement (minor function).

This paper is divided into two parts: in the first part we will present a brief account of formal honorific features; in the second we will analyse two functional tendencies in contemporary Lhasa.

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HONORIFIC FORMS

We define honorifics as “constituting a class of...forms used in speaking to...[or addressing]...a social superior”.¹ Traditionally, the concept of honorifics refers only to the verbal act (Beyer 1992:152). However, the encounters we observed have revealed that gestures are an inseparable aspect of the act of greeting. Or, in some instances, the honorific greeting was solely nonverbal in nature, as also confirmed by Waddell (1988:423). Our study thus covers verbal as well as nonverbal honorific features. Briefly, for illustration, we present some verbal forms of honorifics, followed by examples of some nonverbal ones.

Verbal forms

Honorifics are expressed through lexical, morphological and syntactic devices or, as Koshal (1987: 154) explains, by means of “words, phrases and sentence sequences, which have a connotation of respect” and social class marking.

At the level of nouns, pronouns and verbs, the Lhasa dialect is characterized by a binary system, that of normal (unmarked) versus honorific (marked) forms. To a lesser degree though, some honorifics also exhibit a binary distinction between ordinary honorifics vs. extra or higher honorifics. At the lower end of the spectrum there are a few marked forms that indicate a binary distinction implying various degrees of derogation: e.g. ‘1st person sing.’ *khøpa* ‘I (my humble self)’ (self-denigration) or, one degree lower, *khø thsē* ‘I (my most humble self)’; ‘3rd person sing.’ *kho pa* ‘he (a low-status enemy)’. Due to socio-economic changes these denigrating forms (especially *khøpa* and *khø thsē*) are in the process of disappearing in modern Lhasa dialect.

It should be noted that a Tibetan will always refer to himself and his possessions by the unmarked first pronoun or noun even if he were the Dalai Lama. By contrast, honorific terms are used to address a person or refer to a third party of higher rank. It follows that “the honorific system in Tibetan, as a type of noun classification, has thus become bound to the function of deictic person marking or functionally, to what has traditionally been called pronominalization” (Beckwith 1992:6).

The following paradigms will illustrate verbal honorific forms we observed in greetings: first, free lexical forms (primary honorifics); then dependent morphemes or affixes (secondary honorifics).

¹ Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*.

• *Primary honorifics*

These are free or independent lexical forms, etymologically unrelated words, that parallel the normal forms. On the other hand, the extra-honorifics in the following group are derived by the process of affixation.

		<i>Normal</i>	<i>Honorific</i>	<i>Extra-honorific</i>
'child'	N	pu khu	awa	
'he/she'	pron.	kho	khõŋ	
'drink'	V	thõ	tchø	
'go'	V	tşo	the	
'come/go'	V	jõ	phε	tchiũ / tchip cũ
'sit'	V	tø	çu	cuh tẽn (tça)

• *Secondary honorifics*

These are dependent morphemes or honorifics derived by the process of affixation.

a) Prefixation of a syllable to the normal stem or part of the stem:

		<i>Normal</i>	<i>Honorific</i>
'body'	N	su po	ku su
'you'	pron.	raŋ	khε raŋ
'help'	V	ro	tcha ro
'work'	V	le ka	tcha le

b) Suffixation of a syllable to a normal form (A=address, T=title, N=name, K=kin):

		<i>Normal</i>	<i>Honorific</i>
'mother'	(K)	ama	ama la?
'elder sister'	(K/A)	tša	atsa la?
'Teacher Lopsong'	(T+N)	kẽ lop soŋ	kẽ lop soŋ la?

Nonverbal honorific forms

Greetings can occur in verbal and/or nonverbal form, depending upon the situation. For example, if a high lama passes in the street, out of respect he has to be avoided. In the temple this high lama will be greeted nonverbally by a believer with lowered eyes, hands joined near the face and a bow, after s/he has removed his/her hat and/or lowered his/her braided hair. The lama might

respond with a sign of blessing by touching the top of the head of the greeter. If it is an incarnate lama, the believer will initiate this most honorable encounter by three prostrations, an extra-honorific gesture. These are ritualized, nonverbal greeting forms with overlapping religious functions, often observed in monasteries.

Another ancient nonverbal greeting, equivalent to an honorific, is the showing of the tongue. Waddell² (1988:423-24) citing Herbert Spencer, called it an excellent example of "self-surrender of the person saluting to the individual he salutes". In contemporary Lhasa, this symbolic gesture³ is used mainly by the older generation in encounters with highly competent or well-respected individuals such as a well-known medical doctor. However, an elementary school teacher from the old town of Lhasa told me that her students (the young generation) greeted her in the street with this ancient salutation of extending their tongue and, as a further sign of submission, scratching their hair with their right hand.

Spoken greetings that express deference are usually accompanied by gestures that emphasise and specify the degree of politeness the speaker intends to express toward the encountered person. For instance, a host will welcome a higher guest, either a religious or a secular leader, with the same greeting: *Title X + ja tchip cū naŋ ko* 'X, please come in'. The salutor's nonverbal behavior alone will clarify the degree of respect expressed toward the visitor. Thus, while uttering this greeting of welcome, a host will greet a high lama most respectfully with both hands palms up and a slight bow, whereas a high official would only be welcomed with one hand, palm up and/or a nod. We conclude that gestures specify or modify the functions of the spoken greeting. They act also as phatic emblems (independent greeting forms) that express different degrees of respect in encounters. The next section will elaborate in more detail the functional aspect of honorific markers.

CONTEMPORARY FUNCTIONS OF HONORIFIC MARKERS

It appears that at least two functions (intentions of the speaker in the sense of Halliday 1973) characterize the use of honorifics in Lhasa.

The first functional class includes two overlapping traditional functions treated as one major class in this paper: a) defining and affirming a social superior (class marking); b) expressing politeness, respect or deference.

The second class, though minor, involves a contemporary dynamic observed in Lhasa. It concerns the use of honorifics as a manipulation of relations for personal reasons (personal enhancement).

² He took part in the British Tibetan Expedition of 1903-04 to Lhasa.

³ It is usually accompanied by a nod or a slightly forward head movement.

1) Attitude of respect expressed to social superiors and its fluctuation

Before 1959, a social superior was a person of noble descent (belonging to one of the noble families), or of the high clergy and/or of advanced age. There was a strict code of politeness imposed in public encounters reinforcing the social stratification. Punishment was inflicted on those who did not comply. In modern Lhasa, the once honored noble families have been relegated to a lower social position, thereby leaving their place in the social hierarchy to high-ranking officials. For instance, in the past, a person would jump off his horse to greet a high lama or an elder. The same phenomenon might still occur when a younger person on bicycle meets an elderly acquaintance or someone of higher rank. S/he will jump off the vehicle to express his/her homage to the passerby. However, high-ranking young leaders passing by car, might or might not stop to show the expected deference to high clergy or their elders. It seems that, besides other factors, modern technology has been instrumental in changing social relations (Tuwang, personal communication 1995).

Most of my interviewees agreed that superior status more than superior age, kin relation or any other factor now affects the mode of interaction. I witnessed the importance of high status during my field work in Lhasa together with my Lhasa-born project organiser, Khesang Yeshe, the director of the TASS literature department, also a writer, in his fifties. The following examples are descriptive of most of the verbal greetings addressed to him:

- | | | | |
|-----|-----|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| (1) | G | kē khe saŋ je ɕe la? | 'Teacher Khesang Yeshe, you are |
| | (h) | te (h) o | going.' |
| | R | la si(h) a le phe (h) o | 'Yes. Good bye.' |

The greeter passed us on a bicycle. Even though he had been a classmate of my organiser, he would call him by title and use honorific expressions. However he did not stop and jump off his bike. We assume that his familiarity with the addressee motivated such behavior. Or was he in a rush?

- | | | | |
|-----|---|--------------------------|----------------------|
| (2) | G | Palm of free hand up (h) | NV G by elderly Lama |
| | | + slight bow (h) | |
| | R | āla | 'Monk' + nod |

On our way back to the Academy, we passed by the bicycle of a pedestrian, a retired staff member (clergy). Though loaded down with a shopping bag, he greeted Khesang Yeshe most respectfully with a repetitive up and down gesture of his free hand, palm up, and a head movement. Khesang Yeshe responded verbally but did not stop, a behavior that confirmed his higher status.

Out of seven greetings addressed to Khesang Yeshe during a couple of outings, two only were informal, using non-honorific expressions. One was acted out nonverbally, by a younger woman doctor, who nodded the head when she passed my organiser in the street. She must have felt equal in status and/or they were very familiar with each other.⁴ The other greeting was uttered by a younger Amdo colleague working under Khesang Yeshe. He jumped off his bicycle, addressing his leader informally with: *kha pa tchim pa* 'Where did you go?' Getting off the bicycle nevertheless was an honorific gesture. Even though our data is limited to the Lhasa dialects, I include this example, since it illustrates the importance of body language as a functional modifier. The greeter's familiar speech marked him as an Amdo speaker who would use honorifics less often in his dialect than Lhasa speakers. This dialectal difference that also characterised Kham speakers was often criticised in Lhasa as impolite speech. In the case of our Amdo, his gestures of stopping, nodding and smiling at the addressee clearly indicated a high degree of politeness or respect for his leader, thus modifying positively the tone of the encounter.

So far we have seen that verbal and nonverbal honorifics share similar functions in phatic encounters, that of expressing respect/deference in various degrees and of signalling status (specifying the type of rapport existing between the speaker and hearer). We have also shown that nonverbal behavior can modify the tone of the encounter. The informal behavior of the addresser of (1) reduced the formal tone of the encounter. In contrast, the polite behavior of the Amdo communicated an attitude of respect in spite of his unmarked speech and thus rendered the encounter more formal.

The importance of status in initial encounters was not only signalled by verbal and nonverbal honorifics but also by the use of titles. Notice the title 'teacher' in (1) is followed by a set of honorific forms. Similarly, a greeting addressed to a high-ranking person may contain an initial title and/or name as well as marked linguistic forms or, minimally, a title/term of address as in *ajo amtci-la?* 'Oh, doctor!' The greeter, a woman, hurried over to the lady doctor waiting in front of the Academy gate. The latter, pleasantly surprised, responded with a smile.⁵ The use of a title with or without a name signals social distance or a type of power relation between speaker and hearer (Brown and Gilman 1960), in addition to expressing respect or deference by the addresser. It is habitually reenforced by a more or less highly marked mode of speech and gestures, depending upon the rank of the addressee.

⁴ Later there was no opportunity to discuss these hypotheses with Professor Khesang Yeshe.

⁵ Among young people terms of address were seldom used. Instead, exclamations or 2nd person pronouns and/or short, informal greetings seemed to be the norm. (23) *ja* 'Oh!' was addressed by my young interpreter on his bike to another biker. The answer was a smile.

Strategies exist to compensate for ignorance, memory loss or linguistic incompetence with respect to appropriate address forms. An interviewee of noble birth specified that if the title or the name of a high-ranking person was unknown or forgotten, the speech had to be more polite (more honorifics or extra-honorifics had to be used). On the other hand, hypercorrection was observed with titles that were implicit honorific forms. (Tournadre, personal communication 1996). Thus I heard visitors in a monastery near Lhasa greet a monk not with the standard form *guco(h)*, but with a double honorific marking: *guco(h) laʔ(h)* 'Monk'. Finally, the choice of the appropriate form of address or absence of address term is subject to a complex set of interdependent factors. Though status seems to be of prime importance, other factors have to be considered, including kin relation, degree of familiarity, gender, age, situational setting (i.e. in public or at home). Such a complex topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

Another example in support of the importance of status/rank in modern Lhasa are some of the neologistic honorifics (Tuwang, personal communication 1995):

	<i>Normal</i>	<i>Honorific</i>
(3) 'Deaf person'	ku pa	ce ku
(4) 'Children of mixed Tibetan/Nepali origin'	kha tshar	ce tshar

The honorific address term (3) was specially created for the Panchen Lama's brother who was deaf. Here again status is decisive rather than the physical handicap or infirmity. The address form (4) refers to class distinction, low versus high. It also relates to the concept of ethnic identity, more specifically to a society where children of mixed marriages have become accepted. Lhasa society is becoming more inclusive.

Until now we have defined status primarily in terms of occupational, social and ethnic features. Finally we must mention the importance of religious status in modern Lhasa. For example, high lamas invited for rituals will usually be addressed by extra-honorifics, verbally or nonverbally as explained above. In the streets of contemporary Lhasa, greetings to the clergy vary, according to his/her rank and the addressers', gender, age, relation and belief. One of my informants assured me that the degree of bowing to a high lama indicated a person's degree of faith: the deeper the bow the stronger the faith. Most people, whether believers or not, will express respect to an incarnate lama and at least avoid him, if not taking off the hat, dropping the hair or bowing.

Though Tibetan society is changing, certain areas besides religion have resisted the change. Noble families are still respected by many and this attitude

is expressed in greetings. One elderly lady of noble birth would greet a child of her friend (also a noble lady) at the market as follows:

- (5) *khe raŋ(h) a ma laʔ(h) ki tcha ro(h) la phe(h) peʔ*
 ‘Have you come helping your mother?’

An elderly driver confirmed that he also addressed children from noble families in a high language. However, such attitudes are changing among the younger generation. Young people in modern Lhasa, whether noble or not, greet each other and younger children in an unmarked, common language.

A final look at the structural aspect of high language greetings reveals considerable differences in the length of greetings and the number of honorific forms used. In (1) the classmate of Khesang Yeshe uses a rather short sentence with only one honorific marker besides the title and the name. The greeting of our noble lady (5) addressed to a child is much more elaborate, containing many honorific markers. This particular style was characteristic of all the greetings we elicited from her.⁶ An interesting subject to pursue are formal errors in honorifics. In our sample they were relatively rare, except for a few hypercorrections (mainly of titles. See e.g. *guco(h) laʔ(h)*, above). It seems that language is more carefully monitored in the initial encounter than during a conversation.

The great discrepancy in using honorifics nowadays depends not only on education, age and situational factors but also upon an individual's value system. We met individuals of noble descent who minimized the use of high language, whereas others, not of noble birth, placed much value upon such usage. In the following section we shall elaborate on this point.

2) *Manipulation of relations for personal enhancement*

A second function we have observed in modern Lhasa relates to the personal enhancement of status.

In the past, high language was used to show deference and modesty to the religious establishment, noble families, elders and high leaders (who usually belonged to one or the other of these classes). Today, for example, one finds amongst ordinary Lhasa citizens some who have succeeded in commerce to the

6 Another interesting phenomenon pertains to changes in the use of honorific verbs. A much used honorific is *phe* ‘go’ as in the following greeting exchange in the street:

G : *phe (h) a* ‘Go (in peace)!’

R : *phe (h) o* ‘Go (in peace).’

It seems that the honorific morpheme is gradually replacing the unmarked form *tco* in Lhasa greetings.

extent that they have become *nouveau riche* and like to be recognized and honored for their achievements, as were the noble families in the past. For example in public these *nouveaux riches* expect to be greeted as high-status addressees. Evidently their expectations are not always met. We believe that such communication problems are due to conflicting social norms. The greater the social diversity in modern Lhasa, the more pronounced will be the interference in variable greeting behaviors (Braun 1988:22-23).

In some of these newly rich families, parents now teach their children to address them by a high language. They are respectively called by their children *ama laʃ(h)* 'mother' or *pa laʃ(h)* 'father'. In contemporary noble families, nevertheless, young children address their parents by the normal, unmarked address *ama* mother and *pa* father (Drokar, personal communication 1995), thus indicating closeness or solidarity rather than distance or power. High language is not only comprised of address forms. A greeting initiated by an honorific term of address traditionally calls for high language or the appropriate use of honorific markers for the remaining utterance. According to my informants of noble descent, many mistakes occur in this area, especially at the discourse level, an indicator of breakdown in the old patterns.

It is known that the appropriate use of the traditional high language demands the mastery of many sociolinguistic rules, the knowledge of a large lexicon of honorifics and special syntactic arrangements. Are the linguistic shortcomings of the *nouveaux riches* due to the period of about 15 years when the use of honorifics was obsolete and average families had no exposure to these rather complex forms? This topic is to be pursued in the near future, when we hope to collect more relevant material.

In this paper we have shown that the use of honorifics and their functions in initial encounters is shifting in Lhasa. A gradual shift presupposes the co-existence of old and new usages. Will the latter gradually replace the former? If so, are we in the process of seeing a new language usage emerge where some honorific forms become the norm and others are eliminated? Where occupation and rank determine the use of honorifics regardless of age? Where the honorific system is used for enhancing one's own honor rather than that of the interlocutor? Or will diversification increase and with it the multiplication of norms and subsequent interferences?

Leaving speculations aside, our research findings imply that the Lhasa dialect is still at a stage where different usages co-exist. (See the above example of the business family who admitted that they address children normally except if they are of noble descent.) In practical terms, this implies that one group of people will continue for a while to be offended by the mistakes produced (in the

use of honorifics) by others, another group by the lack of respect expressed to them. In either case, expectations have to be reevaluated within the context of a society that is in transition. The fluctuating use of honorifics is a true reflection of a society in search of its new identity.

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