Two φ-Feature Sets on Honorific Nouns

Gurmeet Kaur

1. Introduction

It is well-known that pronouns can encode honorificity distinctions. That is, apart from information about the person, number (and gender) of an individual, pronouns can also convey information about the social relation between the speaker and said individual. For instance, the referent of the pronoun *usted* in Spanish is a singular addressee who is also honorific vis-à-vis the speaker. Unlike pronouns, the encoding of honorificity in nouns is rarer and less-discussed (however, see Houtzagers 2018, Bhatt & Davis 2023, Corbett 2023, Sinha 2023). This paper discusses novel data from honorific nouns in Punjabi (Western Indo-Aryan/WIA) and provides a morphosyntactic account.

Nouns in Punjabi can be used to refer to a singular honorific individual (SG.HON nouns henceforth). In this usage, the noun occurs with singular morphology itself but triggers plural agreement on the predicate. See (1) with a feminine SG.HON noun which bans the plural nominal affix, but triggers plural agreement on the verb. This plural agreement is always masculine in the language.

(1) caacci-(*yaaN) aaye
aunt-(PL) come.PFV.MPL
'The aunt (hon) came.'

Unlike predicative agreement which is always plural, DP-internal agreement/concord with SG.HON nouns in Punjabi can be singular. As shown in (2a), feminine SG.HON nouns in Punjabi can occur with either masculine plural (MPL) or feminine singular (FSG) DP-internal agreement. Their masculine counterparts only allow MPL DP-internal agreement however. See (2b).

(2) a. mere pyaare/meri pyaari caacci aaye
my.MPL lovely.MPL/my.FSG lovely.FSG aunt come.PFV.MPL
'My lovely aunt (hon) came.'

b. mere pyaare/(*meraa pyaaraa) caaccaa aaye
my.MPL lovely.MPL/my.MSG lovely.MSG uncle come.PFV.MPL
'My lovely uncle (hon) came.'

This paper claims that SG.HON nouns in Punjabi have a distinct structure vis-à-vis regular singular and plural nouns. A regular singular/plural noun hosts a unique specification for number on the Num(ber) head and for gender on n. I illustrate this for a regular feminine plural noun in (3). By contrast, a SG.HON noun in Punjabi contains a dual specification of number and gender features at different heights within the nominal structure. The higher φ-set consists of a plural and a masculine feature, hosted together on an Honorific Projection/HonP. The lower φ-set consists of the inherent gender feature on n and the semantic number feature (here, SG) on Num. The structural representation for a feminine SG.HON noun is in (4).

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(3) $[_{KP}$ CASE $[_{NumP}$ PL $[_{nP}$ FEM $[\sqrt{}\,]]]]$

(4) $[_{HonP}$ MASC,PL $[_{KP}$ CASE $[_{NumP}$ SG $[_{nP}$ FEM $[\sqrt{}\,]]]]]$

The lack of a plural Num head in the structure in (4) explains the absence of plural morphology in SG.HON nouns. At the same time, the presence of plural and masculine features on Hon, the highest head in the structure, accounts for obligatory masculine plural agreement on the predicate. Under the assumption that DP-internal agreement takes place locally via Downward Agree (e.g. Landau 2016), we can derive optionality in DP-internal agreement with feminine SG.HON nouns by merging adnominals above or below Hon. Variation in DP-internal agreement across masculine and feminine SG.HON nouns is attributed to morphology. In particular, assuming the Nanosyntactic framework (Caha 2009, Starke 2009), where lexical items are representations of articulated arboreal structure, I propose that the feminine *-i* affix and the masculine *-aa* affix are associated with structures of different sizes, which determines the number of possible merge sites for an adnominal, and by consequence the lack of singular DP-internal agreement with masculine SG.HON nouns.

The paper is organized as follows: in section 2, I introduce the core data. In section 3, I propose the structure for SG.HON nouns and account for their properties. Section 4 discusses nouns that constitute an exception to the proposed syntactic structure. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Properties of SG.HON nouns in Punjabi

2.1. Plural predicative agreement despite no nominal plural morphology

Typically, SG.HON nouns in Punjabi occur without plural nominal morphology. Let us start with feminine SG.HON nouns. Feminine nouns in the language generally occur with the feminine *-i* ending across nominative (NOM) and oblique (OBL) occurrences. Plurality on a feminine noun is indicated by adding the suffix *-yaaN*[1]. When used honorifically with a singular reference, the feminine noun must occur without the plural *-yaaN* morphology. This is shown in Table (1).

Table 1: Feminine nouns: regular and SG.HON paradigm

	SG	PL	SG.HON
Nom	-i	-i-yaaN	-i
Obl	-i	-i-yaaN	-i

A whole range of masculine nouns, when used honorifically, also ban plural affixes across their nominative and oblique occurrences. This set contains nouns like *caaccaa* 'father's younger brother', *maammaa* 'mother's brother', *naannaa* 'maternal grandfather', *taayaa* 'father's older brother', *raajaa* 'king', among others[2]. Consider the paradigm for the noun *caaccaa*, as shown in Table (2) - the noun appears with *-aa* in its regular singular, nominative occurrence. The plural nominative form ends in *-e*, an ending also used for singular oblique nouns. The plural oblique ending is *-e-yaaN*. When used honorifically with a singular reference, the noun *caaccaa* must occur with the singular nominative ending *-aa* and without any plural affixes *-e/e-yaaN* across case specifications.

Table 2: Masculine nouns (*caaccaa*-group): regular and SG.HON paradigm

	SG	PL	SG.HON
Nom	-aa	-e	-aa
Obl	-e	-e-yaaN	-aa

Despite the lack of plural morphology on the SG.HON noun form, it triggers plural agreement on the predicate. As shown in (5a-5b), a feminine singular and a feminine plural noun, unspecified for

[1] Some feminine nouns in Punjabi do not occur with the *-i* ending, e.g. *pùaa* 'father's sister'. Since these nouns pattern with the *-i* ending feminine nouns when used honorifically, I use *-i* ending feminines as representative of all feminine nouns for reasons of brevity.

[2] Some masculine SG.HON nouns allow a plural affix. These will be discussed in section (4).

honorificity, occur with matching number and gender agreement. By contrast, a feminine SG.HON noun occurs with plural agreement, (5c). Furthermore, this plural agreement is masculine and not feminine.

(5) a. caacci aayi
aunt.FSG come.PFV.FSG
'The aunt came.'

b. caacciyaaN aayiyaaN
aunt.FPL come.PFV.FPL
'The aunts came.'

c. caacci aaye
aunt come.PFV.MPL
'The aunt (hon) came.'

Similar facts obtain for *caaccaa*-type masculine nouns. As shown in (6a-6b), a masculine singular and a masculine plural noun, unspecified for honorificity, occur with matching agreement. However, a masculine SG.HON noun, despite its singular form, triggers plural agreement on the predicate, (6c).

(6) a. caaccaa aayaa
uncle.MSG come.PFV.MSG
'The uncle came.'

b. caacce aaye
uncle.MPL come.PFV.MPL
'The uncles came.'

c. caaccaa aaye
uncle come.PFV.MPL
'The uncle (hon) came.'

To sum up, all feminine nouns and the *caaccaa*-group of masculine nouns trigger plural agreement on the predicate despite the absence of any plural morphology on the noun itself. This plural agreement is masculine, even when the SG.HON noun is feminine.

2.2. Optionality of plural agreement in DP-internal agreement

DP-internal agreement with a regular noun, unspecified for honorificity, must also match the gender and number features of the noun. I illustrate for feminine nouns in (7) and for masculine nouns in (8).

(7) a. meri caacci aayi
my.FSG aunt.FSG come.PFV.FSG
'My aunt came.'

b. meriyaaN caacciyaaN aayiyaaN
my.FPL aunt.FPL come.PFV.FPL
'My aunts came.'

(8) a. meraa caaccaa aayaa
my.MSG uncle.MSG come.PFV.MSG
'My uncle came.'

b. mere caacce aaye
my.MPL uncle.MPL come.PFV.MPL
'My uncles came.'

SG.HON nouns pattern differently. A feminine SG.HON noun can trigger either plural or singular agreement on DP-internal modifiers. Consider (9), where the adjective and possessor can show either FSG or MPL agreement with a feminine SG.HON noun.

(9) mere pyaare/meri pyaari caacci aaye
my.MPL lovely.MPL/my.FSG lovely.FSG aunt come.PFV.MPL
'My lovely aunt (hon) came.'

Moreover, in the presence of adjectives like *vaDDaa* 'older' and *chhoTTaa* 'younger' used with kinship nouns, mixed DP-internal agreement can obtain with a feminine SG.HON noun. Consider the examples in (10), which contain a possessive and the adjective *vaDDaa* 'older'. While speakers prefer matching agreement on both adnominals as in (10a), mismatching agreement is also possible. See (10b) with singular agreement on the adjective and plural agreement on the possessive. Crucially, reversing the directionality of the mismatch leads to ungrammaticality, as shown in (10c).

(10) a. mere vaDDe/meri vaDDi caacci aaye
my.MPL older.MPL/my.FSG older.FSG aunt come.PFV.MPL
'My older aunt (hon) came.'

b. %mere vaDDi caacci aaye
my.MPL older.FSG aunt come.PFV.MPL
'My older aunt (hon) came.'

c. * meri vaDDe caacci aaye
my.FSG older.MPL aunt come.PFV.MPL
'Intended: My older aunt (hon) came.'

The optionality between SG and PL agreement on DP-internal agreement targets is not attested for a masculine SG.HON noun, which can only trigger plural DP-internal agreement, as shown in (11). Note that the singular form of the adnominals in (11) is morphologically well-formed, as shown by their occurrence in (12) with a regular masculine singular noun, unspecified for honorificity.

(11) mere pyaare/*meraa pyaaraa caaccaa aaye
my.MPL lovely.MPL/my.MSG lovely.MSG uncle come.PFV.MPL
'My lovely uncle (hon) came.'

(12) meraa pyaaraa caaccaa aayaa
my.MSG lovely.MSG uncle come.PFV.MSG
'My lovely uncle came.'

Thus, feminine SG.HON nouns in Punjabi can trigger either MPL or FSG DP-internal agreement. Their masculine counterparts can only control MPL DP-internal agreement, however.

3. Analysis

So far, we have seen that SG.HON nouns in Punjabi ban plural affixes on their own form but trigger plural agreement on the predicate. This plural agreement also obtains on DP-internal agreement targets. Only with feminine SG.HON nouns, singular DP-internal agreement is also possible.

To account for the singular form of SG.HON nouns and their agreement, I propose that SG.HON nouns in Punjabi contain two sets of φ-features. They host their inherent gender feature value on n, and the semantic number feature value (here, singular) on Num. In addition, SG.HON nouns contain an Honorific Projection higher in the nominal structure, which hosts a plural feature value and a masculine feature value. The proposed structure is schematized in (13), (see also Bhatt & Davis 2023, Sinha 2023).

(13) $[_{\text{HonP}}$ MASC,PL $[_{\text{KP}}$ CASE $[_{\text{NumP}}$ SG $[_{\text{nP}}$ MASC/FEM $[\sqrt{}\,]]]]]$

In (13), the Num(ber) head (the locus of semantic number) hosts a singular feature while the plural feature is situated on Hon. Treating nominal plural affixes as realizations of a plural feature on *Num*, we can explain why SG.HON nouns never appear with plural affixes themselves.

Recall that predicative agreement with all SG.HON nouns, both masculine and feminine, must be MPL. Following Danon (2011), the highest nominal head is the only nominal head that is accessible to agreement from the outside. Since HonP is the highest head in the nominal structure, its features (MPL) are transferred to the predicate upon agreement.

As for DP-internal agreement, we have seen that feminine SG.HON nouns can trigger FSG or MPL agreement on DP-internal agreement targets. This optionality can be explained by proposing that HonP can be merged before or after the merger of adjectives/possessives. To elaborate, I assume with Landau (2016) that DP-internal agreement targets are just like predicative agreement targets in that they value their features locally via Downward Agree. Consider first a scenario where the adjective merges before the merger of HonP. Assuming a strictly bottom-up derivation, when the adjective is merged, it probes for a φ-source to value its unvalued number and gender features. At this stage, before Hon is merged, the only source of gender features is n, which is specified as feminine, and the only source of number features is Num, specified as singular. This leads to FSG agreement on the adjective. This is schematized in (14).

(14) $[_{\text{HonP}}$ MASC,PL $[_{\text{AdjP}}$ FEM,SG $[_{\text{KP}}$ CASE $[_{\text{NumP}}$ SG $[_{\text{nP}}$ FEM $[\sqrt{}\,]]]]]]$

Compare this with a scenario where the adjective merges after the merger of HonP in the nominal structure. In this configuration, HonP is the closest locus of number and gender features for the probe on the adjective. Consequently, we obtain MPL agreement on the adjective. This is represented in (15).

(15) [$_{\text{AdjP}}$ MASC,PL [$_{\text{HonP}}$ MASC,PL [$_{\text{KP}}$ CASE [$_{\text{NumP}}$ SG [$_{\text{nP}}$ FEM [$\sqrt{}$]]]]]]

Thus, the proposed structure for SG.HON nouns can account for predicative agreement with all nouns, as well as DP-internal agreement with feminine SG.HON nouns. However, the lack of singular agreement with masculine SG.HON nouns in the DP-internal domain remains unexplained. I attribute this to the morphology of the masculine affix *-aa*, as discussed in the following subsection.

3.1. Lack of singular DP-internal agreement with masculine SG.HON nouns

The *-aa* ending in masculine SG.HON nouns differs in two crucial ways from the feminine *-i* ending. **Different distribution:** The set of feminine nouns that *-i* appears on does not change across the regular and honorific paradigms. Thus, all feminine nouns that appear with *-i* in their regular (here, SG.NOM) usage also appear with *-i* in their honorific usage. See Table (3). However, this is not the case for *-aa*. The SG.NOM form of many masculine nouns, used without a honorific meaning, ends in *-aa*. Let us label this larger class as Class I. When used honorifically, only a subset of Class I nouns occur with the *-aa* ending, while others appear with *-e*. See Table (4).

Table 3: No alternation in feminine nouns

Root	Regular (SG.NOM)	Honorific (SG.NOM)	
$\sqrt{caacc}$	caacci	caacci	'father's younger brother's wife'
$\sqrt{mamm}$	maammi	maammi	'mother's brother's wife'
$\sqrt{pàtij}$	pàtiji	pàtiji	'niece'
$\sqrt{potr}$	potri	potri	'paternal granddaughter'

Table 4: The *-aa/-e* alternation in Class I masculine nouns

Root	Regular (SG.NOM)	Honorific (SG.NOM)	
$\sqrt{caacc}$	caaccaa	caaccaa	'father's younger brother'
$\sqrt{mamm}$	maammaa	maammaa	'mother's brother'
$\sqrt{daadd}$	daaddaa	daaddaa	'paternal grandfather'
$\sqrt{pàtij}$	pàtijaa	pàtije	'nephew'
$\sqrt{munD}$	munDaa	munDe	'boy'
$\sqrt{potr}$	potraa	potre	'paternal grandson'

Different availability of honorific meaning: Secondly, *-aa* in SG.HON nouns differs from *-i* (or *-e*) as regards the availability of honorific meaning. Both *-i* and *-aa* ending honorific nouns are interpreted as honorific in their nominative occurrence due to plural agreement on the verb. That is, they do not require any additional honorific morphology. Punjabi has nominal honorific markers such as *-jii* and *-saab*. See (16), where both *-aa* and *-i* ending nouns are interpreted as honorific, regardless of *-jii*.

(16) caaccaa-(jii)/caacci-(jii) aaye
uncle-HON/aunt-HON come.PFV.MPL
'The uncle (hon)/ aunt (hon) came.'

Consider now the above nouns in their non-nominative occurrence. Non-nominative nouns in Punjabi do not trigger agreement. In this occurrence without corresponding plural agreement on the verb, the noun *caaccaa* still does not require *-jii* for an honorific meaning, (17)[3]. However, the noun *caacci*, in

[3] DOM in these examples stands for differential object marking.

its non-nominative occurrence, has a neutral reading. For an honorific reading, it requires additional morphology such as *-jii*, or plural agreement on the DP-internal modifier. See (18).

(17) caaccaa-(jii)-nuu bulaao
uncle-HON-DOM call.IMP
'Call the uncle (hon).'

(18) a. caacci-jii-nuu bulaao
aunt-HON-DOM call.IMP
'Call the aunt (hon).'

b. mere caacci-nuu bulaao
my.MPL aunt-DOM call.IMP
'Call my aunt (hon).'

Thus, the SG.HON form ending in *-aa* has a dedicated honorific meaning even without honorific markers across its (non)-nominative occurrences.

I propose that this uniqueness of the *-aa* ending in masculine SG.HON nouns prevents them from controlling singular DP-internal agreement. I model this within the Nanosyntactic framework (Caha 2018, 2009, Starke 2009, a.o.), which treats lexical items as representations of an articulated tree structure. Two concepts from Nanosyntax that are relevant for my proposal are: (i) phrasal spell-out, and (ii) structural intervention for spell-out by additional syntactic nodes not present in the lexical entry. The core idea behind phrasal spellout is that pronunciation is like other operations in natural language (movement, ellipsis, etc.) in that it targets potentially nontrivial constituents. In other words, phrasal spellout is a type of nonterminal spellout. According to structural intervention, a lexical entry can spell-out a syntactic tree only when an XP does not intervene between these features in the tree. Consider (19a) - the lexical entry */abba/* spells out a tree AP which contains features A and B. Although the structure given in (19b) also contains features A and B, */abba/* cannot spell out AP in (19b) due to the presence of the additional node XP in the syntactic structure (Caha 2009, Fábregas 2018).

(19) a. /abba/ ⇔ [$_{AP}$ A [$_{BP}$ B]]
b. [$_{AP}$ A [$_{XP}$ [$_{BP}$ B]]]

Given this set of background assumptions, I propose that *-aa* lexicalises a larger tree containing the HonP, which *-i* does not. Consider the following lexical entry for *-aa*:

(20) /-aa/ ⇔ [$_{HonP}$ MASC,PL [$_{KP}$ NOM/OBL [$_{NumP}$ SG [$_{nP}$ MASC]]]]

When the honorific structure (as in 13) is to be spelled out, *-aa* expones the entire tree including HonP. Taking adjectives and possessives to head their own projection, the above lexical entry for *-aa* prevents any overt additional constituent from being merged in the structure between HonP and nP since it cannot be spelled out by *-aa*. Thus, adnominals can only merge above HonP, in which case, their closest source of φ-features is the Hon head hosting MPL features. As a result, *-aa* ending masculine SG.HON nouns can only occur with plural agreement on DP-internal agreement targets[4]. On the other hand, the *-i* ending in feminine SG.HON nouns does not lexicalize the full tree including HonP. Consequently, adnominals can be merged both above and below Hon, leading to optionality in DP-internal agreement.

To sum up, both feminine nouns and *caaccaa*-type masculine nouns, when used honorifically, have a uniform structure consisting of a dual specification of number and gender features at distinct heights. Differences in DP-internal agreement result from lexicalization of the full honorific tree only by *-aa*.

4. The exceptionality of some masculine nouns

Apart from the *caaccaa*-group of masculine nouns, Punjabi has two additional groups of masculine nouns. These two groups exhibit properties that cannot be explained via the structure for SG.HON nouns

[4] In line with the Superset Principle (Caha 2009), the lexical entry for *-aa* can also spell out the structure for a regular SG.NOM masculine noun without HonP since that structure would constitute a sub-tree of (20).

proposed so far. The first group contains nouns such as *pàtijaa* 'nephew', *potra* 'maternal grandson', among others, which end in *-e* when used honorifically. See Table (5). Note that these nouns belong to the same group as *caaccaa*-type nouns in the regular paradigm. However, they behave differently in their honorific usage - instead of the *-aa* ending, they employ the *-e* ending.

Table 5: Masculine nouns (*pàtijaa*-group): regular and SG.HON paradigm

	SG	PL	SG.HON
Nom	-aa	-e	-e
Obl	-e	-e-yaaN	-e

The second group contains nouns such as *fuffaR* 'father's sister's husband', *jeTh* 'husband's older brother', among others. These nouns appear with a null ending when used honorifically. See Table (6).

Table 6: Masculine nouns (*fuffaR*-group): regular and SG.HON paradigm

	SG	PL	SG.HON
Nom	-∅	-∅	-∅
Obl	-∅	-∅-aaN	-∅

Both these sets of nouns pattern with the *caaccaa*-group of masculine nouns as regards agreement, which must always be plural on both DP-external and internal targets, as shown in (21a) and (21b).

(21) a. mere/*meraa pàtiije aaye
my.MPL/my.MSG nephew come.PFV.MPL
'My nephew (pl/sg.hon) came.'

b. mere/*meraa fuffaR aaye
my.MPL/my.MSG uncle come.PFV.MPL
'My uncle (pl/sg.hon) came.'

However, they cannot be treated on a par with the *caaccaa*-group due to the following reasons: first, the nominative form of the *pàtijaa*-group of masculine nouns, when used honorifically, occurs with the plural ending *-e*. As Sinha (2023) shows via Marathi, *-e* in honorific nouns in Western Indo-Aryan languages is the PL.NOM affix and not the SG.OBL affix. Secondly, nouns in both *pàtijaa* and *fuffaR*-group are ambiguous between a plural reference and a SG.HON reference when they occur with plural agreement on the verb, see (22a) and (23a). By contrast, *caaccaa*-group of masculine nouns only have a SG.HON reference when they occur with plural agreement on the verb, as seen previously in (6c). Lastly, since these two groups of masculine nouns are ambiguous in their nominative occurrence, they obligatorily need an honorific marker (e.g. *-jii/saab*) to have a uniquely honorific reference, as shown in (22b) and (23b). As seen already, nouns belonging to the *caaccaa*-group do not have this requirement.

(22) a. pàtiije aaye
nephew come.PFV.MPL
'The nephew (pl/sg.hon) came.'

b. pàtiije-saab aaye
nephew-HON come.PFV.MPL
'The nephew (sg.hon) came.'

(23) a. fuffaR aaye
uncle come.PFV.MPL
'The uncle (pl/sg.hon) came.'

b. fuffaR-jii aaye
uncle-HON come.PFV.MPL
'The uncle (sg.hon) came.'

Note that SG.HON nouns of these two groups cannot be treated as regular plurals in syntax either. As illustrated in Tables (5) and (6), SG.HON nouns of both these groups ban the plural affix *-(y)aaN* from their oblique forms, unlike their regular plural counterparts.

To account for the properties of SG.HON nouns of the *pàtijaa* and *fuffaR*-group, I propose the following structure in (24). As for all honorifics discussed so far, the structure in (24) hosts a Hon head with a masculine and a plural feature, and the n hosts the inherent gender specification (here, masculine) per usual. However, instead of a singular specification, the Num head is also specified as plural.

(24) $[_{\text{HonP}}$ MASC,PL $[_{\text{KP}}$ NOM/OBL $[_{\text{NumP}}$ PL $[_{\text{nP}}$ MASC $[\sqrt{}\,]]]]]$

Since HonP hosting the masculine and plural features is the highest node, predicative agreement is always plural with these nouns too. DP-internal agreement must also always be plural since both instances of the number feature in the structure are plural. The above structure also explains the ambiguity in meaning - since Punjabi typically does not have a designated spell-out rule for Hon in nouns, the input in (24) will be realized by the same form that realizes the regular plural noun. Consequently, disambiguation via honorific markers becomes obligatory. Finally, the ban on *-(y)aaN* in the oblique form of SG.HON nouns of both groups can be attributed to morphological overload. It is often assumed that in configurations with marked morphological features, it is possible for exponents of certain morphological categories to disappear (e.g., Calabrese 2008, Despić 2017). I suggest that the presence of PL on HonP, PL on NumP and OBL on KP in the same tree as in (24) constitutes a morphologically overloaded configuration that cannot be exponed - both PL and OBL are marked values as compared to SG and NOM. Since PL on HonP is usually null anyway (except for *caaccaa*-type honorifics), either the OBL on KP or the PL on NumP must be left unrealized. The former case results in a NOM.PL form while the latter in a OBL.SG form - both forms are homophonous for the nouns under discussion. In either case, *-(y)aaN* cannot be exponed. A formal implementation of this idea is left for future work.

5. Conclusion

Employing novel data from Punjabi, this paper has shown that SG.HON nouns do not have the morphosyntax of regular nouns (singular or plural). Instead, these nouns host a dual specification of number and gender features at different heights within the nominal structure. The higher φ-set contains a plural and a masculine feature, hosted together on an Honorific Projection. The lower φ-set consists of the gender feature specification on n and a singular feature on Num. Furthermore, exploring variation across different classes of (masculine) honorific nouns, I have also demonstrated that the lower instance of the number feature on Num can vary between a singular and a plural value across SG.HON nouns.

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