The Price of Politeness: Subject Honorification and Processing*

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This paper examines the role of processing in honorific agreement, a phenomenon long considered to be essentially sociolinguistic in character. We focus on two uses of the subject honorific -(u)si, one involving situations in which the referent of the subject is socially superior to both the speaker and the addressee (the ‘classic condition’) and the other involving situations in which the referent of the subject is higher in status than the speaker but lower than the addressee (the ‘split condition’). Drawing on a reaction time experiment, we show that college-age native speakers of Korean find it more difficult to make decisions about honorific use in the split condition than in the classic condition, presumably because of the greater computational burden it creates.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that the manner in which language is used conveys important information about the relationship of speakers and addressees to each other and to the people they talk about. A very clear example of this involves so-called ‘honorifics’ — forms that signal esteem and respect toward another person, typically someone who is being addressed or referred to. Korean is well known for its honorifics; indeed, Sohn (1999:408) suggests that its strategic use of these forms is ‘the most systematic among all known languages.’

Honorific forms show up at various places in Korean usage — in pronouns, in address forms, in lexical choices, and in nominal and verbal inflection; for general discussion, see Sohn (1994: 359-62, 1999: 407ff), Lee & Ramsey (2000: ch. 7), and Choo & Kwak (2008: chs. 1-3). We focus here on the subject honorific -(u)si, which has received very extensive attention over the years from syntacticians and sociolinguists alike.¹

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¹ All Korean examples are presented using Yale Romanization. Allomorphic variants of
As noted by Sohn (1999:412), the prototypical use of -(u)si is to express
deferece toward the referent of the subject on the part of the speaker, as
when a student utters a sentence such as (1) to describe the activity of his or
her professor.\^\textsuperscript{2}

\begin{enumerate}
\item (1) 선생님께서 신문을 읽으신다.
Sensayng-nim-kkeyse sinmwan-ul ilk-\textbf{usi}-n-ta. (Sohn 1994:359)
professor-Hon-Nom.Hon newspaper.Acc read-Hon-Prs-Reg

‘The professor is reading the newspaper.’

Choo & Kwak (2008:17ff) discuss various subtleties associated with the
use of -(u)si, observing that it is called for primarily when the referent of
the subject is an elder or a social superior with whom the speaker or hearer
has a personal relationship (e.g., a grandparent, a teacher, or a boss). Use
of the subject honorific is unnecessary when the relationship is less close
(involving a neighbor, for example, or a public official, including even the
president) — unless those individuals are within hearing range or the set-
ting is formal. Moreover, as Choo & Kwak note, there can be differences
within families as to whether the honorific is used when the referent of the
subject is a parent, especially a mother.

\begin{enumerate}
\item (2) 엄마 어디가(요)?
Emma, eti ka(-yo)?
mom where go(-Reg)

‘Mom, where are you going?’

On the other hand, the honorific form is called for when speaking about
one’s mother to someone outside the immediate family.

\begin{enumerate}
\item (3) 엄마 어디 가셨는데요.
Emma eti ka-sy-ess-nun-tey-yo. (Choo & Kwak, p.18)
mom somewhere go.Hon-Pst-Adnom-Circ-Reg

‘My mom went somewhere.’

Further complications arise when the criteria relevant to honorification

\footnotesize\(-\text{(u)si}\) include \(-\text{(u)sy}\) (employed in the \(-\text{yo}\) register) and \(-\text{(u)sy}\) (representing the merger of
the /i/ of the honorific with a following vowel).

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{2} We use the following abbreviations: Hon = honorific, Nom = nominative case, Acc = accu-
sative case, Adnom = adnominal marker, Circ = circumstantial, Prs = present, Pst = past, Reg = register
are not in alignment, as when age and social standing conflict. This can result in a situation in which a social superior (perhaps a boss) may use -(으)si for an older subordinate (for instance, one of his employees). Conversely, one might also hear an older worker employ -(으)si for his younger boss.

The preceding remarks apply only to sentences expressing assertions and questions. Honorific -(으)si is far more broadly used in commands and requests, and is found even in directives from teachers to their young students.

(4) 다음 주까지 교과서를 준비하세요.
Taum cwu-kkaci kyokwase-lul cwunpiha-sey-yo. (Choo & Kwak, p. 21)
next week-by textbook.Acc prepare -Hon-Reg

‘Please have your textbooks ready by next week.’

It is likewise used when the speaker doesn’t know the hearer, regardless of age — as when speaking to a stranger on the phone.

(5) 잠시만, 기다리세요.
Camสีman, kitali-sey-yo. (Choo & Kwak, p. 21)
moment wait-Hon-Reg

‘Please wait a moment.’

In sum, it is clear that a wide range of subtle and variable factors must be taken into account when using and interpreting honorifics in Korean sentences. This in turn should be reflected in the burden associated with speech production and comprehension, opening the door to the possibility that honorification could be studied from a psycholinguistic perspective. In the remainder of this paper, we will explore the prospects for this type of inquiry by using an experimental technique to investigate possible differences in the processing difficulty of the two types of honorific patterns discussed below. We turn to this matter in the next section.

II. AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF HONORIFICATION

For the purposes of our exploratory attempt to investigate honorific use experimentally, we will focus on two patterns that seem to differ from each other in interesting ways with respect to the relationship among the speaker, the addressee, and the referent of the subject. In the first of these pat-
terns, which we will henceforth refer to as the ‘classic pattern,’ the referent of the subject is socially superior to both the addressee and the speaker, each of whom has roughly equal status with respect to each other.

(6) Sample situations for the classic pattern:

a. A young boy talks about his father to a close friend.
   referent of subject > [speaker & addressee]
   speaker’s father young boy close friend of the same age

b. A student talks to a fellow student about their teacher.
   referent of subject > [speaker & addressee]
   speaker’s teacher student fellow student

The second pattern of interest involves a situation in which the addressee is socially superior to the referent of the subject, who in turn has higher status than the speaker — what we will henceforth call the ‘split pattern’.

(7) Sample situations for the split pattern:

a. A young boy talks about his father to his father’s mother.
   addressee > referent of subject > speaker
   grandmother the speaker’s a young boy
       father

b. A student talks about his professor to the professor’s father.
   addressee > referent of subject > speaker
   professor’s the speaker’s a student
       father

All other things being equal, the classic pattern should be easier to process than the split pattern, since it involves a less complex set of calculations regarding the relative status of the various participants. Because the speaker and addressee are social equals, their relationship to the referent of the subject need not be separately evaluated.

(8) The classic pattern:

   referent of subject > [speaker & addressee]

   In contrast, the split pattern demands separate consideration of the relationship of the speaker to the referent of the subject and the relationship of the addressee to that same person — a more complicated calculus.
(9) The split pattern:

- the addressee’s perspective: *addressee > referent of subject*
- the speaker’s perspective: *referent of subject > speaker*

We thus predict that the split pattern should trigger less clear-cut acceptability judgments and slower response times than its classic counterpart. The purpose of our experiment is to investigate this prediction and its relevance to the understanding of how honorification works in Korean.

1. Participants

Thirty native speakers of Korean (15 males and 15 females), all undergraduate students at universities in Seoul, participated in our study. There is ample anecdotal evidence that the use of honorifics is undergoing generational change, so it is important to control for age in any experimental work. For practical reasons we concentrate on a single age group here, but we acknowledge the need for research with other cohorts as well.

2. Method and materials

Participants were shown a series of illustrated scenarios on a computer screen with the help of e-prime software. Each scenario began with a brief description of the speaker, the addressee, and who they were talking about — always someone in their family, in their church, in their educational institution, in their workplace, in a hospital, or in the military. When the participants were ready, they pressed a key on the keyboard to bring up a second image that included a sentence uttered by one of the individuals in the situation depicted on the computer screen.

The task of the participants was to rate the sentence’s acceptability on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1= 아주 나뻐요 ‘completely bad’ to 5 아주 좋아요 ‘completely good’, by pressing the appropriate button on the computer keyboard. The software automatically measured the time in milliseconds between the appearance of the uttered sentence and the participant’s selection of its status.

There were a total of 16 test items, 8 exemplifying the classic pattern of honorification and 8 exemplifying the split case.3

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3 The choice of ‘sentence ender’ (-e versus -ta versus -eyo) reflects an independent set of
(10) The classic pattern

a. Context sentence:

여학생이 남학생에게
Yehaksayng-i namhaksayng-eykey
female.student-Nom male.student-Dat

안 교수에 대해서 말했다.
Ahn kyosu-ey tayhayse malhayssta.
Ahn professor-about speak-Pst-Reg

‘A female student was talking to the male student about Professor Ahn.’

b. Test item:

[The girl said⋯]

학교에 오셨어.
Hakkyo-ey o-sy-ess-e.
school-to come-Hon-Pst-Reg

‘(He) came to school.’

(11) The split pattern

a. Context sentence:

학생이 학장에게
Haksayng-i hakcang-eykey
student-Nom dean-Dat

박 교수에 대해서 말했다.
Park kyoswu-ey tayhayse malhayssta.
Park professor-about speak-Pst-Reg

register-related factors not directly related to the referent of the subject; see Choo & Kwak (2008: ch. 1) for extensive discussion.
‘A student was talking to the dean about Professor Park.’

b. Test item:

[The student says…]

연구실로 가셨어요.
yenkwusil-lo ka-sy-ess-e-yo.
office-to go-Hon-Pst-Reg

‘(He) went to the office.’

Half the items of each type appeared with -(으)si, as in the examples above, and half without it. All sentences that included the subject honorific were of comparable length, as were all sentences without it. The test items were pseudo-randomized and distributed in a Latin square design, creating two lists. Each session began with a brief set of instructions and 3 practice items illustrating the manner in which the participants were to proceed. The task took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. All participants were tested individually in a quiet place.

There were two dependent variables—the rating (on a scale of 1 to 5) given to each sentence and the amount of time (in milliseconds) it took to arrive at that rating. Given that response time is a standard measure of processing difficulty (more demanding patterns take longer to process), we can use this variable to test the prediction that the classic pattern of honorification is less demanding than the split pattern.

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4 In this design, each list contains items with and without the honorific marker, but no test item appears in both forms. Thus a list might contain the verb o-si-ta with the honorific marker, but that list would not also contain o-ta (without the honorific marker).
3. Results

Figure 1 summarizes the participants’ ratings for the acceptability of the test items. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the results from three settings — the family, the school/university, and the workplace, since these are the contexts in our study that are most likely to involve established personal relationships.

As can be seen here, the participants gave a much higher rating (out of 5) to the classic pattern when it includes the honorific marker than when it didn’t (3.89 versus 1.85). This difference is statistically significant by a paired t-test: \( t(29) = 10.752, p < .01 \). In contrast, the acceptability ratings for the split pattern are virtually identical (3.02 with \(-(u)si\) and 3.07 without it),\(^5\) and do not differ significantly from each other. This suggests that the participants are confused to some degree as to whether \(-(u)si\) should be used in the split pattern.

Our response time measure confirms this result, as shown by the data summarized in Figure 2. Consistent with our hypothesis that the classic pattern has a lower processing cost, we see that it elicits a significantly

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\(^5\) One matter that calls for further exploration is that our female participants gave significantly higher ratings to the split pattern with \(-(u)si\) than did our male participants. This was the only place where a significant gender-related difference (\(t(14) = 2.438, p < .05\)) arose in our results.
shorter response time compared to the split pattern in paired t-tests — both when -(u)si is present ($t(29) = -2.232, p<.05$) and when it isn’t ($t(29) = -2.397, p<.05$). Thus our participants are faster at making decisions about acceptability and unacceptability for the classic patterns than for the split patterns — exactly as one would expect if processing cost matters for honorification.

4. Discussion

Two key assumptions underlie our experiment. First, the production and comprehension of honorific forms requires the calculation and evaluation of various factors relative to their use. Second, the processing cost of those calculations is reflected in the time in takes to carry them out, consistent with the widely held assumption in the field of psycholinguistics.

With these two assumptions as our starting point, we set out to compare the reaction of native speakers to two instances of honorification — the ‘classic pattern’ in which the referent of the subject has higher standing than the speaker and the addressee (who are comparable to each other in status) and the ‘split pattern’ in which the addressee is higher in standing than the referent of the subject, who in turn outranks the speaker.

(12) a. The classic pattern:

\[ \text{referent of subject} > \text{[speaker & addressee]} \]

b. The split pattern

\[ \text{addressee} > \text{referent of subject} > \text{speaker} \]

For the reasons explained earlier, this led to an intriguing prediction: the classic pattern should be easier to process than its split counterpart, which requires independent evaluation of the relationship between the referent of the subject and the addressee on the one hand and the relationship of the referent of the subject to the speaker on the other hand.

This prediction was borne out by both the measures that we considered. First, the honorific form of the verb elicited a significantly higher rating than its non-honorific counterpart in the classic pattern, but not in the split pattern — suggesting that honorificiation in the latter case is less clear-cut. Second, our response time measure points in the same direction: participants took significantly longer to rate the split pattern than the classic pattern.

This in turn allows us to evaluate claims in the descriptive and theoreti-
cal literature with respect to how honorification works. Of particular interest in this regard is Kim & Sells' (2007:311) suggestion that -(u)si is employed only if the referent of the subject outranks the addressee. On their view, the status of the speaker with respect to the referent of the subject is not relevant, so that a split pattern such as (13) should be acceptable without -(u)si if uttered by one of Professor Kim’s students to Professor Kim’s father.

(13) 김 선생님이 학교에 왔어요.
   Kim sensayng-nim-i hakkyo-ey o-ass-eyo.
   Kim teacher-Hon-Nom school-to come-Pst-Reg

‘Teacher Kim came to school.’

According to Kim & Sells hypothesis (see also Kim 1991, Ihm et al. 1988, and Lee & Kuno 1995), the honorific is not called for here since the addressee outranks the referent of the subject, even though the speaker has lower social status.

(14) addressee > referent of subject > speaker
    Prof. Kim’s father Prof. Kim a student of Prof. Kim’s

If this is right, we should find systematic avoidance of -(u)si in split patterns. However, our results suggest that this is not the case for Korean college students, who seem uncertain about whether the honorific is needed. Interestingly, no such confusion arises in the classic pattern, where the referent of the subject outranks both speaker and addressee. This finding not only points to the relevance of both speaker and addressee to the honorification calculus, as Choo & Kwak propose, it supports our contention that processing cost increases with the number of separate relationships that must be taken into account.

III. CONCLUSION

The study of honorification faces special challenges — a myriad of subtle factors must be taken into account, practices vary from family to family, cross-generational changes are in progress, there are personal differences in formality, and so on. Nonetheless, we believe that the sort of experimental method that we have outlined holds the promise of new insights into the
use of Korean honorifics, offering a way to study the ‘cost’ of honorification in terms of the burden that it places on the processor in the course of speech production and comprehension. It is perhaps not too optimistic to hope that progress in this endeavor may contribute to an eventual account of why certain patterns of honorification are more stable historically, more widely distributed typologically, and perhaps even mastered more easily by language learners.

If we are right, then there is much to do, including the investigation of a wider range of honorific patterns, the expansion and refinement of the particular contexts in which those patterns are presented, and the systematic study of the effects of age, personality, gender, and region (among other factors) on their use. We hope that research along these lines will add to the foundational insights on honorification and politeness that come to us from the pioneering work of Ho-Min Sohn.

REFERENCES


