

## To honor or not to honor: Korean honorifics with mixed status conjoined subjects

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**Background** Korean is a language with a rich honorific system, including both addressee-oriented and argument-oriented honorific elements (Lee 1973, 1985; Yun 1993; Kim & Sells 2007; Portner et al. 2018; Choi & Harley 2019, i.a.). This talk focuses on *subject-oriented honorifics*, which are signaled by the verbal suffix *-si* (and optionally the case marker *-kkeyse*; see below). The presence of this suffix signals honorification of the grammatical subject, and its felicitous use is conditioned by the relative social status of the referent of the subject NP and the speaker. In (1), with a high status (elder) subject referent, the honorific form is felicitous, while the non-honorific form is not. With a low status (younger) subject referent, these judgments are reversed.

- (1) halapenim-i pata-ey {#ka-ess-ta | **ka-si-ess-ta**}.  
grandfather-NOM sea-DAT {#go-PST-DECL | **go-HON-PST-DECL**}.  
“The grandfather went to the ocean.”
- (2) ai-ka pata-ey {**ka-ess-ta** | #ka-si-ess-ta}.  
child-NOM sea-DAT {**go-PST-DECL** | #go-HON-PST-DECL}.  
“The child went to the ocean.”

These usage patterns, which are also found in Japanese and Yaeyaman, are modeled by Davis (2021) using complementary pragmatic constraints, \*UnderHonor and \*OverHonor, which militate respectively against underhonoring high status referents (accounting for (1)) and overhonoring low status referents (accounting for (2)). Davis points out that these constraints come into conflict in the case of conjoined subjects with mixed status referents, like the sentence in (3):

- (3) ai-wa halapenim-i pata-ey {ka-ss-ta | ka-si-ess-ta}.  
child-CONJ grandfather-NOM sea-DAT {go-PST-DECL | went-HON-PST-DECL}.  
“The child and grandfather went to the ocean.”

**Experiment 1** We aim to find out how speakers of Korean resolve the conflict in (3), as well as get a firmer empirical understanding of the core contrast in (1)/(2). We also test a suggestion of Kim & Sells (2007) that the order of conjuncts modulates the resolution of cases like (3).

**Materials.** Stimuli sentences were created by crossing 4 types of subjects with 3 types of honorific marking, as exemplified in (4), where the professor is contextually established as the speaker’s advisor, and Yura as the speaker’s younger friend. The 4 types of subjects varied in number, status, and conjunct order for conjoined subjects: **high**, **low**, **high-low**, and **low-high**. The 3 types of honorific marking were: **0** (no subject honorific marking), **HON1** (verbal honorific suffix *si-*), and **HON1+2** (a combination of the verbal honorific suffix *si-* and the honorific nominative case marker *-kkeyse*). As noted by Kim & Sells (2007), *-si* can be used in the absence of the *-kkeyse*, but not vice versa; we included honorific sentences with and without *-kkeyse* to check for any differences between these two honorification strategies.

- (4) { kyoswunim | yura | kyoswunim-kwa yura | yura-wa kyoswunim }  
{ professor<sub>high</sub> | Yura<sub>low</sub> | professor-and Yura<sub>high-low</sub> | Yura-and professor<sub>low-high</sub> }  
- { i/ka | kkeyse } nonmwun-ul ssu- { ∅ | si }-ess-supnita  
- { NOM | NOM.HON2 } paper-ACC write- { 0 | HON1 }-PAST-DEC

**Procedure.** 47 Native Korean speakers were recruited as participants. Each participant saw 64 sentences: 8 items crossed with 8 of the 12 possible conditions. Presence vs. absence of honorifics (**no honorifics** vs. honorifics) and subject type were tested within subjects, whereas hon-

orific subtype (choice between **HON1** and **HON1+2**) was tested between subjects. The stimuli were presented in random order. In a given trial, participants were asked to rate the naturalness of a given sentence along a 7-point Likert scale.

*Results.* We established 3 main empirical findings, each supported by significant interactions between, and robust effects of, subject type and honorific marking (details omitted for space).

First, the results confirm the general pattern noted in (1)-(2). For singular high status subjects (*high*), **HON1** and **HON1+2** were the preferred options, whereas for singular low status subjects (*low*), **0** was the preferred option (two leftmost panels). At the same time however, the results also reveal an asymmetry: Honorifics paired with low status subjects are judged to be more categorically unacceptable than non-honorifics with high status subjects. We interpret this asymmetry as follows: Honorific forms make a positive requirement on the status of the subject referent. Thus, using honorific forms with a low-status subject results in semantic infelicity (or false entailments). By contrast, non-honorific forms are semantically un-

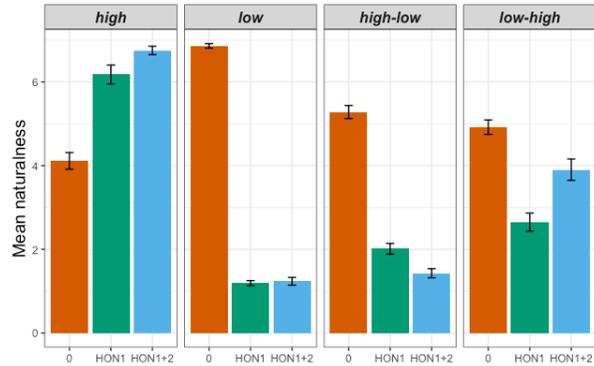


Figure 1: Means & 95% CIs

marked. The combination with high status subjects is only bad by a kind of pragmatic implicature.

The second main finding is that there is an overall preference for choosing the non-honorific form in mixed subject cases. Assuming the constraints proposed in Davis (2021), this suggests that in Korean, \*OverHonor outranks \*UnderHonor. While there is thus an overall preference for using non-honorific forms with mixed subjects, we also found an effect of word order in the acceptability of mixed subjects with honorifics, akin to an ‘agree with closet conjunct’ effect; in essence, the acceptability of sentences with honorification is boosted in the case of *low-high*, where the honorific marker(s) appear closer to the high status conjunct. This effect was strongest for **HON1+2**.

These findings are based on a comparison of the mean acceptability scores using mixed effects regression models. Examining the results for individual participants, however, we observe that the overall patterns conflate several distinct patterns/strategies that vary systematically across participants, similar to what Davis (2021) found for Japanese speakers (cf. Han et al. (2016)).

**Experiment 2** While the results above suggest that Korean speakers generally prefer non-honorific forms with mixed subjects, they also indicate that conjunct order, which is *not* semantic/pragmatic in nature, modulate this overall preference. In experiment 2 (which we are currently running), we probe for semantic factors that modulate this pattern. In particular, we hypothesize that the naturalness of mixed subject sentences with honorific marking will be boosted when co-occurring with the adverb *hamkkey* ‘together’, and more degraded in combination with *kakca* ‘each’. This hypothesis is based on the intuition that *kakca* forces interpreters to consider each conjunct individually, including the mismatched one, whereas *hamkkey* may enable interpreters to apply the predicate to the plurality denoted by the conjoined NP without considering the status of each conjunct.

**Additional Discussion** In the full talk, we discuss the ramifications of the experimental evidence for theories of subject honorification, focusing on (i) whether the phenomenon should be modeled via syntactic agreement, and (ii) the semantics and pragmatics of honorification. We also consider how the inter-speaker variation noted in experiment 1 should be modeled, and its consequences for theories of semantics and pragmatics; in the spirit of Han et al. (2016), we argue for the existence of three distinct strategies for resolving honorific conflicts in Korean, each of which is relatively

categorical at the individual level, but giving rise to variation at the population level.