The logic of Korean honorification

Yoolim Kim and Jamie Y. Findlay
yoolim.kim@ling-phil.ox.ac.uk
jamie.findlay@ling-phil.ox.ac.uk

University of Oxford

LAGB 2017
University of Kent
6 September 2017
1. Honorification in Korean
2. A pragmatic solution
3. Compositional analysis
4. Less clear cases
5. Conclusion
Honorification in Korean

- Performative vs. propositional

(1) ku salam-i ka-ss-sup-ni-ta.
   *that person*-NOM *go*-PST-AH-IND-DECL
   ‘That person went.’ *(Addressee honorification)*

(2) ney-ka sensayng-nim-kkey ku-kes-ul
    *I*-NOM *teacher*-DAT.HON *that-thing*-ACC
    *tuli*-ess-sup-ni-ta.
    *give*.HON-PST-AH-IND-DECL
    ‘I gave that thing to the teacher.’ *(Object honorification)*
Subject honorification

(3) sensayngnim-kkeyse coen-ul ha-si-ta. 
*teacher*-HON.NOM *advice*-ACC *do*-SH-DECL
‘The teacher gives advice.’

- Simplistic view: honours the subject of the clause.
Long recognised that this cannot be the whole story.

Even in the (more conservative) standard variety, the target of honorification doesn’t have to be the subject.
The standard dialect

(4) halmeni-kkeyse pal-i apu-si-ta.

*grandmother*-HON.NOM *arm*-NOM *hurt*-SH-DECL

‘Grandmother’s arm hurts.’

- Target = Grandmother
- Inalienable possession (controller)
The standard dialect

(5)  halmeni-kkeyse  sayngkak-i  coh-usi-ta.

grandmother-HON.NOM  thought-NOM  good-SH-DECL

‘Grandmother’s idea was good.’

- Target = Grandmother
- Inalienable possession (creator)
(6) *halmeni-uy khep-i yeyppu-sï-ta.
   grandmother-GEN cup-NOM beautiful-SH-DECL
   ‘Grandmother’s cup is beautiful.’

- Intended target = Grandmother
- Alienable possession
- Unacceptable in standard Korean.

In some dialects, even broader than that.
The innovating dialect

- Predominantly characteristic of the younger generation (18–35), very generationally-specific
- Seoul, metropolitan areas of Korea
Alienable possessor can be the target of honorification:

(7) \( \text{halmeni-uy khep-i yeyppu-si-ta.} \)

\( \text{grandmother-GEN cup-NOM beautiful-SH-DECL} \)

‘Grandmother’s cup is beautiful.’
The innovating dialect

(8) kokayknim, i os-un
customer this clothing-TOP
phwumcel-toy-s-ess-sup-ni-ta.
sold.out-become-SH-PST-AH-IND-DECL
‘Customer, this article of clothing has become out of stock.’

- Target = customer (addressee)
- ‘Potential possession’
Clearly, the target of -si- is not given definitively by reference to the grammatical subject.

But neither can the target be totally unrelated to the subject.
The exact relation between the two is usually swept under the pragmatic rug.

Potts & Kawahara (2004: 263): “the exact nature of [the relation in question] is not of direct concern to us here”.

Kim & Sells (2007: 332): “exactly how the target of honorification is determined still awaits a full explanation”.
Our proposal: the pragmatic reasoning involved in determining the target of honorification is not a free-for-all.

Rather, there is a well-defined, structured process involved in determining the target, based on its relation to the subject.
Howe (1976), Slobin (1985): possession is just a special case of a more general kind of locative relation (which Barker 1995 calls ‘proximity’).

Broadly conceived, possession is a locative state in which the Ground is an animate being and the Figure-Ground relation is of an enduring or socially sanctioned nature. (Slobin 1985: 1179)

Cf. use of locative prepositions to indicate possession in e.g. French (il est à moi).

Target = ‘closest’ human to the subject in this sense.
A pragmatic hierarchy

- Hierarchy of proximity:
  - identity > inalienable possession
    > alienable possession > potential possession

- Pragmatic relation in question = highest on the hierarchy which identifies a potential human target.
A pragmatic hierarchy

identity > inalienable possession
    > alienable possession > potential possession

- Standard dialect
- Innovating dialect
Meaning over and above syntax

Target of honorification need not be mentioned overtly in the sentence:

(9)  i  chîna-nun  alumdawu-sî-ta.
    *this chinaware*-TOP *beautiful*-SH-DECL

‘This chinaware (belonging to the honoured one) is beautiful.’
identity > inalienable possession

(10)  emeni-uy salinca-nun canin-ha-s-yess-ta.
    ⟨mother-GEN murderer-TOP cruel-BE-SH-PST-DECL⟩
    ‘Mother’s murderer was cruel.’

Target = murderer

(even though there is a more obvious target)
Predictions of the hierarchy

- inalienable possession > alienable possession

**Context:** Father was a lover of science, and left his body to medical research on his death. He also had a very distinctive tattoo on his finger. In my human anatomy class, where each of us has a hand to dissect, and the professor is demonstrating on a hand of his own, I say:

(11) kyoswunim-uy son-un apeci-ey son-i-s-eyo.  
*professor*-GEN *hand*-TOP *father*-GEN *hand*-be-SH-POL  
‘The professor’s hand is my father’s hand.’

- Target = father
- (not professor)
Predictions of the hierarchy

- alienable possession > potential possession

(12)  
A:  cey cha-ka kocangna-ss-sup-ni-ta.
  *my car-NOM break-PST-AH-IND-DECL*
  ‘My car has broken down.’

B:  cey apeci-ey cha-nun olay-toy-s-yess-ciman,
    *my father-GEN car-TOP old-become-SH-PST-but*
    kongcca-i-s-ip-ni-ta.
    *free-be-SH-AH-IND-DECL*
  ‘My father’s car is old, but free.’

- Target = father

- (not potential possessor, in this case the addressee)
Predictions of the hierarchy

    father-GEN car-NOM break-PST-DECL
    ‘(My) father’s car has broken down.’

B: i cha-nun olay-toy-s-yess-ciman, kongcca-i-si-ta.
    i car-TOP old-become-SH-PST-but free-be-SH-DECL
    ‘This car is old, but free.’

Potential possessor ≠ addressee.

Target = A’s father (potential possessor).
Predictions of the hierarchy

- Predictions borne out.
- Evidence for an internal logic on the pragmatic side of things.
Compositional analysis

Meaning associated with subject honorific marker:

(14) \( \lambda x. \exists y [R(y, x) \land HON(y)] \)

- \( R \) is given by the process described above.
- The contents of \( HON \) could be cashed out in various ways, including that developed by Potts & Kawahara (2004) for Japanese.
- Ultimately, since honorification is a type of emotive meaning (Potts 2005), this meaning should end up in the side-issue content.
There remain some difficult cases:

(15) sayksang kyohwan piyong-un kwumayca-nim
    *color* exchange *cost*-TOP *buyer*-HON
    pwutam-i-si-pni-ta.
    *charge-be*-SH-POL-DECL
    ‘The expense for exchange for a different colour will be
    charged to the (honoured) buyer.’ (Kim & Sells 2007: 319)

- **Target** = buyer
- **Relation** = potential possessor?
Less clear cases

(16) kunmwu kanung ciyek-un Pusan-ina Ilsan-i-\textbf{si}-pni-ta.
work possible area-TOP Pusan-or Ilsan-be-SH-AH-DECL
‘The area/region where the honoured one might work is Pusan or Ilsan.’ (Kim & Sells 2007: 319)

- Target = potential worker
- Still to do with proximity; this time, purely locational.
The targets of subject honorification in Korean are not determined purely by syntax.

Nonetheless, we do not need to throw our hands up in despair as soon as pragmatics enters the scene.

There is an internal logic in the pragmatic reasoning which is ripe for further exploration.
References


