

When overgeneralizing a linguistic function: Second language Korean learners' knowledge about subject honorification as a politeness strategy

Nayoung Kwon (University of Oregon) & Gyu-Ho Shin (University of Illinois Chicago)

Korean subject honorification is a grammatical system shaped by structural and socio-pragmatic factors (Sohn, 1999). Unlike number/person agreement in English, subject honorification in Korean is highly optional (1), with only about 40% of honorifiable subjects paired with an honorific predicate (Song et al., 2019). This low cue reliability makes an honorifiable subject a weak predictor for the subject honorific suffix, posing substantial challenges for learners. This aspect is further compounded by the frequent co-occurrence of subject and addressee honorification (Song et al., 2019), obscuring their independent functions. Contrastively, when the subject honorific suffix is used, mismatches with a non-honorifiable subject as in (2) elicit P600 brain responses in native Korean speakers (Kwon & Sturt, 2024), which is comparable to number/person agreement violations observed in other languages (Osterhout & Mobley, 1995; Hinojosa et al., 2003).

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (1) | halmeni-kkeyse
grandmother-NOM.HON | iltung-ul
first.place-ACC | ha-(si)-ess-eyo.
do-(SH)-PST-DCL |
| | 'The grandmother came in first place' | | |
| (2) | *kkoma-ka
kid-NOM | iltung-ul
first.place-ACC | ha-si-ess-eyo.
do-SH-PST-DCL |
| | 'The kid came in first place' | | |

This study investigates L1-English L2-Korean learners' production, perception, and processing of subject honorification through three studies—corpus analysis, politeness rating, and self-paced reading. Corpus analysis using the Korean Learners' Corpus^[a] showed frequent co-occurrence of subject and addressee honorification, particularly among low-proficiency learners (Table 1), indicating a lack of distinction between their functions. The politeness rating task ($n = 40$ for both native speakers and learners; Table 2 for the scheme of test stimuli (3)) revealed that, while native speakers associated increased politeness exclusively with honorifiable subjects, learners perceived increased politeness with the subject honorific suffix, independently of the subject's honorifiability and learners' general proficiency in Korean (Figure 1).

- | | | | |
|-----|--|----------------------------|---|
| (3) | sensayngnim-kkeyse/kkoma-ka/kulim-i
teacher-NOM.HON/kid-NOM/picture-NOM | kyosil-lo
classroom-DIR | tuleka-(si)-ess-ta.
enter-(SH)-PST-DCL |
| | 'The teacher/kid/picture entered the classroom.' | | |

The self-paced reading task ($n = 40$ for both native speakers and learners) specifically targeted sentences with a cataphoric dependency between a predicate and its subject (4). Results showed that learners exhibited a semantic anomaly effect, experiencing processing difficulty with inanimate subjects following predicates requiring an animate subject, but no grammaticality effect, showing no difficulty when the subject honorific suffix was used with un-honorifiable subjects. Learners with higher proficiency showed faster reading times and exhibited a stronger semantic anomaly effect, but no evidence of grammaticality effects emerged, even among more proficient learners. In contrast, native speakers exhibited both semantic anomaly and grammaticality effects.

- | | | | |
|-----|--|----------------------------------|---|
| (4) | kyosil-lo | [tuleka-(si)-mye] _{R3} | [sensayngnim-kkeyse/kkoma-ka/kulim-i] _{R4} ... |
| | classroom-DIR | [enter-(SH)-while] _{R3} | [teacher-NOM.HON/kid-NOM/picture-NOM] _{R4} ... |
| | 'While the teacher/kid/picture entered the classroom, ...' | | |

Together, the findings from the three studies suggest that learners may perceive and apply the subject honorific suffix as a general politeness marker rather than a specific device for subject honorification. Learners' acquisition of this knowledge is likely hindered by low cue validity, frequent co-occurrence with other functions, and socio-pragmatic complexity. Our results align with the semantics-before-structure strategy (Grüter et al., 2020) under the overshadowing-and-blocking account (Ellis, 2006). This highlights how cue competition/weighting shape L2 acquisitional trajectories (MacWhinney, 2013) given the noisy representations involving L2 knowledge (Futrell & Gibson, 2017; Tachihara & Goldberg, 2020).

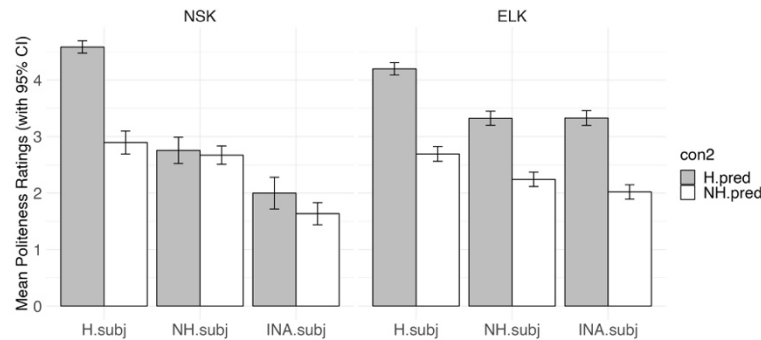
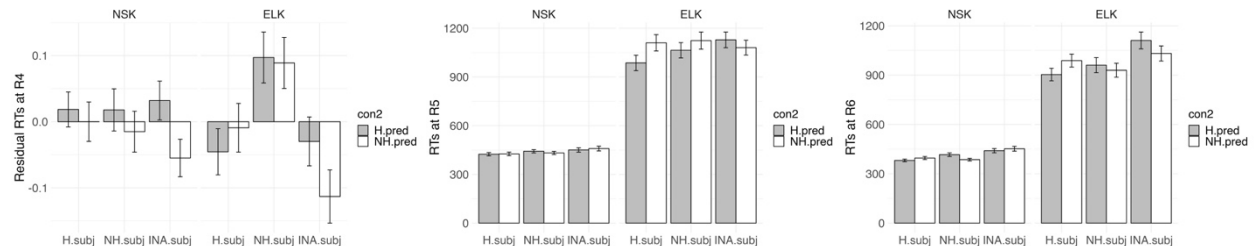
Table 1. Co-occurrence rate of subject and addressee honorification across proficiency levels

Proficiency level	1	2	3	4	5	6
Co-occurrence rate (%)	100	82	78	42	58	9

Table 2. Subject–predicate combinations used for politeness rating and self-paced reading

Subject	Predicate	Acceptable?
H _{subj}	H _{pred}	Yes
	NH _{pred}	Yes
NH _{subj}	H _{pred}	No (Structural anomaly)
	NH _{pred}	Yes
INA _{subj}	H _{pred}	No (Semantic anomaly)
	NH _{pred}	No (Semantic anomaly)

Note. Two control conditions with an inanimate subject were included for each predicate type, creating semantic anomaly conditions. No test stimuli included addressee honorification.

**Figure 1.** Results: Politeness rating (on a 6-point Likert scale [0: very impolite; 5: very polite] via *Qualtrics*). NSK: native speakers of Korean; ELK: English-speaking learners of Korean.

R4, critical (mean residual RTs)

R5, spill-over (mean RTs)

R6, spill-over (mean RTs)

Figure 2. Results: Self-paced reading (via *PCibex* [Zehr&Schwarz,2018]). NSK: native speakers of Korean; ELK: English-speaking learners of Korean. After initial data trimming (by excluding data points below 150 ms or above 4000 ms), the remaining data were log-transformed and further trimmed (by removing data points exceeding 3SDs from the condition mean). As lexical items at R4 differed across conditions, log-transformed reading times at R4 were residualized to control for variability in word length and individual reading speed (Baayen&Milin,2010). R4 serves as the critical region, with R5 and R6 included to account for spillover effects.

Abbreviations. ACC = accusative case marker; DCL = predicate ending, declarative; DIR = directional marker; H = honorific; HON = honorific feature; SH = subject honorific suffix; INA = inanimate; NH = non-honorific; NOM = nominative case marker; PST = past tense marker

[a] <https://kcorpus.korean.go.kr/>