The logic of Korean honorification

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Outline

- 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)*

(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.

(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)

(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-**si**-ta.
     grandmother-GEN *cup*-NOM *beautiful*-SH-DECL
     'Grandmother's cup is beautiful.'

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

Syntax or something else?

- Kim & Sells (2007): target of honorification = "maximal human referent" of subject.
- 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) √halmeni-uy   khep-i   yeyppu-**si**-ta.
     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.

Syntax or something else?

- 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".

Syntax or something else?

- 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.

A pragmatic solution

- 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   chaina-nun   alumdawu-**si**-ta.
       this chinaware-TOP *beautiful*-SH-DECL
       'This chinaware (belonging to the honoured one) is beautiful.'

Predictions of the hierarchy

- 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)

(13) A: apeci-ey   cha-ka   kocangna-ss-ta.
          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 $\neq$ 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) $\lambda x.\exists y[R(y, x) \wedge HON(y)]$

- 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.

Less clear cases

- 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?

(16)   kunmwu kanung   ciyek-un Pusan-ina Ilsan-i-**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.

Conclusion

- 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.

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