Honorifying without mentioning:
The case of Korean *si*

Sukchan Lee & Youngho Lee

Seoul National University

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Scan me!

Korean *si*

(1) a. Apeci-ka   tali-**si**-ess-ta.
        father-NOM run-SI-PST-DECL
        'Father ran.'

 b. *Atul-i   tali-**si**-ess-ta.
        son-NOM run-SI-PST-DECL
        'Son ran.'

Korean marks the verb with *si* when the grammatical subject is of 'high'
status (to the speaker).

Subject honorification

(2)   a.   Apeci-ka   atul-ul   towu-si-ess-ta.
                father-NOM son-ACC help-SI-PST-DECL
                'Father helped son.'
    b. *Atul-i   apeci-lul   towu-si-ess-ta.
                son-NOM father-ACC help-SI-PST-DECL
                'Son helped father.'

Korean marks the verb with *si* when the **grammatical subject** is of 'high' status (to the speaker).

Animacy constraint

(3) a. Apeci-ka   o-si-ess-ta.
         father-NOM come-SI-PST-DECL
         'Father came.'
     b. *Phyenci-ka o-si-ess-ta.
         letter-NOM come-SI-PST-DECL
         'The letter came.'

A well-known property of *si* (and of honorification, in general) is its
animacy constraint; inanimate subjects cannot be marked with *si*,
regardless of whether they are considered 'honorified' in the context.

Non-canonical *si*

(4)   Khephi nao-**si**-ess-supni-ta.
        coffee   come.out-SI-PST-ADDR.HON-DECL
        (To the customer) 'Your coffee is ready.'

Recently, a non-canonical usage of *si* has emerged as a hallmark of customer service contexts (see Brown 2015, and references therein).

Non-canonical *si*

(4) Khephi nao-**si**-ess-supni-ta.
     coffee   come.out-SI-PST-ADDR.HON-DECL
     (To the customer) 'Your coffee is ready.'

Questions

- How can *si* be licensed when the grammatical subject is inanimate?
- How does *si* end up honorifying the addressee (and not the coffee)?

Not addressee honorification

Recent proposals characterize non-canonical *si* as part of an ongoing development toward addressee honorification (Lim 2000; S. Kim 2019; Pak 2022; Song and Barrie 2025). However, we find this understanding to be problematic on both theoretical and empirical grounds. We show that non-canonical *si* **need not honorify the addressee** and can appear in **embedded environments**.

Our proposal

- *Si* is uniformly subject honorification.
- Non-canonical *si* occurs when the outer subject is phonologically null in a Multiple Subject Construction (MSC).

Outlook

Proposal

Multiple Subject Construction[1]

(5)   Examples from J. H. S. Yoon (2015)

    a.   Cheli-**ka**   meli-**ka**   kalsayk-i-ta.
          Cheli-NOM hair-NOM brown-COP-DECL
          'Cheli has brown-colored hair.'

    b.   Enehak-**i**   chwicik-**i**   elyep-ta.
          linguistics-NOM employment-NOM difficult-DECL
          '(It is) in linguistics (that) getting employed is difficult.'

In Korean, a limited subset of predicates (mostly stative predicates) allows multiple subjects.

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[1]Sometimes referred to as the Multiple Nominative Construction (MNC) in the literature. J. H. S. Yoon (2015) shows that the outer subject in MNCs passes several subjecthood diagnostics and should therefore be treated as a genuine subject.

Si in MSCs

(6)   a.   Cheli-ka   apeci-ka   pheynchanhu-si-ta.
             Cheli-NOM father-NOM sick-SI-DECL
             'Cheli's father is sick.'

       b.   Apeci-ka   khi-ka   khu-si-ta.
             Father-NOM height-NOM tall-SI-DECL
             'Father is tall.'

In MSCs, both outer and inner subjects seem to license *si*-marking on the predicate.

The structure of MSCs

Although the exact syntactic structure of MSCs remains a matter of debate (see J. H. S. Yoon 2015, and references therein), we adopt Saito's (2016) analysis, according to which multiple subjects occupy specifier positions of T.
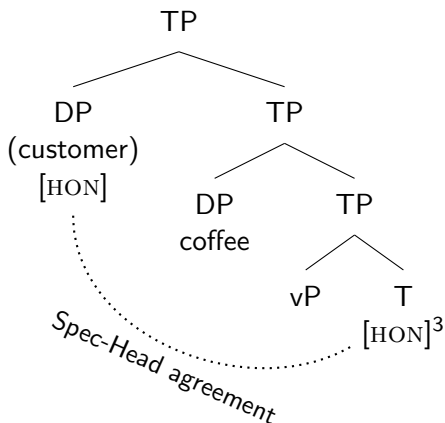
```
              TP
             /  \
           DP    TP
                /  \
              DP    TP
                   /  \
                 vP    T
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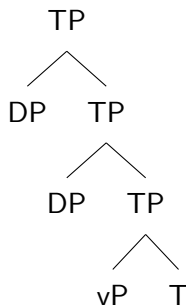
Our proposal

(4)   (Sonnim-i)   khephi(-ka) nao-si-ess-supni-ta.
      customer-NOM coffee-NOM come.out-SI-PST-ADDR.HON-DECL
      (To the customer) 'Your coffee is ready.'

We argue that (4) involves an MSC, in which the outer subject position is occupied by a null DP referring to the customer.[2] Importantly, this null DP is not in a syntactic dependency relation with a higher Addressee argument/head (contra Pak 2022).

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[2]It remains an open question whether this null element corresponds to the referential noun *sonnim* 'customer' or to a second-person pronoun.

Our proposal

TP
├── DP (customer) [HON]
└── TP
    ├── DP coffee
    └── TP
        ├── vP
        └── T [HON][3]

Spec-Head agreement

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[3]Following J.-B. Kim and Sells (2007), we treat [HON] as a privative feature.

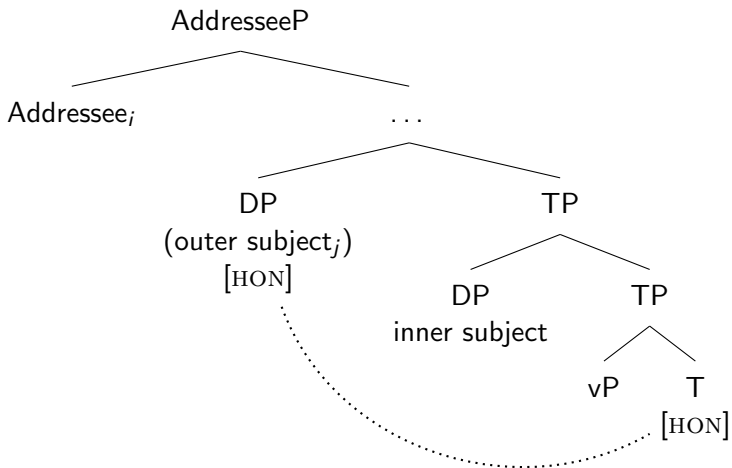# Honorifying without addressing

Honorifying without mentioning

In a nutshell, we identify non-canonical *si* as cases of "honorifying without mentioning," i.e., instances of subject honorification in which the (outer) subject is phonologically null.

Prediction
- Non-canonical *si* does not necessarily honorify the addressee.
- In other words, non-canonical *si* can appear even when the addressee and the overt subject are both deprived of [HON] features.

What we expect to find

Honorifying without addressing

Context: A customer's coffee is ready, but the new server is slacking off.
The annoyed barista reprimands the server, pointing towards the customer.

(7)   khephi nao-**si**-ess-e.   ppalli   il-hay-la.
       coffee   come.out-SI-PST-DECL.PLAIN quickly work-do-IMP
       '(That customer's) coffee is ready. Hurry up and get to work.'

Note the speaker's (the annoyed barista) use of the plain speech-style
particle *e* and the imperative *la*, both of which are known to be infelicitous
if the addressee is 'higher' than the speaker (Portner et al. 2019).

Honorifying without addressing

Context: Professors A and B are close friends. They are gossiping about Dr. Kang, a highly respected linguist and head of the department.

(8)   (kang.kyoswunim-i)   atul-i   sewultay
        (professor.Kang-NOM) son-NOM SNU
        tuleka-**si**-ess-e.
        go.in-SI-PST-DECL.PLAIN
        '(Professor Kang's) son got into SNU.'

Note, again, the use of the plain speech-style particle *e*.

Embeddability

Two types of honorifics

Two types of honorific markers have been distinguished in the literature — 'referent' vs. 'addressee' honorifics (Comrie 1976) or 'propositional' vs. 'performative' honorifics (Harada 1976) — with only the referent/propositional type being embeddable.

The embeddability problem (Ye and Ahn 2025)

Si can appear in a range of embedded contexts, even when it appears to honorify the addressee.

Non-canonical *si* in embedded positions

(9)   Examples from Ye and Ahn (2025)

    a.   [Cwucha-nun mwulyo-**si**-la-ko]   cenhay-tallay-yo
         parking-TOP free-SI-DECL-COMP relay-give-DECL.POL
         'They wanted me to relay that parking is free.'

    b.   [Chwulkuk-i   yenkitoy-**si**-ess-ta-ko]
         departure-NOM delay-SI-PST-DECL-COMP
         cenhay-tallay-yo
         relay-give-DECL.POL
         'They wanted me to relay that departure has been postponed.'

Non-canonical *si* can be embedded in reportative contexts.

Non-canonical *si* in embedded positions

(10)   a.   [Khephi nao-**si**-n]   sonnim
            coffee   come.out-SI-REL customer
            'Customer whose coffee is out.'

       b.   [Khephi nao-**si**-myen]   malssumtuli-lkey-yo
            coffee   come.out-SI-COND tell-will-DECL.POL
            'I will tell you when the coffee is ready.'

Non-canonical *si* can also appear in relative clauses (10a) and in
conditionals (10b).

The embeddability problem

Ye and Ahn (2025) propose that the embeddability of *si* does not pose a problem, as the thematic argument that *si* honorifies is merely **coreferential** with the utterance addressee. Under this view, *si* remains content-oriented and can therefore be embedded.

We largely concur with their proposal, though we point out one issue later. Similarly, under our analysis, the embeddability problem does not arise, since **si is uniformly subject honorification**.

Comparison with previous proposals

S. Kim (2019): Allocutive agreement

S. Kim (2019) analyzes non-canonical *si* as a case of **allocutive agreement**, integrating the Speech Act projection of Haegeman & Hill (2013) and the cyclic Agree model of Béjar & Rezac (2009). (A similar analysis is advocated by Song and Barrie 2025.)

We argue that this analysis is untenable, given the cases of "honorifying without addressing" and the embeddability of *si*.

One and the same

(11) *Kyoswunim-kkeyse namu-**si-si**-ess-eyo.
professor-HON.NOM remain-SI-SI-PST-DECL.POLITE
'The professor stayed.' (Honorifying 'professor' and speaking in a
polite manner)

One important observation made by S. Kim (2019) is that the subject
honorific and (superficially) allocutive *si* cannot co-occur. If non-canonical
si were a case of allocutive agreement, it would be unclear why it cannot
co-occur with the subject honorific *si*. This is clear under our analysis;
they're **one and the same**.

Pak (2022): Binding

Pak (2022) proposes an MSC structure akin to ours[4], but with the higher DP **bound** by the Addressee argument, projected higher in the syntax.

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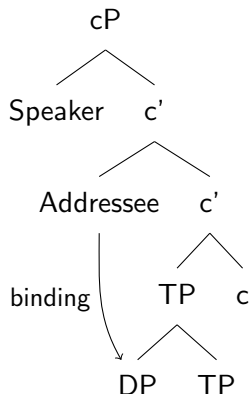
[4]See Mok (2013) for a comparable analysis in the domestic Korean literature.

No syntactic dependency

This analysis bears a striking resemblance to ours in treating non-canonical *si* as analogous to MSCs; examples of non-canonical *si* resemble 'inalienable possession constructions' and allow only stative predicates.

However, we believe that **no syntactic dependency** should be established between the addressee and the null subject, especially in light of the "honorifying without addressing" cases.

Restriction on speech-style particles

(7) khephi nao-si-ess-**e**.   ppalli   il-hay-la.
     coffee come.out-SI-PST-DECL.PLAIN quickly work-do-IMP
     '(That customer's) coffee is ready. Hurry up and get to work.'

(8) (kang.kyoswunim-i)   atul-i   sewultay
     (professor.Kang-NOM) son-NOM SNU
     tuleka-si-ess-**e**.
     go.in-SI-PST-DECL.PLAIN
     '(Professor Kang's) son got into SNU.'

Furthermore, both S. Kim (2019) and Pak (2022) incorrectly predict that
non-canonical *si* restricts the choice of speech-style particles (e.g., being
incompatible with the plain speech-style particle *e*). As shown in (7) and
(8), however, this prediction is not borne out.

Ye and Ahn (2025): Coreference

Ye and Ahn (2025) take a semantic approach, arguing that *si* identifies a relevant thematic argument as a free variable and contributes a use-conditional meaning that it is higher-ranked than the speaker.

(12)   a. $[\![si]\!]^u = \lambda e.\text{SPEAKER} <_{hon} x_1$ (use-conditional meaning)
       b. $[\![si]\!]^t = \lambda e.\theta(e) = x_1,$ (truth-conditional meaning)
             where θ is a contextually-salient thematic head

Their analysis shares with ours the core insight that instances in which *si* appears to honorify the addressee should be analyzed as cases of **coreference**.

Giving coffee

(4)   Khephi nao-si-ess-supni-ta.
       coffee   come.out-SI-PST-ADDR.HON-DECL
       (To the customer) 'Your coffee is ready.'

(13)   Khephi tuli-(*si)-lkey-yo.
        coffee   give-SI-will-DECL.POLITE
        (To the customer) 'Here's your coffee.'

However, the notion of 'identifying a salient thematic argument' is not
sufficiently clear, leaving unexplained why *si* cannot appear in (13). Our
intuition is that the customer bears no less significance to the event as a
recipient/affectee in (13) than in (4).

Giving coffee

(13)   Khephi **tuli**-(*si)-lkey-yo.
        coffee   give-SI-will-DECL.POLITE
        (To the customer) 'Here's your coffee.'

For us, the ungrammaticality of *si* in (13) follows straightforwardly: MSCs
are known to occur only with stative predicates (J.-M. Yoon 2018), so the
customer cannot be a higher subject of *tuli* 'give'.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Summary

- *Si* is uniformly subject honorification.
- Non-canonical *si* occurs when the outer subject is phonologically null in a Multiple Subject Construction (MSC).
- Our proposal is sufficiently general to capture cases of "honorifying without addressing" and embedded *si*.
- Our proposal is sufficiently constrained to rule out cases of "giving coffee" and double *si*.

We welcome all sorts of comments and questions. Please reach us at
`scleev@snu.ac.kr` and `penguinlove@snu.ac.kr`!

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