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Korean Honorific Agreement too Guides Null Argument Resolution: Evidence from an Offline Study

Abstract

An off-line referent acceptability-rating experiment was conducted to investigate the factors influencing the interpretation of null subjects in Korean. Particularly, it tested (i) whether the subject preference for the referent of a null pronoun present in Romance languages would be present in Korean and (ii) whether subject-verb honorific agreement would influence null subject interpretation. The target sentences were two clause sentences, and a null subject was contained in a subordinate clause, which preceded the main clause. The subordinate verbs varied in two honorific conditions: (i) [YESVHON] condition in which the verb contained the honorific suffix *-si-* and (ii) [NOVHON] condition in which the verb lacked honorification. The main clause included a subject (+/- honored person, e.g., grandmother or granddaughter), object (+/- honored person), and transitive verb (e.g., hugs). Each item was presented with a target sentence followed by a question-answer pair that identified the null subject as referring to the main clause subject or object. Forty-eight native Korean speakers participated. Their task was to rate the acceptability of the given answer for the question on a 5-point scale. The results show that participants were overall more willing to interpret the main clause subject as the referent of the null subject than the object (subject preference). Participants also gave higher ratings for the given answer in trials where the honored person (e.g., grandmother) was in subject position than in trials where the honored person was in object position. I propose that this stems from a frequency bias that an honored-person is more likely to be realized in subject/agent position in Korean sentences. The findings suggest that the interpretation of null subjects in Korean is guided by two distinctive factors: grammatical properties of potential referents and their honor statuses. In addition to grammatical subjects being more discourse prominent, honored entities are suggested to be more discourse-prominent than non-honored entities and that they are more likely to be interpreted as the referent of a null argument.

Korean Honorific Agreement *too* Guides Null Argument Resolution: Evidence from an Offline Study*

Lucy Kyoungsook Kim

1 Introduction

The current paper reports the findings of an off-line study that tested the factors affecting the interpretation of null subjects in Korean. Grammatical arguments, such as sentence subjects and objects, are often phonologically empty in Korean. This is similar to Romance languages, such as Italian and Spanish, in which pronouns are often dropped when there is overt agreement (e.g., agreement in person, number, or gender). Studies have found that the interpretation of pronouns that are phonologically null in these languages tends to be different from the interpretation of overtly-expressed pronouns (Alonso-Ovalle et al., 2002; Carminati, 2002; Mayol, 2006; Sorace and Filiaci, 2006). For example, null pronouns are more likely to be interpreted as referring to the subject of the preceding clause (subject preference), and overt pronouns as somewhere else in the clause (e.g., the object). Although it permits null arguments like Romance languages, Korean does not have overt agreement for person, number, or gender. One of the interesting characteristics of Korean, however, is that it exhibits strong subject-verb honorific agreement (i.e., agreement between a subject noun and its verb in honorification). For example, if the subject of a sentence is an honored person (e.g., *grandfather*) from the speaker/writer's perspective (e.g., *grandson*), an honored-verb should be used that agrees with the honor status of the subject. On the other hand, when the subject is a non-honored person (e.g., *student* in relation to *teacher*), no verbal-honorification is required. Individuals' honor statuses are often determined by their age, occupation, or family relations. Older people are more honored than young people, grandparents are more honorable than parents, parents are more honorable than children, and so forth. Subject-verb honorific agreement in Korean is exemplified in (1).

- (1) Subject-verb honorific agreement in Korean
- a. *haksang-i o-ass-ta*
student-NOM come-PAST-DECL.
'A/the student came.'
 - b. *haksang-*nim-i o-ass-ta*
'A/the student-*HON came.'
 - c. *haksang-I o-*si-ess-ta*
'A/the student came-*HON.'
 - d. *sensang-nim-i o-si-ess-ta*
teacher-HON-NOM come-HON- PAST-DECL.
'The teacher-HON came-HON.'
 - e. # *sensang-nim-i o-ass-ta*
'The teacher-HON came.'

The nominal suffix *-nim* as in (1d) is an example of subject-honorification, which is attached to an occupational noun, such as *sensang-nim* (teacher-HON). The presence of *-nim* shows that the referent of the noun is respected by the speaker (Lee, 1996). Presence of the suffix with a noun that is often considered as non-honored, such as *student*, is therefore inappropriate as in (1b). As for verbal-honorification, the suffix *-(u)si-* often adjoins the verb stem, and shows that the speaker

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owes honor to the subject noun (Choi, 2003) as in (*o-si-ta* for *ota*, ‘to come’). In (1c), the presence of the verbal-honorification with the non-honored subject *haksang* (student) is infelicitous. Sentence (1d) is proper as the honorable subject noun *sensang-nim* (teacher) agrees with the use of the verbal suffix *-si-*. However, notice that the absence of *-si-* with *teacher* in (1e) is not as marked as the presence of it with *student* in (1c), suggesting that failing to use honorific verbal morphology with honorific subjects is not as marked as using honorific verbal morphology when it is not licensed.

Although Korean honorification has been recognized as an essential part of the grammar and communication at large (Sohn, 1999), Cho (1994) argues that it is too weak to identify null subjects. However this is yet to be tested empirically. Furthermore, researchers disagree as to whether Korean honorific agreement is a purely pragmatic phenomenon, or whether it is also subject to syntactic constraints. Some view the honorific relation between a verb and its argument as syntactic and thus similar to the number and gender agreement in Indo-European languages (Ahn, 2002; Choe, 2004; Koopman, 2005; others). Others view honorific agreement as a product of constraints on the context alone (Kim & Sells, 2007; Han, 1991; Park, 1992; others). For example, Kim and Sells (2007) argue that the honorific feature specified as [+HON] and the unmarked form [-HON] are not binary features. They observe that “multiple expressions of honorific marking within the same clause progressively elevate the social status of the referent” (p. 303), and argue that [±HON] cannot describe this cumulative effect.

It should be noted that the current study makes no particular claim to whether Korean honorific agreement is syntax-driven or purely pragmatic-oriented. Rather, it concerns the honorific property that a subject noun carries in the presence or absence of verbal-honorification as shown in (1a) and (1d). In other words, use of the honorific verbal suffix *-si-* requires an honored subject (e.g., *teacher*), not a non-honored one (e.g., *student*). This holds independent of whether the agreement is regarded as syntactic or purely pragmatic.

2 Research Questions

Considering the abundance of null arguments and the roles that honorific expressions play, the present study investigated whether honorific agreement between a verb and its arguments can help comprehenders determine referential relations between a null entity and its potential referents. An off-line referent acceptability-rating task was employed for which participants rated the acceptability of a given person (either the subject or the object of the main clause) as the referent of a null subject present in the subordinate clause. The research questions explored in the study are: (i) whether the subject preference for the referent of a null pronoun evident in Romance languages would be present in null subject resolution in Korean (see also Han, 2006), (ii) whether comprehenders make use of the honorific agreement between the subordinate verb and the subject and object of the main clause, and (iii) the way in which the hypothesized subject preference and the honorific agreement interact for the interpretation of null subjects.

3 Off-line Referent Acceptability-Rating Experiment

3.1 Participants

Forty-eight adult native speakers of Korean recruited in Korea volunteered for participation. They were not paid for their participation.

3.2 Target Items

The experiment included 24 targets and 42 fillers. Each item was presented with a sentence followed by a question-answer pair that identified the null subject as referring to the main clause subject or object (see the sample item in (2)). Three independent variables were manipulated in a 2x2x2 design: (i) *Honorification* (presence or absence of the honorific suffix *-si-* on the subordinate verb, e.g. ‘drinking±HON’), (ii) *Grammatical role of the honorable entity* in the main clause (subject vs. object), (iii) *Referent type* (grammatical role of the null subject’s antecedent, i.e.,

subject vs. object). These independent variables yield the eight experimental conditions shown in Table 1.

Conditions	Honorification on subordinate verb ($\pm si$)	Grammatical Role of honored person	Grammatical role of given referent
[YESVHON-SHON-S]	+HON	SUB=hon	SUB
[YESVHON-SHON-O]		SUB=hon	OBJ
[YESVHON-OHON-S]		OBJ=hon	SUB
[YESVHON-OHON-O]		OBJ=hon	OBJ
[NOVHON-SHON-S]	-HON	SUB=hon	SUB
[NOVHON-SHON-O]		SUB=hon	OBJ
[NOVHON-OHON-S]		OBJ=hon	SUB
[NOVHON-OHON-O]		OBJ=hon	OBJ

Table 1. Eight experimental conditions used in the off-line referent acceptability-rating task

The target items were two-clause sentences in which the subordinate clause, which included a null subject, preceded the main clause. The main clause included a subject (e.g., *pastor*), object (e.g., *child*), and transitive verb (e.g., *greet*) as in (2). Three different subordinate conjunctions of *while*, *before*, and *after* were used. Eight sentences were included in each conjunction type. The question following each target sentence asked who the person doing the subordinate verb was (e.g., *Who is drinking water?* in (2)). Participants’ task was to rate the acceptability of the given answer (e.g., *pastor* in (2)) for the question on a 5-point scale.

(2) Sample target trial

물을 드시는 동안 목사님이 꼬마를 반기신다.
 [[\emptyset mul-ul tu-si-nun dongan] [moksa-nim-I k^homa-lul
 water-ACC eat-HON-COMP while pastor-HON-NOM child-ACC
 panki-si-n-ta]]
 greet-HON-PRES-DECL

‘While \emptyset drinking+HON water, the pastor greets+HON the child.’

Question: Who is drinking water?
 Answer: the pastor

Not at all acceptable ●-----●-----●-----●-----● Definitely acceptable

Care was taken to balance the gender distribution between the main clause subject and object across the three conjunction groups (e.g., male/female subject and male/female object). The targets used 22 verbs, each of which was used in only one item with the exception of the verb ‘greet’ which occurred three times, once with each conjunction type. All target items were normed to ensure that the subordinate verb did not have a stronger semantic or pragmatic association with a particular honor status than others. For example, subject of the verb phrase *opening the door* was found to have a stronger association with the security guard (non-honored) in relation to the president of a company (honored), and was thus replaced.

The rationale behind having the subordinate clause, which contained a null subject, precede the main clause was the following. First, having the null subject before its possible referents (main clause subject and object) ensured that the null subject is not assigned a referent at the onset of processing. Second, the presence and absence of honorification in the subordinate verb allowed the experimenters to test the effect of honorification in on-line interpretation of null subjects (see

Kim and Kaiser, 2009 for the results of an on-line self-paced reading experiment).

The targets and fillers were distributed among eight lists in a Latin Square design. Target items were separated by at least one filler sentence. The filler sentences were similar to the targets in sentence structure and length. There were four main types of fillers: (i) sentences including overt backward anaphora, (ii) sentences including both overt and null anaphora, in which the subject noun phrase preceded the pronoun, (iii) sentences with other syntactic ambiguities, and (iv) sentences in which the referent of overt or null pronouns was unambiguous.

3.3 Predictions

Table 2 presents the predicted referent acceptability-rating scores for the main clause subject and object as the null's antecedent in each of the eight conditions. Score 5 indicates the provided person as a "definitely acceptable" answer for the question, and score 1 indicates the person as a "not at all acceptable" answer.

Conditions	Sample item	Given referent	
		subject	object
YESVHON-SHON-S YESVHON-SHON-O	잠바를 입으시는 동안 할머니가 손녀를 안으신다. While Ø is wearing+HON a coat, the grandmother hugs+HON the granddaughter.	5	1
YESVHON-OHON-S YESVHON-OHON-O	잠바를 입으시는 동안 손녀가 할머니를 안는다. While Ø is wearing+HON a coat, the granddaughter hugs the grandmother.	1+	5-
NOVHON-SHON-S NOVHON-SHON-O	잠바를 입는 동안 할머니가 손녀를 안으신다. While Ø is wearing a coat, the grandmother hugs+HON the granddaughter.	3+	3-
NOVHON-OHON-S NOVHON-OHON-O	잠바를 입는 동안 손녀가 할머니를 안는다. While Ø is wearing a coat, the granddaughter hugs the grandmother.	3+	3-

Table 2. Predictions on the referent acceptability-rating scores

Note: 1 = Not at all acceptable, 5 = Definitely acceptable

The overall predictions were that the main clause subject would be the preferred referent of the null over the main clause object due to subject prominence and that honorific agreement matters in the interpretation of null subjects. Specific predictions were made first considering the conditions where the verb in the subordinate clause is marked with the honorification suffix *-si-* (YESVHON conditions). In the YESVHON-SHON-S condition – where the subordinate verb has honorification (YESVHON), the main clause subject is honored (SHON) and the question asks about the subject referent (S) – it was predicted that participants would rate the subject referent (given in the question-answer pair) as a very acceptable antecedent for the null subject (close to 5 on the scale) since the honored subject agrees with the verb's honorification. In contrast, in the YESVHON-SHON-O condition – where the subordinate verb has the honorific suffix (YESVHON), matrix subject is honored (SHON), and the question asks about the matrix object (O) – the given object referent was expected to receive a low rating (close to 1) since the presence of the verbal-honorification agrees with the main clause *subject*, not the object.

In the YESVHON-OHON-S condition, where the matrix *object* is honored, the non-honored *subject* given in the question will trigger low ratings since the honorification on the subordinate verb agrees with the object in the main clause. However, if null pronouns prefer subjects, the ratings in this condition will nevertheless be higher than those in the YESVHON-SHON-O condition, where the referent in the question-answer pair is the *object* even though the answers in both conditions contradict the presence of the verbal-honorification.

In the YESVHON-OHON-O condition, where the object agrees with the verbal-honorification and it is also the referent given in the question-answer pair, high acceptability ratings were expected. However, assuming subject preference, it was predicted that the ratings in this ‘object-agreeing’ condition would be lower than those in the ‘subject-agreeing’ YESVHON-SHON-S condition, where the subject agrees with the verbal-honorification and is given in the question. In other words, in the YESVHON-OHON-O condition, the subject preference is expected to interfere when comprehenders are trying to associate the null subject of the honored subordinate verb with the main clause object.

In the conditions where the verb in the subordinate clause has no honorification (NOVHON conditions, the second half of Table 2), both the subject and object of the main clause were expected to be plausible referents for the null pronoun. However, if null pronouns have a subject preference, the ratings for the conditions where the referent in the question/answer pair is the main-clause subject (NOVHON-SHON-S and NOVHON-OHON-S) will be higher than the ratings for the conditions where the main-clause object is the referent in the question/answer pair (NOVHON-SHON-O and NOVHON-OHON-O conditions).

3.4 Results

The average ratings for subject and object antecedents in each of the conditions are shown in table 3. In general, participants’ ratings were in the predicted direction. First of all, ratings were higher when the given referent agreed with the subordinate verb in honorification (YESVHON-SHON-S and YESVHON-OHON-O) than when it did not (YESVHON-SHON-O and YESVHON-OHON-S). In the absence of verbal-honorification (NOVHON conditions), the differences in the rating scores between the subject and object referents were not as large as those in the conditions with verbal-honorification. This indicates that, in the absence of verbal-honorification, both the subject and object are considered as plausible referents for the null subject. However, participants gave overall higher ratings for the subject referents than the object referents, demonstrating a subject preference.

Conditions	Sample item	Given referent	
		subject	object
YESVHON-SHON-S YESVHON-SHON-O	잠바를 입으시는 동안 할머니가 손녀를 안으신다. While Ø is wearing+HON a coat, grandmother hugs+HON granddaughter.	4.20	1.81
YESVHON-OHON-S YESVHON-OHON-O	잠바를 입으시는 동안 손녀가 할머니를 안는다. While Ø is wearing+HON a coat, granddaughter hugs grandmother.	2.36	3.42
NOVHON-SHON-S NOVHON-SHON-O	잠바를 입는 동안 할머니가 손녀를 안으신다. While Ø is wearing a coat, grandmother hugs+HON granddaughter.	3.56	2.44
NOVHON-OHON-S NOVHON-OHON-O	잠바를 입는 동안 손녀가 할머니를 안는다. While Ø is wearing a coat, granddaughter hugs grandmother.	3.35	2.09

Table 3. Mean rating scores in the eight conditions
(1 = Not at all acceptable, 5 = Definitely acceptable)

Statistical analyses were carried out to measure the effects of the three independent variables on the referent acceptability-ratings: (i) *Honorification* (presence or absence of verbal-honorification on the subordinate verb, e.g. ‘wearing±HON’), (ii) *Grammatical role of the honorable entity* in the main clause (subject vs. object), (iii) *Referent type* (grammatical role of the given

answer, i.e., subject vs. object). Participants' ratings revealed significant main effects of *Referent type* ($p < .0001$) and the *Grammatical role of the honorable entity* ($p = .001$). More specifically, ratings were higher (i) when the null pronoun referred to the subject of the main clause than when it referred to the object (*subject preference*), and (ii) when the subject of the main clause was an honorable individual than when the object was an honorable individual. Participants preferred to interpret the null pronoun as referring to the subject of the main clause rather than the object. They were also more likely to accept the given answer as the subject of the subordinate verb when the main clause subject was an honored person than when the object was an honored person. In addition, there was a significant interaction between *Referent type* and *Grammatical role of the honorable entity*. When the honored entity (e.g., *grandmother*) was in subject position, the null subject's preference for that subject was stronger than when the honored entity was in object position. The preferences for the subject to be the referent of the null pronoun and the honored person to be the grammatical subject suggest that subjects, as well as honored entities, are more discourse salient than objects and non-honorable entities, respectively.

The subject preference indicated by the significant effect of *Referent type* was further tested by comparing the mean rating scores across the conditions. The Mean Rating (MR) of the YESVHON-SHON-S condition (MR = 4.2) was significantly higher than that of the YESVHON-OHON-O condition (MR = 3.42) ($p < .0001$). In other words, when the verbal-honorification agreed either with the honored subject or the honored object of the main clause, participants gave significantly higher ratings for the subject referent than the object referent. The mean rating of the YESVHON-OHON-S condition (MR = 2.36) was also significantly higher than that of the YESVHON-SHON-O condition (MR = 1.81) ($p < .001$). This shows that when the verbal honorification did *not* agree with either the non-honored subject or non-honored object of the main clause, the ratings were still higher for the subject referent than the object referent. In the absence of verbal-honorification, the ratings for the honored person were higher when it was in subject position (NOVHON-SHON-S, MR = 3.56) than when it was in object position (NOVHON-OHON-O, MR = 2.09) ($p < .0001$). The ratings for the non-honored person were also higher when it was in subject position (NOVHON-OHON-S, MR = 3.35) than when it was in object position (NOVHON-SHON-O, MR = 2.44) ($p < .0001$).

The effects of honorific agreement on the interpretation of null subjects were further assessed by comparing the mean ratings of the YESVHON-SHON-S condition and the YESVHON-OHON-S condition. Both conditions probed the acceptability of the subject referent, but in the YESVHON-SHON-S condition, the honorable entity was in subject position, and in the YESVHON-OHON-S condition, it was in object position. If honorific agreement does not have a significant impact on null subject resolution and subjecthood is all that matters, the ratings for the subject referent in these conditions should not differ significantly. However, participants gave significantly higher ratings in the YESVHON-SHON-S condition (MR = 4.2) than in the YESVHON-OHON-S condition (MR = 2.36, $p < .0001$). When the honorification on the subordinate verb clashed with the given referent as in the YESVHON-OHON-S condition, ratings decreased. Likewise, if honorific agreement has no effect, the object referents should receive low ratings regardless of honorific agreement. However, ratings for the object referent were higher when it matched the subordinate verb in honorification than when it did not. That is, the mean rating of the YESVHON-OHON-O condition (MR = 3.42) was significantly higher than that of the YESVHON-SHON-O condition (MR = 1.81) ($p < .0001$). Furthermore, the mean rating of the YESVHON-OHON-O condition was higher than that of the NOVHON-OHON-O condition ($p < .0001$). That is, the ratings for the object referent increased when it was honored and the subordinate verb was also honored to match it in comparison to the condition where the object was non-honored and the subordinate verb was not honored to match it.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

The study reported here investigated the factors affecting the interpretation of null subjects in Korean. One of the goals of the study was to find out whether the preference for grammatical subjects over objects as the referent of a null pronoun in Romance languages would be present in Korean. The other goal of the study was to discover whether the linguistic and socio-cultural constraints on honorific agreement would play a role in guiding the resolution of null subjects along with the

potential referents' grammatical roles (i.e., subject vs. object). The results show that participants were overall more willing to interpret the main clause subject as the referent of the null entity than the object. This confirms that the subject preference for a null pronoun is also present in the interpretation of null subjects in Korean. This also fits with Han's (2006) observation that subjecthood is an important predictor for NP antecedents of null pronouns in Korean corpus data. However, participants preferred the main clause *object* as the referent in the YESVHON-OHON-S/O conditions, in which the non-honored subject did not agree with the honored subordinate verb but the honored object did. This leads to the conclusion that though the subject preference is present in Korean, the effect of honorific agreement is strong enough to overcome the preference. These findings suggest that both grammatical subjects, as well as honored entities, are more salient or prominent than grammatical objects and non-honored individuals, respectively if we assume that null subjects refer to highly salient referents.

Another interesting finding of the study was that acceptability-ratings were higher when the honored person was in subject position than in object position. Having an honored person in subject position seems to have triggered comprehenders to accept the given referent to a greater degree than having the honored person in object position whether the referent agreed with the subordinate verb in honorification or not. It could be the case that comprehenders found sentences with an honored person in subject position more natural than sentences with an honored person in object position. The trials where the honored person was in object position could therefore have prompted participants to carefully examine the acceptability of given referents, and thus to be more sensitive to honorific agreement in referent resolution.

The preference for an honored person to be a grammatical subject might have stemmed from a frequency bias. It is known that grammatical subjects are more likely to be agents (e.g., Kroeger, 1993 and others). There seems to be a bias for an honored-person to be realized in subject/agent position in Korean sentences as well. Though there is no particular research on this phenomenon, it is highly likely the case given the social dimensions of the Korean culture and consequently the nature of discourse. For example, in relation to non-honored entities, honored individuals are given priority and respect in the culture: they walk in front of a line, things should be offered to them first, they should be seated first, they talk rather than listen, and they give commands rather than being asked to do things. They are often the center of discourse and an agent rather than a recipient. Thus, broadly speaking, it seems that honored individuals are more likely to be construed as or represented as agentive than non-honored individuals. I hypothesize that this may be connected to my finding that the given referents in the trials where the honored entities are in subject position received higher ratings than the referents in trials where they are in object position.

As a whole, the findings of the study provide insights into the interpretation of null subjects in Korean. They suggest that the interpretation of an entity that is not overtly pronounced is guided by two distinctive factors: grammatical properties of potential referents and their honor statuses. In addition to grammatical subjects being more discourse-prominent, the current study shows that honored entities are more discourse-prominent than non-honored entities and that they are more likely to be interpreted as the referent of a null argument.

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