Korean 'Formality' endings '-supnita/-supnikka' and '-eyo' in the negotiation of interactional identity in the news interview☆,☆☆

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A B S T R A C T

What makes the rich verbal inflection system in Korean grammar even more tangled is the reported presence of formal and casual endings. Many scholars have traditionally categorized them in terms of formality or the level of deference and affection. This approach, however, has paid little attention to how Korean speakers actually 'code-switch' between the two forms in a rather dynamic manner at each turn at talk. More recent studies from a more functional perspective mainly focus on the speaker's side of the interaction. In this study, two separate episodes from a Korean news interview show were analyzed. I first transcribed the data following the conventions in Conversation Analysis, then marked all the endings employed in 1st pair part questions and 2nd pair part answers by who issued it, and in which pair part and with what local context it was issued. It has been argued that different languages employ different linguistic devices to project and reshape identities of the other(s) present in real-time interaction. My analyses show that in the Korean news interview, speakers use the two endings in a highly selective manner to achieve the interactional goal of negotiating the moment-by-moment identities of the listener through ongoing talk.

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1. Introduction

As is well known, Korean has a rich verbal ending system; accordingly, there has long been an intricate problem of how to distinguish some of the various endings that are highly interchangeable and how to make the distinction easily understandable to the language learners of Korean. Unlike most European languages where proper verbal conjugation has to be made in terms of the person and number of the subject, one of the most important factors which triggers the different conjugation in Korean is the relationship between the speaker and the listener in terms of age and social status.[1]

☆ 'Ending' (or 'ender') is a grammatical unit which refers to linguistic elements that are mandatorily used to syntactically complete the verbal conjugation of sentences in Korean. These grammatical particles are attached to the stem of any verbs, adjectives, or the copula '-ita'. These endings well represent the agglutinative characteristic of Korean.

☆☆ This paper follows the Yale Romanization system of Korean, except for proper nouns such as names of places or participants in the data under examination. The Yale system is widely used in linguistics for its phonemic accuracy in terms of transliterating each alphabet in Korean into its counterpart symbol in the Roman alphabet notation without obscuring the phonemic value of each consonant and vowel. All proper nouns, however, follow the Revised Romanization of Korean proclaimed by Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea).

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[1] When a younger person with a relatively lower social status talks to an elderly person with a higher social status or to someone she/he does not know well, honorific (or polite) endings are employed. On the other hand, when an elderly person with a higher social status talks to a younger person with a relatively lower social status, non-honorific (or plain) endings are used. The same is true for someone talking to a person who is of a similar age or bears a close relationship to the speaker.

In addition to this distinction between honorific and non-honorific endings that are found both in Japanese and Korean, what makes the Korean verbal inflection system even more tangled is the reported presence of the different formal and casual endings. For instance, there are two possible ways in which a declarative sentence can be completed in Korean. Without making any propositional changes, one can use '-supnita' or '-eyo' with falling intonation at the end of the sentence. Also, for interrogative sentences, '-supnikka' and '-eyo' with rising intonation can be employed interchangeably at the sentential end without causing substantial alteration in its propositional contents. Many Korean scholars[2] have categorized these alternative endings in terms of formality or the level of deference and affection. This approach holds tenable in many of the archetypal cases. However, it has been facing criticism since there seem to appear many cases in which the 'formal' (i.e. '-supnita/-supnikka') and 'casual' (i.e. '-eyo') endings are employed dynamically in a mixed manner even within the same turn of speech.

In naturally occurring conversations, native speakers of Korean often use 'casual' endings in formal situations such as in the news interview or courtroom conversation. This suggests that the way in which Korean speakers actually use these two endings in conversation may be more complicated than what have been described and categorized in the traditional view. This implies that the distinction between them should be assessed from a more flexible perspective to take into consideration more diverse interactional factors. Revisiting the issue while keeping these aspects in mind will help us more accurately grasp the real picture of the usage of these 'seemingly analogous' endings in Korean.

More recently there have been a notable number of studies[3] which show interesting findings from the functional and interactional perspective.[4] These studies, however, also have several drawbacks of having a considerable amount of counter examples; thus, significant modification to the existing models is needed. In the short example below, which was extracted from Example 3 in the next section,[5] the male interviewer (MIR) in the news show uses '-eyo,' whereas one of the two interviewees (DJN) uses '-supnita.' This behavior is in stark contrast to what would be expected following the previous studies in that in this 'formal' situation the very person with an official, formal, presentational, and authoritative role keeps using the 'casual' ending.

Example (1)

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01  HDN:   cheumulo    ilehkey solcikhan yaykitaylo han pen
            first:time this    honest    story:as   one time

02     →nanwe polkka   hapnita.    yey:
            share try-PURP do-supnita. Yeah:
            "{We} are going to share candid stories for the
            first time-supnita."

03  FIR:   a:
            "ah:"

04  MIR:   a  cengmal solcikhan yaykilul  hasil
            ah really  honest    story-ACC do-HON-ATTR

05     →cwunpika      ta toysyesseyo?
            readiness-NOM all become-HON-PST-eyo?
            "Are {you} really ready to tell us {your} candid stories-eyo?"
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In other words, with what actual communicative goals to achieve each linguistic form from the two Korean endings gets to be used is still vastly unknown. Therefore, the research questions that this paper deals with are: (1) what is the interactional role of the two endings, '-supnita/-supnikka' and '-eyo,' in Korean in the service of social action; and (2) what factors trigger which linguistic form to be selectively used (i.e., how and in what order, if there is any, do Korean speakers deploy these endings when they are mixed) in the news interview. The interesting findings from this research will certainly shed new light on the small yet significant puzzle of the sophisticated Korean ending system and ultimately contribute to a better understanding and education of the multi-layered Korean ending system.

2. Relevant literature review

In this section of the paper, I will first summarize how previous studies have dealt with the issue of distinguishing between the two alternative linguistic forms, '-supnita/-supnikka' and '-eyo,' in Korean. In the synchronic approach to the Korean ending system, a good deal of studies has been conducted. I will closely examine the more traditional view first and then discuss recent studies that have been conducted from a more functional perspective.

As noted in the introduction, the more traditional view of categorizing different endings in Korean in addition to the 'honorific' and 'non-honorific' distinction is the 'formal' and 'casual' dimension. Some of the prominent advocates of this view are Suh (1980, 1984), Sung (1985), Nam and Ko (1993), and Nam (2001). According to this view, the Korean verbal ending system could be modeled as is shown in Table 1.

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[2] Suh (1980, 1984), Sung (1985), Nam and Ko (1993), and Nam (2001), among others.
[3] Eun and Strauss (2004), Strauss and Eun (2005), Kim (2014), and Brown (2015), among others.
[4] Refer to the next section for a more detailed discussion of the relevant literature.
[5] Refer to Section 3, Data and Methodology, for detailed information regarding the data examined in this study.