

# The Social Meanings and Functions of the Korean Subject Honorific Suffix *–(u)si*

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## 1 Introduction

The honorific suffix *–(u)si* is known to indicate the speaker's respect or deference to the person referred to or being talked about. It is generally regarded that *–(u)si* is attached to the predicate when the subject deserves deference from the speaker, and this phenomenon is called “honorific agreement.”

There have been many studies about the syntactic and sociolinguistic characteristics of *–(u)si* (e.g. Choe 2004; Choi 2010; Mok 2013). However, there are not many studies that discuss the pragmatic meanings or functions of *–(u)si*. It has simply been explained that *–(u)si* is used to express respect or deference to the referent. However, the use of *–(u)si* is very context dependent, and as will be discussed, it is used strategically in real conversations. Further, recently, *–(u)si* has been overused by workers in the

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service sectors, in a way that is often grammatically wrong, but this phenomenon is getting more popular.

The purpose of this study is to discuss how *-(u)si* is used in real conversations. Especially, this study discusses how honorific agreement is realized in real conversations. From a perspective of indexicality (Ochs 1990, 1993; Silverstein 1976), this study will analyze the usages of *-(u)si* in various genres of television show conversations (e.g. debates, talk shows, and comedy shows)<sup>1</sup>. These programs are not scripted, so they have characteristics of naturally occurring conversations. About six hours of television conversations were transcribed and analyzed for this study.

Indexicality concerns how to relate linguistic form to social meanings in a given context. According to Ochs (1990), what a linguistic form can directly index are affective and epistemological dispositions. She explains that affective dispositions include feelings, moods, and attitudes of participants toward some proposition, and epistemological dispositions refer to some property of the participants' beliefs or knowledge vis-à-vis some proposition. She further explains that other socio-cultural dimensions (e.g., social identities of participants, social relationships among participants) are indirectly indexed from the direct indexical meanings.

From an indexical perspective, this study will show that *-(u)si* is not used solely based on social hierarchical differences between the speaker and the referent, but based on the speaker's stance in the given situation.

## 2 Grammatical Characteristics of Honorific Agreement

### 2.1 Social Norms of Using *-(u)si*

Honorific agreement refers to cooccurrence restrictions between an address term and the addressee honorific form of the predicate on the one hand, and between a subject form and the subject honorific form of the predicate on the other (Sohh 1999). As shown in the example (1), honorific title suffix *-nim* is attached after the job title *kyoswu* 'professor', and subject honorific suffix *-(u)si* is attached after the verb stem *-ka* 'go'. In the example (2), the verb *cwumusita* 'to sleep' is a fossilized honorific word, so we do not need to add extra *-(u)si* to this verb.

- (1) *Kim kyoswu-nim-i ka-sey-eyo*  
 Kim-professor-HT-NOM go-SH-POL

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<sup>1</sup> The data for this study includes conversations from representative debate programs called *Paykpun tholon* 'One hundred minute debate' and *Simya tholon* 'Midnight debate', talk shows called *Te sutha syo* 'The Star Show' and *Kim Jung-eun-uy chokholleys* 'Kim Jung-eun's Chocolate', and comedy shows called *Hayphi thukeyte* 'Happy Together' and *Phaymillika tessta* 'Family Outing'.

- ‘Professor Kim goes.’  
 (2) *Kim kyoswu-nim-i cwumusey-yo*  
 Kim-professor-HT-NOM sleep(hon)-POL  
 ‘Professor Kim sleeps.’

Honorific agreement is different from general grammatical rules since it is context dependant. For example, using  $-(u)si$  or honorific words in the examples (1) and (2) are dependant on the speaker’s intention in the context. If Prof. Kim is not present, it may be okay to drop  $-(u)si$  and say just *ka-yo* and to use common word *cata* ‘to sleep’ instead of *cwumusita* ‘to sleep (hon)’. Therefore, appropriateness of using  $-(u)si$  depends on the context, not on any grammatical rule.

In fact, there are some exceptional cases when the use of  $-(u)si$  is inappropriate regardless of the context. For example, when the subject is the speaker himself/herself, it is always inappropriate to use  $-(u)si$  in the predicate. Also, when the subject is intrinsically referring to a person who is younger than the speaker (e.g. *tongsayng* ‘younger sibling’, *aki* ‘baby’), it is almost always unnatural to use  $-(u)si$  in the predicate.

- (3) *cey-ka hakkyo-ey ka-yo/\*ka-si-eyo*  
 I-NOM school-to go-POL/go-SH-POL  
 ‘I go to school.’  
 (4) *tongsayng-i ka-yo/\*ka-si-eyo*  
 younger brother-NOM go-Pol/go-SH-POL  
 ‘My younger brother goes to school.’  
 (5) *aki-ka ca-yo/\*cwumusi-eyo*  
 baby-NOM sleep-Pol/sleep(hon)-POL  
 ‘A baby sleeps.’

Also, nouns with derogatory meanings such as *kangto* ‘robber’, *keci* ‘beggar’ do not go well with  $-(u)si$ . Further, words that describe undesirable actions or states do not sound natural when  $-(u)si$  is attached. For example, it sounds unnatural (or even comical) if we attach  $-(u)si$  in verbs such as *hwumchita* ‘to steal’, or *milswuhata* ‘to smuggle’.

- (6) *kangto-ka kyengchal-hantey ?caphi-si-ess-eyo*  
 robber-NOM police-by caght-SH-PST-POL  
 ‘The robber was caght by the police.’  
 (7) *keci-ka ?kukelha-si-eyo*  
 beggar-NOM beg-SH-POL  
 ‘A beggar is begging.’

- (8) *sensayngnim-i mayak-ul ?milswuha-si-ess-eyo*  
 teacher drug-ACC smuggle-SH-PST-POL  
 ‘The teacher smuggled drugs.’

Thus, it seems like there are some restrictions for inappropriate usages of  $-(u)si$ . However, it is still hard to say that subject honorifics is a grammatical rule, since many of the inappropriate cases are due to the mismatches of semantic meanings. Therefore, it is proper to say that the subject honorifics is a sociolinguistic or a pragmatic matter, not a grammatical rule.

## 2.2 Triggering the Use of $-(u)si$

One of the controversial issues on the use of  $-(u)si$  is when a sentence component other than subject triggers the use of  $-(u)si$ . Sohn (1992/2013) discusses the cases when some obvious subjects do not trigger the use of  $-(u)si$ , while other elements of a sentence does. In the sentences below, *apeci* ‘father’ or *sensayngnim* ‘teacher’ is triggering the use of  $-(u)si$  in the predicate, but they are not grammatical subjects. Sohn (ibid.) summarized the hierarchy of NP that triggers the use of  $-(u)si$  in the following order: Agent > Experiencer Topic > Experience Locative > Theme Subject > Possessor Topic > Possessor Genitive.

### (9) Hierarchy of NP that triggers $-(u)si$

#### a. Agent

*Minsu-nun apeci-ka tachi-si-ess-eyo*  
 Minsu-TOP father-NOM hurt-SH-PST-POL  
 ‘Minsu’s father was hurt.’

#### b. Experiencer Topic

*apeci-ka namtongsayng-i poi-si-eyo*  
 father-NOM younger brother-NOM be seen-SH-POL  
 ‘Father sees younger brother.’

#### c. Experience Locative

*sensayngnim-eykey cey-ka philyoha-si-eyo*  
 teacher-to I-NOM necessary-SH-POL  
 ‘Teacher needs me. (*lit.*, To teacher, I am necessary.)’

#### d. Theme Subject

*ce hantey cohun sensayngnim-i kye-si-eyo*  
 I to good teacher-NOM exist-SH-POL  
 ‘I have a good teacher. (*lit.*, To me, there is a good teacher.)’

#### e. Possessor Topic

*sensayngnim-i tayk-i me-si-eyo*  
 teacher-NOM house far-SH-POL  
 ‘Teacher’s house is far.’

## f. Possessor Genitive

*sensayngnim-uy*      *tayk-i*      *me-si-eyo*  
 teacher-GEN      house-NOM      far-SH-POL  
 ‘Teacher’s house is far.’

(Adapted from Sohn 1992/2013)

In summary, the use of  $-(u)si$  depends on the given situation and the speaker’s psychological attitude towards the referent and the situation. Also, a speaker does not passively follow subject honorific rule or meta-pragmatic understanding on the use of  $-(u)si$ , but uses  $-(u)si$  actively to show his/her psychological attitude in the discourse. In this sense, Lee (2006) argues that  $-(u)si$  is a pragmatic suffix and that we cannot explain enough from a syntactic perspective.

**3 Strategic Uses of  $-(u)si$** **3.1 Speaker’s Emotional Attachment to the Referent**

The following example is from a debate program where politicians debate political and social issues. This politician is talking about the then-president and is using the honorific subject particle  $-kkeyse$  after the subject *taythonglyeng* ‘president’. However, he does not use any  $-(u)si$  or honorific words in the predicates, which does not meet the honorific agreement.

## (10) From “100-minute Debate”

*taythonglyeng-kkeyse kwukmintul eykey sakwaha-Ø-ess umeyto*  
 president-NOM(HON) citizen to apologize-Ø-PST although  
*pwulkwuhako cenhye pansengha-Ø-ci anhko iss-Ø-ta ilehkey*  
*despite at all repent-Ø-not and stay-Ø-DC like this*  
*sayngkak toy-ko-yo*  
 thought become-and-POL

‘Despite the fact that the president has apologized to the citizens, he is thought to have not repented at all.’

Even though there are three positions where  $-(u)si$  can be possibly used (marked as Ø), this person does not use any  $-(u)si$ . However, this remark does not sound rude or unnatural in this situation. Rather, by not using  $-(u)si$ , it is considered that this person is talking about the president objectively, expressing psychological detachment from him.

On the contrary, repeated use of  $-(u)si$  in all of the possible places can index the speaker’s emotional attachment to the referent. In the example (11), while this talk show guest, who is a singer, talks about the producer of her

song, she uses *-(u)si* in all of the possible places while explaining what happened with him while she was recording her song.

## (11) The Star Show

*koyngcanghi phikonha-si-nikkan-yo tto ku ttayka*  
 very tired-SH-so-POL also that time  
*CF-to phitinim-i ccik-usi-ess-ko*  
 commercial-also producer-NOM film-SH-PST-and  
*cam-ul ayey mos cwumusi-n*  
 sleep-ACC totally cannot sleep(HON)-RL  
*sangthay-si-ess-ketunyo kulaykaciko icey cemcem*  
 situation-SH-PST-you know so then more and more  
*hwa-lul nay-si-nun ke-yey-yo*  
 anger-ACC break-SH-RL thing-be-POL  
 ‘Because he was very tired, and also because he had just filmed a commercial, he was not able to sleep at all. In that situation, he got more and more angry, you know.’

This singer is using *-(u)si* or honorific word at all the possible places. Unlike the example (11), this person is talking about a person from a very subjective perspective. The repeated use of *-(u)si* sounds like the speaker is emphasizing that she is personally close to this person, and maybe even shows her emotional attachment to the referent.

**3.2 Use of *-(u)si* for Addressee Honorifics**

When you talk about the listener’s actions or states, your referent coincides with the addressee. For example, when you ask questions, make suggestions, or make requests to someone higher than you socially, you can use *-(u)si* in the predicate and honorific sentence ending at the same time. In the following examples, the verb *-ka* ‘to go’ is about the addressee’s action, and the speaker can consider inserting *-(u)si* before the sentence ending. The sentence endings are honorific endings and if you add *-(u)si*, the question sounds more courteous.

(12) Using *-(u)si* in Korean sentences for ‘Prof. Kim, where are you going?’

- a Kim kyoswu-nim, eti-ka-yo?*  
 Kim professor-HT where-go-POL  
*b Kim kyoswu -nim, eti-ka-si-eyo?*  
 Kim professor-HT where-go-SH-POL  
*c Kim kyoswu-nim, eti-ka-pnikka?*  
 Kim professor-HT where-go-DEF  
*d Kim kyoswu -nim, eti-ka-si-pnikka?*

## Kim professor-HT where-go-SH-DEF

The combinations of honorific sentence endings (i.e.  $-eyo/ayo$  and  $-[su]pnita$ ) and  $-(u)si$  lead to variations in the degree of a speaker's honorific intention (Oh, 2010). Depending on the relationship between the interlocutors or the atmosphere of the situation, it is possible to take the honorific suffix  $-nim$  out from each sentence, which makes more variations in the honorific meaning. Thus, use of honorifics is not a simple task of just following certain rules, but it is a very complicated process which requires the speaker's strategic choice while considering the context.

Actually, the most common use of  $-(u)si$  in the data for this study is found in  $-(u)seyyo$  ( $<-[u]si-eyo$ ) ending. This ending  $-(u)seyyo$  is the combined form of  $-(u)si$  and addressee honorific polite ending  $-eyo/ayo$ , but as Park (1976) argues,  $-(u)seyyo$  ending seems to have become one of the addressee honorific endings, which is considered more polite than the simple  $-eyo/ayo$  ending. Park (1976) points out that while the  $-seyyo$  ending can be used in a situation where the deferential form is mostly used, honorific sentence endings,  $-eyo/ayo$  cannot be used directly with a person of higher social status when they ask a question, make a proposal, command or request something from an addressee.

Especially,  $-(u)si$  is most often used when an utterance requires immediate action from the addressee. In the speech acts of directives, requests, commands and advice (Searle, 1975),  $-(u)si$  is used in most possible cases (e.g. *ancu-si-eyo* 'Have a seat.', *ese o-si-eyo* 'Welcome!; Come in!', *towacwu-si-eyo* 'Help!').

The example (13) is from a comedy show, where the 20-year-old Korean-American guest (Brian), is talking to the host, who is about 40 years old. In this situation, the host was complaining because he had lost the game. Brian said that the host should be satisfied by the fact that at least he had beaten him in the game. It was obviously a joke from the context and everyone knows that his Korean is not perfect, but his remark sounded a little aggressive because he used the simple  $-yo$  ending instead of  $-(u)seyyo$ , so other people around him expressed their surprise by his sudden challenging remark by saying *o::* 'wow'.

(13) From 'Family Outing' (comedy show)

1 Brian: *ce-lul iky-ess-canhayo*

I-ACC win-PST-POL

'You beat me (in this game).'

2 *kipwun cohkey sayngkakha-Ø-eyo*

feeling well think-POL

'Be satisfied with it.'

3 Others: *o::*

wow  
'Wow!'

In contemporary Korean, it is almost fixed that in the speech acts of directives, requests, commands and advice, *-(u)seyyo* form is considered as a default honorific form, fixed as one of the addressee honorific endings taking the speaker's affective stance. So if you take *-(u)si* out, it could sound too direct and even aggressive. It looks as though the affective stance of emotional attachment is incorporated into this new ending and conventionally used by most people.

### 3.3 Taking a Ritualized Attitude to the Addressee

The data for this study shows that the host of each show uses *-(u)si* more often when they talk to the audience than to the guests. The example (14) is from an opening remark of a talk show and the emcee is using *-(u)si* at all possible places.

- (14) From the talk show opening remark by the emcee
- |                     |                 |                    |                   |                            |
|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>onul</i>         | <i>hanpen</i>   | <i>thukpyelhan</i> | <i>nukkim-ulo</i> | <i>caymiiss-nun</i>        |
| today               | once            | special            | feeling-by        | exciting-RL                |
| <i>syo</i>          | <i>po-si-ko</i> | <i>kipwun</i>      | <i>cohkey</i>     | <i>tolaka-si-ess-umyen</i> |
| show                | watch-SH-and    | feeling            | well              | go back-SH-PST-if          |
| <i>coh-kess-eyo</i> |                 |                    |                   |                            |
| good-will-POL       |                 |                    |                   |                            |
- 'Today, I hope you will watch this exciting show with special feelings and return (home) pleasantly.'

However, when she has conversations with guests, the frequency of using *-(u)si* is much less than when she talks to the audience, and as can be seen in example (15), the emcee did not use *-(u)si* even if it could be used in three places.

- (15) Talk show emcee having a conversation with a guest.
- |                             |                 |                    |               |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------|
| <i>hay.oy</i>               | <i>hwaltong</i> | <i>ha-Ø-myense</i> | <i>kacang</i> |
| overseas                    | activity        | do-Ø-while         | most          |
| <i>kuliwu-Ø-ess-ten-key</i> | <i>mwe-ka</i>   | <i>iss-Ø-eyo?</i>  |               |
| miss-Ø-PST-RT-thing         | what-NOM        | have-Ø-POL         |               |
- 'While working overseas, what did you miss the most?'

The emcee's utterances to the audience are mostly announcements, which is a unidirectional mode of speech. She uses *-(u)si* in most possible places, which makes the utterance sounds a little ritualized to make herself sound



like a kind and caring emcee. On the other hand, when she is talking with the guests, she sometimes speaks more casually, dropping  $-(u)si$ , sounding less ritualized and giving off a more personal atmosphere.

### 3.4. Misuse of $-(u)si$

As  $-(u)seyyo$  ending is used prevalently for the addressee, its usage has been more generalized to express simple honorific intention to the addressee even when the subject or theme of a sentence is not an honorable person. It has been pointed out by researchers and public media that overuse or ‘inappropriate’ use of  $-(u)si$  is a new phenomenon in contemporary Korean society. For example, people working in the customer service sector, such as cashiers, telemarketers, and department store clerks, often use  $-(u)si$  when the subject is not the human subject.

- (16) *kephi nao-si-ess-supnita*  
coffee come out-SH-PST-DEF  
‘Here is your coffee.’
- (17) *20,000 won toy-si-kess-supnita*  
20,000 won become-SH-will-DEF  
‘It is 20,000 won. (*lit.*, [The total] becomes 20,000 won.)’
- (18) *i phentu-nun iyul-i noph-usi-eyo*  
this fund-TC rate-NOM high-SH-POL  
‘The interest rate of this fund is high.’

The data from this study does not provide conversations like in the service sector, but there are some misuses of  $-(u)si$ . The example (19) is when a singer is saying that many universities want her team to sing at their festival.

- (19) *manhi cengmal manhun tayhakkyo-eyse*  
many really many college-at  
*hamkkey hay cwu-si-ki-lul wenha-si-nuntey*  
together do give-SH-NOM-ACC want-SH-so  
‘Many schools, very many schools want us to be at their school (festivals)...’

In this example, the first  $-(u)si$  is attached after the verb about the speaker’s action (to be at the university festivals), which is clearly a mistake. There are several cases of this kind of mistake in the data. It is assumed that people unconsciously express their emotional attachment by using  $-(u)si$ , sometimes not recognizing the related subjects of the predicate clearly.

#### 4 Conclusion

This study has discussed that the use of *-(u)si* does not always appear following the honorific agreement rule in real conversations. Instead, people strategically choose to use *-(u)si* in the given context.

The data for this study shows that people selectively use *-(u)si* among possible positions. It appears that using *-(u)si* may index the speaker's emotional attachment to the referent. When *-(u)si* is used for the addressee in questions or the speech acts of directives, requests, commands and advice, *-(u)seyyo* ending is recognized as the most appropriate style, while simple *-yo* style is considered too direct or even aggressive.

In unidirectional discourses, such as announcements or presentations, use of *-(u)si* sometimes indexes a ritualized stance along with emotional attachment. The show hosts used more *-(u)si* when they talk to the audience than when they talk to the guests. There were some misuses of *-(u)si*, when the speaker uses *-(u)si* in the predicate describing his/her own action. This kind of mistake can be found when the sentence structure is complicated.

This study argues that the basic function of *-(u)si* is to express the speaker's affective stance of emotional attachment to the addressee in a ritualized way. It is not a mere politeness marker, but it is used strategically to regulate honorific meaning in Korean conversations.

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