

Rethinking Embeddability and Context Sensitivity in Honorification: Evidence from Korean *si*

Ariela Ye Dorothy Ahn
Rutgers University
SALT 35 @ Harvard
May 20-22, 2025

1 Introduction

▷ Honorification and its classification

- Definition: Honorification is the grammatical information about the social relation between two individuals—the speaker and other entities related to the utterance.
- Types:
 - the ‘**performative**’ type (or addressee honorification): speaker—addressee

(1) Korean addressee honorific marker *supni*

- Myungsoo-ka wa-ss-ta.
Myungsoo-NOM come-PST-DECL
‘Myungsoo came.’ (Addressee is of non-high status)
- Myungsoo-ka wa-ss-**supni**-ta.
Myungsoo-NOM come-PST-H_{Adr}-DECL
‘Myungsoo came.’ (Addressee is of high status)

☞ *supni-ta*: one of many forms for addressee honorification (see [Portner et al. \(2019\)](#) and references therein).

- the ‘**propositional**’ type (or argument honorification): speaker—a clause-internal argument

(2) Korean argument honorific marker *si*

- Myungsoo-ka wa-ss-ta
Myungsoo-NOM come-PST-DECL
‘Myungsoo came.’ (Subject is of non-high status)
- Kim kyoswu-nim-i o-**si**-ess-ta
Kim professor-H_S-NOM come-H_S-PST-DECL
‘Professor Kim came.’ (Subject is of high status)

▷ Different approaches to honorification

- The syntactic approach: Agree ([Alok 2021](#); [Alok & Baker 2022](#); [Jou 2024](#))
- The semantic/pragmatic approach: the Taboo of Directness ([Wang 2023](#)); expressive meanings with a numerical relation between speaker-target ([Potts & Kawahara 2004](#); [Potts 2007](#); [Kim & Sells 2007](#))

▷ Honorification and embeddability

- Argument and addressee honorification differ in embeddability ([Portner et al. 2019](#); [Tomioka & Ishii 2022](#); [Ishii & Cho 2023](#))
- [Portner et al. \(2019\)](#): difference between content-oriented markers and utterance-oriented markers

▷ [Portner et al. \(2019\)](#): content-oriented markers are embeddable while utterance-oriented markers are unembeddable

- Content-oriented markers:
 - refer to an entity
 - contributed as an ordinary argument to the propositional content of the sentence

- express information about speaker-entity relation
- Utterance-oriented markers:
 - refer to the addressee
 - do not contribute a referent to the propositional content
 - convey information about speaker-addressee relation + context formality

▷ This project

- i. Korean argument honorific marker *si* can
 - a) be used as addressee honorification and
 - b) be embedded
- ii. Korean *si* as indirect addressee honorification

challenge for Portner et al. 2019?

▷ Roadmap

- §2 Empirical data
 - §2.1 The canonical use of *si* and *supni* and the embedding asymmetry
 - §2.2 The non-canonical use of *si*
- §3 Implementing the multi-dimensional semantics
- §4 A reductive analysis of *si*
- §5 Concluding remarks

2 Empirical data

2.1 Basic Korean data: *si* vs. *supni*

- The embedding asymmetry

- (3) Myungsoo-ka Kim kyoswu-nim-i o-**si**-ess-ta-go malhay-ess-ta.
 Myungsoo-NOM Kim professor-H_S-NOM come-H_S-PST-DECL-COMP say-PST-DECL
 ‘Myungsoo said that Professor Kim came.’
 (honoring embedded subject Prof. Kim: Speaker_{matrix} <_{hon} Prof. Kim)

- (4) Context: Prof. Kim was asking who came to the colloquium and Jane, a freshman said:
 Myungsoo-ka Jin-ka wa-ss-***supni**-ta-go malhay-ess-supni-da.
 Myungsoo-NOM Jin-NOM come-PST-H_{Adr}-DECL-COMP say-PST-H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘Myungsoo said that Jin came.’
 (Intended: honoring matrix addressee Prof. Kim: Jane <_{hon} Prof. Kim)

2.2 The non-canonical use of *si*: honoring addressee

▷ Some properties of this non-canonical use of *si*

- age variation: ✓ young speakers; ✗ older/more conservative speakers
- natural in service contexts
- natural in relay contexts
- natural in sentences with evidential markers

▷ Puzzle 1: *si* is used to honor the addressee, not the subject

- Service contexts

- (5) a. *Context: Restaurant employee tells the customer that water is self-served.*
 Mwul-un selpu-**si**-pni-ta
 water-TOP self.served-si-H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘Water is self-service.’
- b. *Context: Restaurant has a sign on the wall that reads:*
 Mwul-un selpu-(***si**)-ipni-ta
 water-TOP self.served-*si-H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘Water is self-service.’
- (6) adapted from Brown (2015) with modification
- a. khephi nao-**si**-ess-supni-ta
 coffee come.out-SI-PST-H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘Coffee is ready.’
- b. cikum-un cali-ka eps-**usi**-pni-ta
 now-TOP seat-NOM not.exist-SI--H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘There aren’t any seats available now.’
- (7) adapted from Choo & Kwak (2008) with modification
- a. *Context: Uttered by a hotel front desk clerk*
 cenhwa o-**si**-ess-supni-ta.
 phone.call come-SI-PST-H_{Adr}-DECL
 (lit.) ‘A phone call (for you) arrived.’
- b. poksaki pissa-**si**-ta-kwuyo?
 copy.machine expensive-si-DECL-REPORT.Q
 ‘The copy machine is expensive, you’re saying?’
- (8) adapted from Kim & Findlay (2023) with modification
 kokayk-nim, i os-un phwumcel-toy-**si**-ess-supni-ta.
 customer-H this clothing-TOP sold.out-become-SI-PST-H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘Dear customer, this article of clothing has become out of stock.’

▷ **Puzzle 2: si can be embedded in reportative contexts**

- In reportative contexts:

- (9) *Context: Person A is telling C that parking is free, which was said by some parking lot staff B.*
 [cwucha-nun mwulyo-**si**-la-ko] cenhay-tallay-yo
 parking-TOP free-SI-DECL-COMP relay-give-H_{Adr}
 ‘They wanted me to relay that parking is free.’ (honoring person C: A <_{hon} C)
- (10) chwulkuk-i yenkitoy-**si**-ess-ta-ko cenhay-tallay-yo
 departure-nom delay-SI-PST-DECL-COMP relay-give-H_{Adr}
 ‘They wanted me to relay that departure has been postponed.’
- cf.
- (11) *Context: Person A is retelling what B told him to C*
 *pi-ka o-**si**-ess-ta-ko cenhay-tallay-yo
 rain-TOP come-SI-PST-DECL-COMP relay-give-H_{Adr}
 ‘They want me to relay that it rained.’

- In evidential marking contexts

- (12) cwucha-nun mwulyoi-**si**-lay-yo
 parking-top free-si-evidential.report-H_{Adr}
 ‘Parking is free (I heard from a different agent).’

- 📖 Embedded *si* is sensitive to the utterance addressee
- 📖 Contrary to Portner et al. (2019)’s generalization

- 📖 Contribution of this paper: A semantic & pragmatic account
- 1. Non-canonical use of *si* is not a counter example to Portner et al. (2019)’s generalization
- 2. It is not deviation from standard Korean grammar

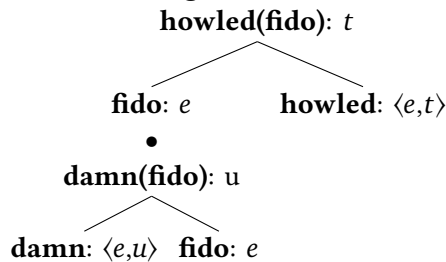
3 Implementing the multi-dimensional semantics to honorification

3.1 The foundation

- ▷ The ingredients for our analysis
 - Potts (2005): honorific markers encode non-asserted and not-at-issue content.
 - multi-dimensional semantics (Gutzmann 2012; Gutzmann & McCready 2014) to distinguish separate asserted and not-asserted content in semantic derivation
- ▷ Exemplification of multi-dimensional semantics: a case analysis of expressives
 - Gutzmann & McCready (2014) separate truth-conditional and use-conditional meanings
 - Expressives only add content to the use-conditional meaning
 - The use-conditional-contributing content enters semantic derivations at internal constituents
 - Use-conditional meaning do not further compose with the rest of the higher projections

- (13) The damn dog Fido howled.
- a. “The damn dog Fido howled” is true if Fido howled.
 - b. “The damn dog Fido howled” is felicitously used if the speaker feels negatively about Fido.

- (14) $\llbracket \text{That damn dog Fido howled} \rrbracket = \langle \text{howled}(\text{fido}), \{\text{damn}(\text{fido})\} \rangle$



3.2 Our proposal in a nutshell

- ▷ Both *si* and *supni* have two layers of meaning: truth-conditional and use-conditional

- ▷ Semantics of *si*
 - TC: identifies a relevant thematic argument of the event as a free variable x_1 (15a).
 - UC: marks x_1 as higher-ranked than speaker (*cS*) (15b).
 - x_1 constrained to salient primary argument of the event (agent or affectee)

- (15) a. $\llbracket \text{si} \rrbracket^t = \lambda e. \Theta(e) = x_1$ (Θ : contextually-salient thematic head)
 b. $\llbracket \text{si} \rrbracket^u = \lambda e. cS <_{\text{hon}} x_1$ ($<_{\text{hon}}$: status ranking)

▷ Semantics of *supni*

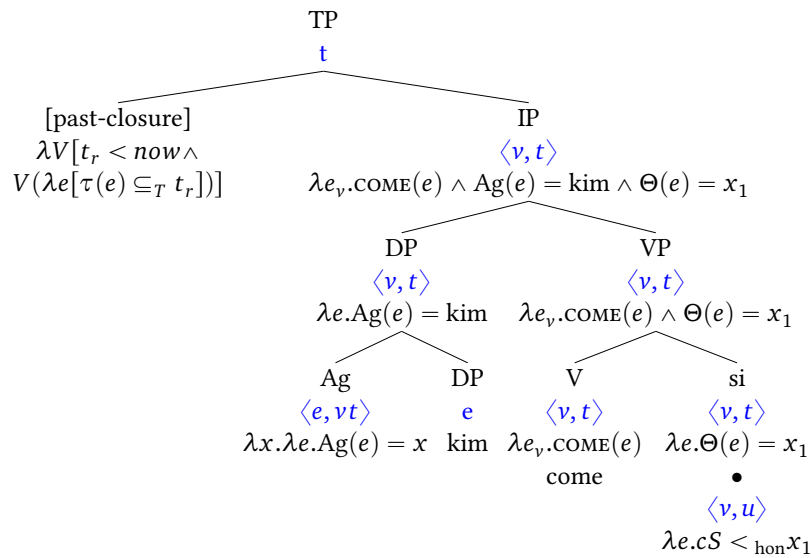
- TC: Identity Function taking a proposition p as its argument and returning p (16a)
- UC: encodes the relative social hierarchy between cS and the addressee (cA), marking cA as higher-ranked than cS (16b).

- (16) a. $\llbracket \text{supni} \rrbracket^t = \lambda p.p$
 b. $\llbracket \text{supni} \rrbracket^u = \lambda p.cS <_{\text{hon}} cA$

▷ Exemplification

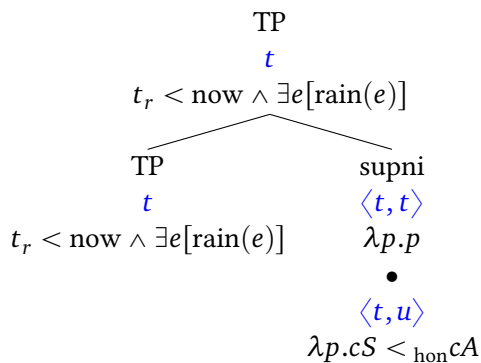
- An illustration of *si*

- (17) a. Kim kyoswunim-i o-si-ess-ta.
 Kim prof-NOM come-H_s-PST-DECL
 ‘Prof. Kim came.’
 b. $\llbracket (17a) \rrbracket = \langle t_r < \text{now} \wedge \exists e[\text{COME}(e) \wedge [\tau(e) \subseteq_T t_r] \wedge \text{Ag}(e) = \text{kim} \wedge \Theta(e) = x_1], \{cS <_{\text{hon}} x_1\} \rangle$
 c.



- An illustration of *supni*

- (18) a. pi-ka wa-ss-supni-ta.
 rain-NOM come-PST-H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘It rained.’
 b. $\llbracket (18a) \rrbracket = \langle t_r < \text{now} \wedge \exists e[\text{RAIN}(e) \wedge [\tau(e) \subseteq_T t_r], \{cS <_{\text{hon}} cA\}] \rangle$
 c.



4 Deriving argument honorific *si* as addressee honorification

Step 1: Identifying a relevant thematic argument

- *si* identifies some relevant thematic argument as a free variable x_1
 - x_1 is fixed by context, ensuring some contextual familiarity
- Possible thematic arguments picked: Agent, Affectee, Beneficiary, Possessor/Experiencer
 - Double Nominative Construction in Korean (Han & Kim 2004; Na & Huck 1993)

- (19) Nay-ka tongsayng-i pangmwunhae-ss-ta.
 I-NOM brother-NOM visit-PST-DECL
 ‘My brother visited.’
 (More intuitively: An event of my brother visiting happened to me)
- (20) Nay-ka tampay-ka kumci-toy-ss-ta.
 I-NOM smoking-NOM prohibit-PASSIVE-PST-DECL
 ‘A prohibition of smoking happened to me’
 (Not always about nominal possession; Ahn & Smith in prep)

Step 2: Coreference with *cA*

- *si* does not directly mark *cA* as higher ranked than *cS*.
- Instead, it marks the relevant argument x_1 as higher ranked, and this results in addressee honorification only when x_1 is known to be *cA* in the context
- Ways to corefer with x_1 : be the affectee, beneficiary, experiencer of the said event

▷ Examples of coreference between *cA* and x_1

- Coffee: customer is waiting for coffee

- (21) a. coffee nao-si-ess-supni-ta
 coffee come.out-SI-PST-H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘Coffee is ready’
- b. $\langle \exists e. come(e) \wedge theme(e) = coffee \wedge \Theta(e) = x_1, cS <_{hon} x_1 \rangle$
- (i) TC: There exists a coming event of coffee and some relevant thematic argument is x_1 .
- (ii) UC: x_1 is honored by speaker
- (iii) relevant Θ : ben/affectee
- (iv) context: *cA* is the beneficiary of this event
- (v) implication: $cS < cA$

- Water: Server lets the customer know that self-serving is imposed on the customer

- (22) a. Context: Restaurant employee tells the customer that water is self-served.
 Mwul-un selpu-si-ipni-ta
 water-TOP self.served-SI-H_{Adr} DECL
 ‘Water is self-served.’
- b. Context: Restaurant has a sign on the wall that reads:
 Mwul-un selpu-(*si)-ipni-ta
 water-TOP self.served-*SI-H_{Adr}-DECL
 ‘Water is self-served.’

- Not possible without an overt addressee because there is no contextually salient entity that can resolve the anaphor x_1

- Parking:

- (23) *Context: Person A is telling C that parking is free, which was said by some parking lot staff B.*
 [cwucha-nun mwulyo-**si**-la-ko] cenhay-tallay-yo
 parking-TOP free-SI-DECL-COMP relay-give-H_{Adr}
 ‘They wanted me to relay that parking is free.’ (honoring person C: $A <_{\text{hon}} C$)
- (24) $\llbracket (23) \rrbracket = \exists e. \text{say}(e) \wedge \text{agent}(e) = B \wedge \text{recipient}(e) = cS \wedge [\exists e'. \wedge \text{theme}(e) = e' \wedge e' = \text{free}(e') \wedge \Theta(e') = x_1 \wedge \exists z. \text{theme}(e') = z \wedge \text{content}(z) = \text{parking}]$
 (There is a speech event (e) where B reports a state (e') to cS; the content of e' is being free and the theme of the state is z whose content is parking.)

5 Concluding remarks

✍️ What does this paper tell us:

- Novel Korean data: embedded *si* sensitive to utterance context
 - direct addressee
 - the speaker-addressee ranking
- Challenges Portner et al. (2019)’s core proposal
- Proposed analysis:
 - *si* as an indexical honorific marker, targeting an internal thematic argument of an event
 - x_1 fixed by the context and coreference with cA
- Maintains the generalization in Portner et al. (2019): *si* still content-oriented
- Derives the innovative use of *si* as indirect addressee honorification

References

- Ahn, Hee-Don. 1991. *Light verbs, vp movement, negation and clausal architecture in korean and english*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison Doctoral dissertation.
- Alok, Deepak. 2020. *Speaker and addressee in natural language: Honorificity, indexicality and their interaction in magahi*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Doctoral dissertation.
- Alok, Deepak. 2021. The morphosyntax of magahi addressee agreement. *Linguistics and philosophy* 24(3). 264–296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00351935>
- Alok, Deepak & Baker, Mark. 2018. On the mechanics (syntax) of indexical shift: Evidence from allocutive agreement in Magahi. Ms. Rutgers.
- Alok, Deepak & Baker, Mark. 2022. Person and honorification: Features and interactions in magahi. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 7 (1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.7675>
- Bae, Suyoung. 2022. Two different types of verb phrase fronting constructions in korean. *Language Research* 58(2). 119–140. <https://doi.org/10.30961/lr.2022.58.2.119>
- Baker, Mark. 1985. The mirror principle and morphosyntactic explanation. *Linguistic Inquiry* 16(3). 373–415.
- Baker, Mark & Alok, Deepak. 2019. On the syntax of addressee agreement and indexical shift in Magahi. In *Annual meeting of the linguistic society of america*, New York, NY.
- Boeckx, Cedric & Niinuma, Fumikazu. 2004. Conditions on agreement in japanese. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 22 (3). 453–480. <https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.7675>
- Bondarenko, Tanya. 2023. On the source of displacement: Two meanings of embedded CPs. Ms. available at lingbuzz/007469.
- Brown, Lucien. 2015. Honorifics and politeness. In *The handbook of korean linguistics*, 303–319. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Champlion, Lucas. 2015. The interaction of compositional semantics and event semantics. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 38. 31–66.
- Changguk, Yim. 2021. The unembeddability of imperatives in Korean: Two different types of imperative morphology. *Open Linguistics* 7. 35–41. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2021-0005>
- Chomsky, Noam. 2000. Minimalist inquiries: The framework. In Martin, Roger & Michaels, David & Uriagereka, Juan (eds.), *Step by step: Essays on minimalist syntax in honor of howard lasnik*, 89–155. MIT Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2001. Derivation by phase. In Kenstowicz, Michael (ed.), *Ken hale: A life in language*, 1–52. MIT Press.
- Choo, Miho & Kwak, Hye-Young. 2008. *Using korean: A guide to contemporary usage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, Chris & Postal, Paul M. 2012. *Imposters: A study of pronominal agreement*. MIT Press.
- Culy, Christopher. 1994. Aspects of logophoric marking. *Linguistics* 32(3). 1055–1094.
- Darmasetiyawan, IMade Sena & Ambridge, Ben. 2022. Syntactic representations contain semantic information: Evidence from balinese passives. *Collabra: Psychology* 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.33133>
- Gutzmann, Daniel. 2001. *True to form: Rising and falling declaratives as questions in english*. Santa Cruz, CA: University of California, Santa Cruz dissertation.
- Gutzmann, Daniel. 2012. *Use-conditional meaning. Studies in multidimensional semantics*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: University of Frankfurt dissertation.
- Gutzmann, Daniel & McCready, Eric. 2014. Using descriptions. *Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics* 10. 55–72.
- Han, Chung-hye. 1998. *The structure and interpretation of imperatives: mood and force in universal grammar*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania dissertation.
- Han, Chung-hye & Kim, Jong-Bok. 2004. Are there “double relative clauses” in korean? *Linguistic Inquiry* 35. 315–337.
- Harada, Shin-Ichi. 1976. Honorifics. *Syntax and semantics: Japanese generative grammar* 5. 499–561.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2013. The syntax of answers to polar questions in english and swedish. *Lingua* 128. 31–50.

- Holmberg, Anders. 2014. The syntax of the finnish question particle. In Svenonius, Peter (ed.), *Functional structure from top to toe. the cartography of syntactic structures*, vol. 9, 266–289. Oxford University Press.
- Ikawa, Shiori. 2022. *On agree feeding interpretation: Honorification, empathy, and switch reference*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University dissertation.
- Ishii, Keita & Cho, Juyeon. 2023. Morpho-syntax governs the embeddability of Utterance Honorifics: Evidence from Burmese. *Penn Linguistics Conference* 47.
- Jou, Eunsun. 2024. Honorification as Agree in Korean and beyond. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 9 (1). 1–48. <https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.9565>
- Kaur, Gurmeet. 2019. Not all imperatives have a jussive head: Emphasizing the role of allocutivity in syntax. In *Talk presented at the workshop on person and perspective*, Los Angeles: University of Southern California.
- Kaur, Gurmeet. 2020. On the syntax of addressee in imperatives: insights from allocutivity. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 51. 107. <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.1083>
- Keenan, Edward & Comrie, Bernard. 1977. Noun phrase accessibility and universal grammar. *Linguistic Inquiry* 8(1). 63–99.
- Kim, Jong-Bok & Sells, Peter. 2007. Korean honorification: a kind of expressive meaning. *Journal East Asian Linguist* 16. 303–33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10831-007-9014-4>
- Kim, Lucy Kyoungsook & Kaiser, Elsi. 2009. Effects of honorific agreement on null subject interpretation in korean. In *Proceedings of the 2009 seoul international conference on linguistic interfaces*. Seoul, Korea: Yonsei University.
- Kim, Yoolim & Findlay, Jamie Y. 2023. On the ‘subject’ honorific -si- in korean. *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America* 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v8i1.5534>
- Kwon, Nari & Lee, Yookyung. 2024. When grammaticality is intentionally violated: Inanimate honorification as a politeness strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 232. 167–181.
- Lee, Miseon & Huh, Sorin & O’Grady, William. 2017. Korean subject honorifics: An experimental study. *Journal of Pragmatics* 117. 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2017.06.006>
- McFadden, Thomas. 2017. The morphosyntax of allocutive agreement in tamil. Ms. Leibniz Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft.
- Merchant, Jason. 2004. Fragments and ellipsis. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 27(6). 661–738. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10988-004-1711-4>
- Miyagawa, Shigeru. 2012. Agreements that occur mainly in the main clause. In *Main clause phenomena: New horizons* 190, 79–111.
- Na, Younghee & Huck, Geoffrey J. 1993. On the status of certain island violations in korean. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 16. 181–229.
- Nevins, Andrew. 2011. Prospects and challenges for a clitic analysis of (A)SL agreement. *Theoretical Linguistics* 37. 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.1515/thli.2011.013>
- Pak, Miok. 2022. Allocutive imposters in the form of referent honorification. *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America* 7(1). 5221. <https://doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v7i1.5221>
- Portner, Paul & Pak, Miok & Zanuttini, Raffaella. 2019. The speaker-addressee relation at the syntax-semantics interface. *Language* 95 (1). 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2019.0008>
- Potts, Christopher. 2003. A layered semantics for utterance modifiers. In *Talk presented at the workshop on direct compositionality*, Brown University.
- Potts, Christopher. 2005. *The logic of conventional implicatures*. Oxford University Press on Demand.
- Potts, Christopher. 2007. The expressive dimension. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33(2). 165–198. <https://doi.org/10.1515/TL.2007.011>
- Potts, Christopher & Kawahara, Shigeto. 2004. Japanese honorifics as emotive definite descriptions. *Semantics and Linguistic Theory* 14. 253–270. <https://doi.org/10.3765/SALT.V14I0.2917>
- Rizzi, Luigi. 1997. The fine structure of the left periphery. *Elements of grammar: Handbook in generative syntax* 281–337.
- Ross, John. 1970. On declarative sentences. In Jacobs, Roderick & Rosenbaum, Peter (eds.), *Readings in english transformational grammar*, 222–277. Boston: Ginn.
- Sohn, Homin. 1999. *The Korean language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Song, Sanghoun & Choe, Jae-Woong & Oh, Eunjeong. 2019. An empirical study of honorific mismatches in Korean. *Language Sciences* 75. 47–71.
- Speas, Margaret. 2004. Evidentiality, logophoricity and the syntactic representation of pragmatic features. *Lingua* 114(3). 255–276. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-3841\(03\)00030-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-3841(03)00030-5)
- Speas, Peggy & Tenny, Carol. 2003. Configurational properties of point of view roles. In Sciallo, Anne-Marie Di (ed.), *Asymmetry in grammar*, 315–345. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Tomioka, Satoshi & Ishii, Keita. 2022. Being polite and subordinate: Morphosyntax determines the embeddability of Utterance Honorifics in Japanese. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 7 (1). 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.7684>
- Wang, Ruonan. 2023. Honorifics without [hon]. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 41 (3). 1287–1347. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11049-022-09563-0>
- Yamada, Akitaka. 2019. *The syntax, semantics and pragmatics of Japanese addressee-honorific markers*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University dissertation.