

THE OBLIGATORINESS AND OPTIONALITY IN KOREAN SUBJECT HONORIFICATION*

JAEHONG SHIM

The University of Chicago

1 Introduction

In Korean linguistics, subject honorification has attracted significant attention regarding its realization conditions. It offers valuable insights into contextual allomorphy within the Distributed Morphology (DM, Halle and Marantz (1993)) framework, due to the presence of both regular and suppletive honorific markers and the language's morphological complexity. Broadly, there are two approaches to contextual allomorphy in Korean subject honorification: syntactic (Jo, 2004, Koopman, 2005, Chung, 2009, Kim, 2023, Jou, 2024) and post-syntactic (Kim and Chung, 2015, Choi and Harley, 2019). While both agree that honorification involves a positive honorific feature on the subject, syntactic accounts posit it originates in narrow syntax, whereas post-syntactic accounts argue it is inserted later as a dissociated morpheme. Specifically, Choi and Harley (2019) argues that subject honorification involves a post-syntactic morpheme, supported by the interaction between *do*-support in Korean long-form negation (LFN) and honorific marking.

However, I argue that *do*-support does not necessarily need to be analyzed as a post-syntactically inserted morpheme. By adopting the framework of the Generalized Head Movement (GenHM) (Arregi and Pietraszko, 2021a,b), I will demonstrate that a post-syntactic approach is not the only viable analysis for *do*-support. If we can account for *do*-support being introduced in narrow syntax, then it is not essential to treat subject honorification as a post-syntactically inserted morpheme.

Subject honorification is a grammatical way to encode the relationship between the speaker and the subject of an utterance, indicating that the subject holds a higher social status than the speaker. It is realized in two ways. For verb roots in Korean, subject honorification is marked through the affixation of the regular subject honorific (RegH) suffix *-(u)si* to the verb stem. Consequently, while the predicate in (1a) does not exhibit any honorific suffix, we observe the presence of a RegH suffix in the predicate morphology in (1b)¹.

*Special thanks to Karlos Arregi, Jason Merchant, UChicago Morphology & Syntax Circle, and the reviewers and audiences at WAFL 18 for their feedback.

¹Abbreviations used in this paper: Acc = accusative, Agr = agreement, Comp = complementizer, Decl = declarative, Hon = honorific, Neg = negation, Nom = nominative, O = orphan, Pst = past, Subj = subject

- (1) a. Chelswu-ka Yenghuy-lul po-ass-ta.
 C.-Nom Y.-Acc see-Pst-Decl
 ‘Cheolsu saw Yeonghui.’
- b. cwusang-kkeyse Yenghuy-lul po-si-ess-ta.
 your.majesty-Nom.Hon_{Subj} Y.-Acc see-Hon_{Subj}-Pst-Decl
 ‘Your majesty saw Yeonghui.’ Agr_{Subj}P

In this study, I assume that the RegH *-(u)si* is inserted into Hon_{Subj} head through Vocabulary Insertion. Following Jou (2024), I assume that Agr_{Subj} head carries an unvalued [HON:] feature, as shown in (2a). This feature probes its c-command domain to agree with the subject NP’s valued [HON:] feature, as illustrated in (2a) and (2b), respectively.

- (2) a. b.

x C

(adapted from Jou (2024))

When the probe agrees with a NP_{Subj} with a [HON:+] feature, the RegH suffix *-(u)si* is inserted into the Agr_{Subj} head within a complex head created via Head Movement, as specified in (3c). This insertion blocks the elsewhere condition, as in (3b). I will provide a more detailed explanation of how a single complex head is formed in Section 2.² (4) illustrates Vocabulary Insertion in the predicate for RegH context, respectively.

- (3) a. V[SEE] ↔ *po*-³ (4)
 b. Agr_{Subj} ↔ ∅
 c. Agr_{Subj}[HON:+] ↔ *-(u)si*
 d. T[Past] ↔ *-Ass*
 e. C[Decl] ↔ *-ta*

However, a limited number of roots exhibit root suppletion for subject honorification. For instance, *mek*- ‘eat’ expresses subject honorification through a suppletive honorific (SupH) stem *capswusi*- ‘eat.Hon_{Subj}’, as shown in (5b). In such cases, the use of RegH is strongly dispreferred.

²For the sake of brevity, I will omit argument NPs from the syntactic trees for the remainder of this paper.

³In this paper, the constituent [√ v]_v is abbreviated as V. Therefore, whenever V appears in a vocabulary entry or syntactic structure, it should be understood as an abbreviation of [√ v]_v. For instance, V[SEE] in (3a) represents [√SEE v]_v. Similarly, VP is used as a shorthand for [NP_{Subj} [VP v]_v]_{VP}, unless otherwise specified.

- (5) a. Chelswu-ka kkul-ul mek-ess-ta.
C.-Nom honey-Acc eat-Pst-Decl
'Cheolsu ate honey.'
- b. cwusang-kkeyse kkul-ul {capswusi-ess-ta / *mek-usi-ess-ta}.
your.majesty-Nom.Hon_{Subj} honey-Acc {eat.Hon_{Subj}-Pst-Decl / eat-Hon_{Subj}-Pst-Decl}
'Your majesty ate honey.'

The vocabulary items in (6) capture the pattern of SupH in Korean. Specifically, when $\sqrt{\text{EAT}}$ is in the context of subject honorification, the more specific item (6a) blocks the elsewhere form (6c), as shown in (74). Given that Vocabulary Insertion proceeds root-outward (Bobaljik, 2000), the inserted SupH stem subsequently conditions the suppletion for Agr_{Subj}[HON: +], as specified in (6b) (Choi and Harley, 2019). Thus, the insertion of a null morpheme effectively blocks the insertion of the RegH $-(u)si$.

- (6) a. V[EAT] $\leftrightarrow$ *capswusi-* / xx Agr_{Subj}[HON: +]
b. Agr_{Subj}[HON: +] $\leftrightarrow$ $\emptyset$ / {*cwumwusi-*, *kyeysi-*, *capswusi-*, ... } xx SupH stems
c. V[EAT] $\leftrightarrow$ *mek-*
- (7) a. b.

To summarize, Korean subject honorification is realized either regularly or suppletively, depending on the idiosyncratic properties of individual roots. In the case of single complex heads, the interaction between more specific vocabulary items and elsewhere forms accounts for the observed pattern. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Long-Form Negation (LFN0 has been claimed as evidence for the post-syntactic nature of subject honorification. In the next section, we will examine the evidence related to LFN in detail.

2 Long Form Negation: Subject Honorification as a syntactic process

In this section, I will elucidate how Generalized Head Movement (GenHM, (Arregi and Pietraszko, 2021a,b) supports Korean subject honorification as a syntactic process, using its pattern within the LFN context as a key example. The behavior of subject honorification in LFN is crucial for understanding its morphosyntactic properties, as it has been considered one of the central pieces of evidence supporting post-syntactic subject honorification. To summarize the post-syntactic camp's position: subject honorification is argued to be a post-syntactic phenomenon because its insertion is fed by the post-syntactic insertion of another morpheme, specifically the light verb *ha-* 'do.'

However, the GenHM framework offers an alternative perspective by treating this light verb as being introduced in narrow syntax rather than post-syntactically. To demonstrate this, let us first examine how subject honorification operates in the LFN context.

2.1 Subject honorification pattern in a long-form negation context

Long-form negation (also known as post-verbal negation) is one of the two types of sentential negations available in Korean. In this construction, when a predicate is negated, the main verb followed by the negation marker *ani* 'not' remains non-finite. Instead, a light verb, *ha-* 'do,' appears after the main verb and negation marker and is marked for inflection. As a result, when we negate a RegH sentence, such as in (2.1a), repeated from (1b), the predicate now consists of a non-finite main verb followed by this inflected dummy verb. Interestingly, as Yi (1994) observed, subject honorification in this context displays double exponence: it is marked both on the non-finite main verb and again on the light verb, resulting in what I dub (**double-marking**).

- (8) a. *cwusang-kkeyse* *Yenghuy-lul po-si-ess-ta.*
 your.majesty-Nom.Hon_{Subj} Y.-Acc see-Hon_{Subj}-Pst-Decl
 'Your majesty saw Yeonghui.'
- b. *cwusang-kkeyse* *yenghuy-lul po-si-ci* *ani ha-si-ess-ta.*
 your.majesty-Nom.Hon_{Subj} Y.-Acc see-HON_{Subj}-Comp not do-Hon_{Subj}-Pst-Decl
 'Your majesty did not see Yeonghui.'

Furthermore, subject honorification can be marked only on either the main verb or the light verb, as shown in (9a) and (9b), which I refer to as (**V1-marking** and **V2-marking**, respectively). However, it is ungrammatical to omit subject honorification on both verbs in subject honorification context (**no-marking**).

- (9) a. *cwusang-kkeyse* *yenghuy-lul po-*(si)-ci* *ani hay-ess-ta.*
 your.majesty-Nom.Hon_{Subj} Y.-Acc see-Hon_{Subj}-Comp not do-Pst-Decl
 'Your majesty did not see Yeonghui.'
- b. *cwusang-kkeyse* *yenghuy-lul po-ci* *ani ha-*(si)-ess-ta.*
 your.majesty-Nom.Hon_{Subj} Y.-Acc see-Comp not do-HON_{Subj}-Pst-Decl

When we negate a SupH sentence, as in (10a), repeated from (5b), we also observe a double-marking pattern and a V1-marking pattern, as shown in (10b).

- (10) a. *cwusang-kkeyse* *kkul-ul capswusi-ess-ta.*
 your.majesty-Nom.Hon_{Subj} honey-Acc eat.Hon_{Subj}-Pst-Decl
 'Your majesty ate honey.'
- b. *cwusang-kkeyse* *kkul-ul capswusi-ci ani ha-(si)-ess-ta.*
 your.majesty-Nom.Hon_{Subj} honey-Acc eat.Hon_{Subj} not do-Hon_{Subj}-Pst-Decl
 'Your majesty did not eat honey.'

However, unlike RegH where both V1-marking and V2-marking are possible, only V1-marking is permissible for SupH, as illustrated in (11). Notably (11a) also demonstrates that marking RegH on the main verb with the non-honorific stem does not resolve the ungrammaticality in the context of SupH.

- (11) a. *cwusang-kkeyse kkul-ul mek-(usi)-ci ani ha-si-ess-ta.
 your.majesty-Nom.HonSubj honey-Acc eat-HonSubj-Comp not do-HonSubj-Pst-Decl
 b. *cwusang-kkeyse kkul-ul mek-ci ani hay-ess-ta.
 your.majesty-Nom.HonSubj honey-Acc eat-Comp not do-Pst-Decl

As seen so far, while it is possible to omit RegH marking on the main verb, this is not the case for SupH. Now, let us examine how the GenHM framework accounts for the observed patterns of subject honorification in the LFN context.

2.2 The GenHM treatment of long-form negation: it is morpheme doubling!

First, let us examine how a single complex head is formed in the GenHM framework. In this framework, a complex head is understood as a cluster of the morphological features of syntactic terminals involved in Head Movement, organized within an internal complex-head structure. To illustrate, consider (12a), repeated from (1b). Here, Head Movement creates a cluster of morphosyntactic features of the heads involved, namely V, Agr_{Subj}, T, and C. The dashed line represents that these heads share the complex head in narrow syntax⁴.

- (12) a. cwusang-kkeyse Yenghuy-lul po-si-ess-ta.
 your.majesty-Nom.HonSubj Y.-Acc see-HonSubj-Pst-Decl
 ‘Your majesty saw Yeonghui.’
 b.

The complex head is then sent to PF and undergoes two critical post-syntactic processes when a specifier is intervening between the head chain: *Split-by-Intervention* and *Orphan Assignment*. These processes are essential for understanding how the GenHM framework accounts for the subject honorification patterns observed in LFN. Originally developed to explain the different linearization patterns of *do*-support found cross-linguistically, *Split-by-Intervention* and *Orphan Assignment* analyze two verbal parts of LFN as two distinct heads that are derived from splitting a single complex head.

Let us see how this process actually works. First, I assume that the negation marker *an(i)* in LFN is a specifier of ΣP , in the sense of Laka (1990). When ΣP is merged into the causal spine

⁴According to (Arregi and Pietraszko, 2021b:246), a complex head is pronounced at the highest position in the head chain unless one of the lower heads is a strong head. Since I have not found any evidence for the presence of such strong heads in Korean, I assume that the complex head is pronounced at the highest head in the head chain, which is C in (12b)

C

between TP and Agr_{Subj}P, a single complex head is formed, as illustrated in (13a). However, since Neg at Spec,ΣP intervenes in the head chain, it triggers *Split-by-Intervention*, resulting in a doubling of the complex head, as shown in (13b). Consequently, each of the split complex heads now contains daughter nodes that are no longer shared with their original base-generated syntactic terminals. For instance, C and T nodes of the lower complex head are no longer linked to C and T in the clausal spine. The process of *Orphan Assignment* then assigns an orphan feature, indicated by [O] in (13b), to these detached nodes. During Vocabulary Insertion, these nodes receive defective pronunciations, as summarized in (14), rather than their full forms.

(13) a.

CP

C C

b.

Neg at Spec,ΣP triggers
Split-by-Intervention
C and T nodes of the lower complex head
are no longer linked to C and T in the clausal spine.
The process of *Orphan Assignment* then assigns an orphan feature, indicated by [O] in (13b), to these detached nodes. During Vocabulary Insertion, these nodes receive defective pronunciations, as summarized in (14), rather than their full forms.

- (14) a. $V[O] \leftrightarrow ha-$ d. $\Sigma[O] \leftrightarrow \emptyset$
 b. $Agr_{Subj}[O] \leftrightarrow \emptyset$ e. $T[O] \leftrightarrow \emptyset$
 c. $\Sigma \leftrightarrow \emptyset$ f. $C[O] \leftrightarrow \emptyset$

There are two crucial points about this analysis regarding subject honorification. First, the light verb *ha-* ‘do’ is simply a defective pronunciation of the main verb, $V[SEE]$. Thus, unlike the previous post-syntactic treatment of *do*-support, the GenHM framework posits that the light verb originates in narrow syntax. Second, the V1-marking pattern is derived from the defective pronunciation of the orphan $Agr_{Subj}[Hon: +]$ in the higher head. C^C

What about the double-marking pattern? Following Arregi and Pietraszko’s (2021b:278-279) analysis of predicate clefts in Mainland Scandinavian language, I assume that an orphan Agr_{Subj} optionally receives its full pronunciation (see also related data in Platzack (2012:280-281)). Thus, when the orphan $Agr_{Subj}[Hon: +]$ gets its full pronunciation, we observe a double-marking pattern.

To account for the V2-marking pattern, I further propose that ΣP can be merged either above or below $Agr_{Subj}P$. The variation in ΣP ’s position affects the orphan status of $Agr_{Subj}P$ within each complex head. Specifically, when ΣP is merged higher, Agr_{Subj} in the higher complex head is assigned orphan status, leading to either its full or defective pronunciation. This variation results in the double-marking pattern in one scenario and the V2-marking pattern in the other.

- (15) The orphan status of each
 ~~Agr_{Subj} is flipped.~~

Now, let us see how SupH pattern is derived under the current proposal. Recall that SupH is triggered by an adjacent Agr_{Subj} with a positive honorific feature, as specified in (16a), repeated from (6a). I propose that Agr_{Subj} can trigger honorific suppletion regardless of its orphan status. When ΣP is merged above $Agr_{Subj}P$, this configuration correctly derives the SupH pattern, as Σ

and Agr_{Subj} are adjacent within a single complex head. However, this adjacency is disrupted when Σ P is merged below Agr_{Subj}P because Σ intervenes between the root and Agr_{Subj} in the complex head. To account for this, I propose an additional rule (16b), which ensures that honorific suppletion can still occur even when Σ intervenes between the root and Agr_{Subj}. Since Σ never receives a phonological realization, Agr_{Subj}[HON:+] remains linearly adjacent to the SupH stem during Vocabulary Insertion. Thus, even with Σ intervening, Agr_{Subj}[HON:+] still correctly get its suppletive null exponent, as specified in (16c), repeated from (6b). This rule only requires Agr_{Subj}[HON:+] to be linearly adjacent to the SupH stem. Furthermore, since the full pronunciation of Agr_{Subj}[HON:+] is null, Agr_{Subj}[HON:+][O] consistently receives a null exponent, regardless of whether it gets its full pronunciation, as illustrated in (17b). To sum up, when Σ P is merged above Agr_{Subj}P, we observe either a double-marking or a V1-marking pattern. On the other hand, when Σ P is merged below Agr_{Subj}P, only the double-marking pattern is derived.

- (16) a. V[EAT] $\leftrightarrow$ *capswusi-* / xx Agr_{Subj}[HON:+]
 b. V[EAT] $\leftrightarrow$ *capswusi-* / [xx Σ] Agr_{Subj}[HON:+]
 c. Agr_{Subj}[HON:+] $\leftrightarrow$ $\emptyset$ / { *cwumwusi-*, *kyeysi-*, *capswusi-*, ... } xx SupH stems

- (17) a. $\Sigma >$ Agr_{Subj}

Neg
ani-

cC

- b. Agr_{Subj} $>$ Σ

~~Neg~~ defective and full
 pronunciation are null.

3 Final remark: against post-syntactically inserted subject honorification

So far, we have seen how the GenHM framework analysis accounts for the subject honorification pattern in Korean. When negation intervenes in the head chain involved in complex head formation, it triggers a head split. The morphological features of each head, once detached from their original syntactic position, are assigned an orphan status and subsequently receive a defective pronunciation. While the specific surface realization of subject honorification is determined post-syntactically, the current analysis still supports its fundamentally syntactic nature. This is because the $\text{Agr}_{\text{Subj}}[\text{HON:}+]\text{s}$ in both heads are introduced in narrow syntax.

As mentioned earlier, the subject honorification pattern found in the LFN context has been used as evidence to support the analysis of post-syntactically inserted subject honorification. In particular, the marking of subject honorification on the light verb has been claimed as the central piece of evidence for this approach (Choi and Harley, 2019). Given that subject honorification applies to verbs and appears on each verbal component within LFN, Choi and Harley (2019) argues that Hon is associated with *v*, as illustrated in (18a). Building on Han and Lee's (2007) analysis of LFN, they argued that subject honorification must be post-syntactic because the light verb *ha-* 'do' in LFN is itself an instance of a post-syntactically inserted *v* by (18b). Thus, the insertion of the post-syntactic *v* head triggers the subsequent insertion of Hon on the light verb. Since the insertion of Hon relies on the prior insertion of another post-syntactically inserted morpheme, it follows that Hon itself must also be inserted post-syntactically.

- (18) a. Hon-sprouting rule:
 $v \rightarrow [v \text{ Hon}] / [\text{NP}_{[+\text{hon}]} \dots [\dots \underline{\text{xx}} \dots]]$
 b. v-sprouting (do-insertion) rule:
 $\text{Neg} \rightarrow [\text{Neg } v] / [\underline{\text{xx}} \text{ T}]_{\text{T}}$
- (19) a. post-syntactically inserted v b. post-syntactically inserted Hon

However, as I have argued throughout this paper, the *ha*-support observed in LFN does not necessarily require analysis as a post-syntactically inserted morpheme if we adopt the GenHM framework. As (Jou, 2024:11) has noted, many languages possess agreement systems where a single NP can trigger multiple instances of agreement. Thus, there is no compelling reason to reject the analysis of Korean subject honorification as a syntactically introduced agreement phenomenon.

References

- Arregi, Karlos, and Asia Pietraszko. 2021a. Unifying long head movement with phrasal movement: A new argument from spellout. *Talk given at WCCFL* 38:21–31.
- Arregi, Karlos, and Asia Pietraszko. 2021b. The ups and downs of head displacement. *Linguistic Inquiry* 52:241–290.
- Bobaljik, Jonathan David. 2000. The ins and outs of contextual allomorphy. *University of Maryland working papers in linguistics* 10:35–71.
- Choi, Jaehoon, and Heidi Harley. 2019. Locality Domains and Morphological Rules: Phases, Heads, Node-Sprouting and Suppletion in Korean Honorification. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 37:1319–1365.
- Chung, Inkie. 2009. Suppletive verbal morphology in Korean and the mechanism of vocabulary insertion1. *Journal of Linguistics* 45:533–567.
- Halle, Morris, and Alec Marantz. 1993. Distributed morphology and the pieces of inflection. In *The view from building 20*, ed. Kenneth Hale and Samuel Jay Keyser, 111–176. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.
- Han, Chung-hye, and Chungmin Lee. 2007. On negative imperatives in Korean. *Linguistic Inquiry* 38:373–395.
- Jo, Jung-Min. 2004. *Grammatical effects of topic and focus information*. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Jou, Eunsun. 2024. Honorification as Agree in Korean and beyond. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 9:1–48.
- Kim, Jaieun, and Inkie Chung. 2015. A unified Distributed Morphology analysis of Korean honorification morphology. *Studies in generative grammar* 25:631–650.
- Kim, Taehoon Hendrik. 2023. The syntax of negation in Korean given an antisymmetric and cartographic framework. Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Koopman, Hilda. 2005. Korean (and Japanese) morphology from a syntactic perspective. *Linguistic inquiry* 36:601–633.
- Laka, Itziar. 1990. Negation in syntax—on the nature of functional categories and projections. Doctoral Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Platzack, Christer. 2012. Cross Germanic variation in the realm of support verbs. *Comparative Germanic syntax: The state of the art* 191:279–310.
- Yi, Eun-Young. 1994. NegP in Korean. *Papers on negation (Cornell Working Papers in Linguistics)* 12:193–208.