

# The Use of the Honorific Suffix *-si-* for Non-human Subjects: An Analysis of Talk-shows

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## Abstract

The Korean language has a complex honorific system that reflects the social dynamics between speakers, listeners, and referents. Korean honorifics include address terms, sentence endings, honorific words, and the subject honorific suffix *-si-*. In principle, the suffix *-si-* should be used only with human subjects; however, in actual communication, it is often used with non-human subjects. This so-called 'misuse' is especially common in service sectors, where businesses aim to show extreme politeness to customers. Public media criticizes this trend, arguing that it improperly elevates inanimate objects rather than people. Research on this phenomenon is limited, particularly in the context of everyday conversation. This study aims to investigate the use of *-si-* with non-human subjects in TV talk show conversations, exploring the factors contributing to this seemingly ungrammatical usage.

**Keywords:** Korean honorifics, subject honorific suffix *-si-*, honorific agreement, referent honorifics, addressee honorifics

## Povzetek

Korejščina ima zahteven način izražanja spoštljivosti, ki odraža družbeno dinamiko med govorcji, sogovorcji in referenti. Korejski spoštljivi govor se izraža z rabo nazivov, stavčnih končnic, spoštljivega besedišče in pripone *-si-*. Slednja izraža spoštljivost do osebk v stavku in se praviloma uporablja v primerih, ko je osebek človek. Vendar se v dejanski komunikaciji pogosto uporablja tudi, ko osebek ni človek ali je celo stvar oziroma pojem. Ta 'nepravilna raba' je še posebej pogosta v storitvenih sektorjih, kjer želijo ponudniki strankam izkazati prekomerno spoštljivost. Javni mediji kritizirajo tako rabo in trdijo, da se z njo povzdiguje stvari in pojme namesto ljudi. Raziskave o tem pojavu so omejene, zlasti v kontekstu vsakdanjega govora. Namen študije je v pogovorih televizijskih oddaj raziskati rabo pripone *-si-*, ki se nanaša na nečloveške osebke, ter raziskati dejavnike, ki prispevajo k tej na videz neslovnični rabi.

**Ključne besede:** korejski spoštljivi izrazi, spoštljiva pripona *-si-*, spoštljivostno ujemanje, spoštljivi izrazi za naslovnika, spoštljivi izrazi za referenta

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## 1 Introduction

The Korean language has a complex honorific system manifested extensively in the Korean linguistic structure. Korean speakers use honorifics based on the social relationship between the speaker and the listener, as well as the referent when talking about someone else. For example, when they talk to a socially higher person, they use appropriate address terms and use honorific sentence endings. Additionally, they consider the relationships between the conversation participants and the referent when talking about other people. When they talk about someone in a socially higher position than themselves, they may use proper reference terms, use honorific particles, and attach the honorific suffix *-si-* in the predicate, or use honorific verbs or adjectives.<sup>1</sup>

The suffix *-si-* is known as the subject honorific suffix. According to traditional descriptive grammar, *-si-* cannot be used with non-human subjects. However, sentences like those in example (1), though considered ungrammatical, are commonly used in practice.

- (1) a. 커피 나오셨습니다.  
Keopi nao-si-eot-seumnida.  
coffee come-SH-Pst-Def  
'Here is your coffee.'
- b. 이 디자인이 더 잘 어울리세요.  
I dijain-i deo jal eoulli-si-eoyo.  
this design-Nom more well match-SH-Pol  
'This design fits you better.'
- c. 이 펀드는 이율이 높으세요.  
I peondeu-neun iyur-i nopeu-si-eoyo.  
this fund-Top rate-Nom high-SH-Pol  
'The interest rate of this fund is high.'

The subjects in the sentences in (1) are 'coffee,' 'this design,' and 'this fund,' respectively, yet *-si-* is used in the predicates. This grammatically incorrect use of *-si-* is particularly prevalent in the service sector such as coffee shops and department stores, where a high level of politeness is

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the term *-si-*, we follow Sohn (1999), a widely referenced source for Korean linguistics. Since *-si-* attaches to a predicate stem rather than occurring within it, it cannot be classified as an infix. It may be referred to as a 'subject honorific marker,' or as a 'pre-final ending,' terminology used by Vučkovič (2025) in the same issue.

expected. This phenomenon has been highlighted as a social issue by public media, which argues that such improper honorific usage is harming the Korean language.

A news article on this phenomenon mentions that “In various service industries where customers are served, the intention to convey respect for the customer has resulted in the incorrect usage of honorifics, where inanimate objects like coffee or merchandise are being elevated instead of people” (YTN, 2023). The article further argues that such inappropriate use of honorifics should be corrected. However, the suffix *-si-* appears to be increasingly used in casual conversations in contemporary Korean.

Regarding the use of *-si-* with non-human subjects, Baek (2016) found that although many people recognize this usage as incorrect, they generally find it acceptable. In particular, younger generations seem more inclined to accept it. She further argues that this extended use of *-si-* has become conventionalized and is considered polite, even though it remains grammatically incorrect. Similarly, Lee (2022) noted that while the general public recognizes the inappropriate use of *-si-* in online posts, they are not bothered by it and view it as natural. Lee concluded that *-si-* is now perceived primarily as a politeness marker, with its grammatical correctness not taken seriously by Korean speakers. Additionally, Yoon (2018) identified instances where *-si-* is used with verbs describing the speaker's actions or states in complex sentences. Yoon (2018) suggests that people may unconsciously express emotional attachment using *-si-*, sometimes without clearly identifying the subjects related to the predicate.

There have been various discussions about its syntactic and sociolinguistic characteristics regarding the characteristics of the honorific suffix *-si-* (e.g. Choe, 2004; Choi, 2010; Lee, 2010; Mok, 2013; Song et al., 2019; Kim & Findlay, 2023; Jou, 2024). Among those, only a few have examined how *-si-* is actually used in real conversations. The purpose of this study is to explore how *-si-* is used with non-human subjects in natural conversations. This study further investigates the elements that trigger its use, aiming to understand why such seemingly ungrammatical usage occurs.

## 2 Korean honorifics and the subject honorific suffix *-si-*

According to Sohn (1999, p. 408), “honorifics are grammatical and lexical forms encoding the speaker’s socioculturally appropriate regard towards the addressee (i.e., addressee honorification) and the referent (i.e., referent honorification).” Honorifics can thus be categorized into two aspects: addressee honorifics and referent honorifics. Among these, Korean

speakers primarily evaluate the relative social status between themselves and the addressee. Based on this assessment, they select suitable address terms and apply appropriate sentence endings to the predicate.

When talking about someone who deserves the speaker's deference, the subject honorific suffix *-si-* is attached to the predicate or a fossilized honorific predicate such as *deusida* 'to eat' *jumusida* 'sleep' or *gyesida* 'to stay, exist' should be used. Note that these fossilized honorific words already have *-si-* in their stem. Further, they may consider using other referent honorific features such as honorific referent terms and honorific case particles. While the use of addressee honorifics is more strictly observed, the use of referent honorifics is less strict than that of addressee honorifics, especially when the referent is not present. The use of referent honorific elements depends on the speaker's attitude toward the person being talked about and the context of the conversation. Examples in (2) are all acceptable but they differ in their use of honorific elements: example (2a) has all possible referent honorific elements (the honorific title suffix *-nim*, honorific subject particle *-kkeseo* and the subject honorific suffix *-si-*), while examples (2b) and (2c) lack some of them.

- (2) a. 김 교수님께서 한국에 가세요  
 Gim gyosu-nim-kkeseo hangug-e ga-si-eoyo.  
 Kim professor-HT-Nom Korea-to go-SH-Pol  
 'Prof. Kim is going to Korea.'
- b. 김 교수님이 한국에 가세요.  
 Gim gyosu-nim-i hangug-e ga-si-eoyo.  
 Kim professor-HT-Nom Korea-to go-SH-Pol  
 'Prof. Kim is going to Korea.'
- c. 김 교수가 한국에 가요.  
 Gim gyosu-ga hangug-e ga-yo.  
 Kim professor-Nom Korea-to go-Pol  
 'Prof. Kim is going to Korea.'

The use of these honorific forms depends on the context, making it impossible to evaluate the appropriateness of a sentence without considering the specific context. Yoon (2018) examined the strategic use of the honorific marker *-si-* in talk-show conversations, focusing on how conversation participants regulate its use alongside other referent honorific elements. The study reveals that in political debate conversations, participants employ minimal *-si-* when referring to politicians from opposing

parties, while they utilize more *-si-* along with other referent honorific elements (e.g., honorific particles, honorific nouns, and verbs) when discussing politicians within their party, filling all possible slots where these forms can be used. Yoon (2018) also found that in talk show conversations, guests increase their use of *-si-* when speaking about individuals who have significantly supported them, suggesting that repeated use of *-si-* in all available contexts may indicate the speaker's emotional attachment to the referent. Additionally, Yoon (2018) noted that emcees of the programs consistently use *-si-* in all possible slots during their opening and closing remarks, attributing this usage to the emcees' ritualized and professional attitudes. Thus, the results of this study imply that the use of *-si-* is influenced by the speaker's attitude toward the referent and the atmosphere of the context.

Although the use of *-si-* is mainly dependent on the context, there are some exceptional cases when the use of *-si-* can be considered incorrect regardless of the given context. When the referent is socially lower than the speaker or the referent is the speaker themselves, as in the examples in (3), Korean speakers consider it wrong to use the subject honorific suffix *-si-* in the predicate, unless in a sarcastic or playful situation. Additionally, when the subject is a non-human entity, as in the examples in (4), it is considered incorrect to use *-si-* in the predicate.

- (3) a. \*남동생이 책을 읽으세요.  
 Namdongsaeng-i chaeg-eul ilg-eusi-eoyo.  
 brother-Nom book-Acc read-SH-Pol  
 'My younger brother is reading a book.'
- b. \*제가 책을 읽으세요.  
 Je-ga chaeg-eul ilg-eusi-eyo.  
 I-Nom book-Acc read-SH-Pol  
 'I am reading a book.'
- (4) a. \*서울은 한국의 수도이시다.  
 Seoul-eun hangug-euy sudo-i-si-ta.  
 Seoul-Top Korea-Gen capital-Cop-SH-Dc  
 'Seoul is the capital city of Korea.'
- b. \*이 개는 잘생기셨다.  
 I gae-neun jalsaenggi-si-eot-ta.  
 this dog-Top handsome-SH-Pst-Dc  
 'This dog is handsome.'

While the use of *-si-* is highly context-dependent and optional, obvious violations of honorific agreement are taken seriously. Kwon and Sturt (2024) examined how native Korean speakers process sentences with honorific violations and found that they experienced processing difficulties when encountering violations of honorific agreement, as these were perceived as grammatical errors.

Another unique characteristic of *-si-* that needs to be considered is that, although the suffix *-si-* is intended for the referent honorifics, it is often associated with addressee honorifics when talking about the listener's actions or states because the referent coincides with the addressee. For example, when asking questions, making suggestions, or making requests to someone higher than the speaker socially, *-si-* should be used in the predicate and honorific sentence ending at the same time. In the following examples, the verb *-ga* 'to go' is about the addressee's action, and the speaker can consider inserting *-si-* before the sentence ending. The sentence endings are honorific endings and if *-si-* is added, the question sounds more courteous.

- (5) a. 김 교수님, 어디 가요?  
 Gim gyosu-nim, eodi ga-yo?  
 Kim professor-HT where go-Pol  
 'Prof. Kim, where are you going?'
- b. 김 교수님, 어디 갑니까?  
 Gim gyou-nim, eodi ga-mnikka?  
 Kim professor-HT where go-Def  
 'Prof. Kim, where are you going?'
- c. 김 교수님, 어디 가세요?  
 Gim gyosu-nim, eodi ga-si-eoyo?  
 Kim professor-HT where go-SH-Pol  
 'Prof. Kim, where are you going?'
- d. 김 교수님, 어디 가십니까?  
 Gim kyosu-nim, eodi -ga-si-mnikka?  
 Kim professor-HT where -go-SH-Def  
 'Prof. Kim, where are you going?'

As shown in the example (5), *-si-* and the honorific sentence endings (i.e. *-eoyo/ayo* and *-[seu]mnita*) result in variations, each of which expresses a different nuance of the speaker's honorific intention. In contemporary Korean, when talking to a social superior, the use of *-si-* is considered

appropriate and in particular, when asking a question, proposing, commanding, or requesting something from an addressee, *-seyo* form, which is derived from *-si-* + *eoyo*, is considered the most appropriate honorific ending (Park, 1976). Yoon (2018) argues that *-si-* expresses the affective stance of emotional attachment to the referent, and *-seyo* (*-si-eoyo*) form is now considered as a default honorific form, fixed as one of the addressee honorific endings conveying the speaker's affective stance to the addressee.

To summarize, the subject honorific suffix *-si-* is a key element in referent honorifics, and its usage is highly context-dependent. It is used to express the speaker's polite attitude toward the referent, and Korean speakers often employ it strategically to convey their psychological stance. The suffix is also associated with sentence endings related to addressee honorifics, helping to express politeness toward the addressee. The next section will discuss the use of *-si-* with non-human subjects.

### 3 The use of *-si-* with non-human subject

In principle, the use of the suffix *-si-* is triggered by the subject of the sentence, but there are cases when its use is prompted by other elements closely related to the subject. Regarding this phenomenon, Lee (2015) argued that a grammar-oriented approach to honorifics has limitations and that honorifics should be examined from a sociolinguistic perspective, based on real data. From this viewpoint, Lee (2010, 2015) asserted that the use of *-si-* is not simply triggered by the grammatical subject but by the person to whom the speaker intends to show respect in a given context. He introduced the term 'situation subject,' referring to "the person who is the addressee and has more power to control the situation" (Lee, 2005, p. 113). According to this explanation, the use of *-si-* is not restricted when the addressee has the power to control the situation, though, as will be discussed below, it does not appear that the use of *-si-* is entirely without restrictions.

More specifically, Sohn (1999) discussed the element that triggers the use of *-si-* other than the grammatical subject, considering the relationship between *-si-* and the grammatical subject of the sentence. First, when the possessor of the subject is a socially higher person deserving honorification, the use of *-si-* can be considered natural. In examples (6a) and (6b), the subjects of the sentences are *nun* 'eyes' and *os* 'clothes', respectively. Although they are inanimate, the use of *-si-* is generally accepted because

the owner of these nouns is *eomeoni* 'mother', who deserves the speaker's honorification.

- (6) a. 우리 어머니의 눈이 크세요.  
 Uri eomeoni-ui nun-i keu-si-eoyo.  
 our mother-Gen eye-Nom big-SH-Pol  
 'My mother's eyes are big.'
- b. 우리 어머니의 옷이 예쁘세요.  
 Uri eomeoni-ui os-i yeppeu-si-eoyo.  
 our mother-Gen clothes-Nom pretty-SH-Pol  
 'My mother's clothes are pretty.'

Example (6a) is considered more natural than (6b), as the word *nun* 'eyes' represents a part of the mother, whereas *os* 'clothes' refers to something merely associated with her. According to Sohn (1999), using *-si-* is more natural for inalienably possessed entities such as body parts, ideas, and health. However, for alienable nouns like one's house or clothes, using *-si-* may be optional.

Secondly, when the possessor topic of a sentence is a socially higher person than the speaker, the use of *-si-* is acceptable. Korean is considered a topic-prominent language (Sohn, 1986), and the topic may or may not coincide with the grammatical subject. In the following double nominative construction, the first NP, the topic, is the possessor of the following NP, the subject of the sentence. In this structure, the possessor topic is thought to trigger the use of *-si-*. Note that similar to the examples in (6), while (7a) sounds natural, (7b) may sound a little awkward.

- (7) a. 우리 어머니는 눈이 크세요.  
 Uri eomeoni-neun nun-i keu-si-eoyo.  
 our mother-Top eye-Nom big-SH-Pol  
 'As for my mother, her eyes are big.'
- b. 우리 어머니는 옷이 예쁘세요.  
 Uri eomeoni-neun os-i yeppeu-si-eoyo.  
 our mother-Top clothes-Nom pretty-SH-Pol  
 'As for my mother, her clothes are pretty.'

There are also occasions when the experiencer of the predicate triggers the use of *-si-*, particularly when the predicate is an adjective or a verb that denotes an uncontrollable state (Sohn, 1992/2013). According to Sohn



(1992/2013), a predicate can be ‘affective’ or ‘descriptive’ depending on its thematic structure. Sohn (1992/2013, p. 539) states that “a predicate is affective if its referent affects the referent of the experiencer NP.” The experiencer can be a syntactic subject, locative, or topic. Some predicates can be either descriptive or affective depending on their meaning in the sentence. For example, *jota* is descriptive when interpreted as ‘to be good,’ as in *oneul nalssi-ga jo-ayo* ‘Today’s weather is good,’ but it can be affective when interpreted as ‘to like,’ as in *gyosunim-kkeseo-neun oneul nalssi-ga jo-eusi-eoyo?* ‘Do you like today’s weather, professor?’ The experiencer could be a topic or locative, as shown in example (8). The key idea is that the experiencer’s state or condition is influenced by the predicate.

- (8) a. 아버지는/아버지께            약속이                    있으세요.  
 Abeoji-neun/abeoji-kke yaksog-i                    iss-euse-yo.  
 father-Top/father-to    appointment-Nom have-SH-Pol  
 ‘Father has an appointment.’
- b. 아버지는/아버지께            일이                    많으세요.  
 Abeoji-neun/abeoji-kke ir-i                    man-euse-yo.  
 father-Top/father-to    work-Nom much-SH-Pol  
 ‘Father has a lot of work.’
- c. 아버지는/아버지께            문제가                    생기셨어요.  
 Abeoji-neun/abeoji-kke munje-ga                    saenggi-si-eoss-eoyo.  
 father-Top/father-to    problem-Nom rise-SH-Pst-Pol  
 ‘A problem has arisen for father.’
- d. 아버지는/아버지께            제 목소리가            안 들리세요.  
 abeoji-neun/abeoji-kke je moksori-ga an deulli-se-yo.  
 father-Top/father-to    my voice-Nom not hear-SH-Pol  
 ‘Father cannot hear my voice (My voice is not heard by father).’
- e. 아버지는/아버지께            선물이                    마음에 드세요.  
 Abeoji-neun/abeoji-kke seonmur-i                    maeum-e deu-se-yo.  
 father-Top/father-to    present-Nom mind-to enter-SH-Pol  
 ‘Father likes the gift.’

Sohn (1992/2013) explained that such predicates include adjectives or verbs to describe psychological state (*bureopda* ‘to be envious,’ *maeume dulda* ‘to like’), sense-related passive verbs (e.g., *boida* ‘to be seen,’ *deulldta* ‘to be heard’), and adjectives in the meaning of possession (e.g., *itda* ‘exist,’ *manta* ‘many, much,’ *saenggida* ‘come to possess’).

Overall, when the subject is a person who deserves honorification in common situations, the use of *-si-* is considered necessary. The use of *-si-* can also be triggered by other elements that include possessor genitive, possessor topic, experiencer topic, and experiencer locative. However, as will be discussed below, the naturalness of such structures may depend on the meaning of the predicate or the context.

One hypothesis for the use of *-si-* in this way is that it has evolved into an addressee honorific marker. Lee (2005) presented examples from online community posts and argued that the omitted 'situation subject' is the addressee, which triggers the use of *-si-*. Thus, Lee's argument is that *-si-* functions as the type of addressee honorific marker, used to express the speaker's honorific intent toward the addressee who holds more social power. Lee (2022) further found a trend in which such inappropriate use of *-si-* is considered more polite than statements without it.

Similarly, Baek (2016) noted that the prevalent use of the *-seyo* (*-si + eyo*) ending is related to this trend. According to her, this ending became more common around the 2000s, replacing its more formal counterpart *-sipsio*. As the use of *-si-* for addressee honorifics became widespread, *-si-* is now recognized as an addressee honorific. The discussions in Lee (2005, 2022) and Baek (2016) focus on service sectors, including stores and coffee shops, where this use of *-si-* has become very common. The following sections will explore how *-si-* is used in more formal and public contexts.

## 4 Data and methods

### 4.1 Data

For the analysis of *-si-* usage, this study examined an oral communication corpus of public conversations published by the National Institute of the Korean Language in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The corpus consists of 196,542 lines, with each line containing 1-2 sentences. It is composed of conversations from various TV programs, including a variety of talk shows such as political debates, interviews, cooking shows, and educational programs. These shows typically feature one or two emcees along with guests, and the conversations are moderated by the emcees. While the conversations follow certain formats, they are not pre-scripted, allowing extensive interaction.

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<sup>2</sup> This research used datasets from 'The Open AI Dataset Project (AI-Hub, S. Korea)'. All data information can be accessed through 'AI-Hub (www.aihub.or.kr)'.

## 4.2 Methods

This study focuses on the use of *-si-* in sentence endings. Instances of *-si-* in incomplete sentences or embedded/subordinate clauses were excluded due to the volume of such cases and the challenge of conducting a comprehensive search through the data. The present dataset is large enough to reveal various patterns in complete sentences. Sentence endings containing *-si-*, such as *-seyo*, *-syeyo*, *-syeosseoyo*, *-simnida*, *-simnikka*, *-syoessseumnida*, and *-syeossseumnikka*, were manually searched in the corpus, and sentences with non-human subjects were selected for analysis. Duplicate expressions were counted only once, and sentences with unclear meanings were removed. The final set consisted of 137 sentences.

For the analysis, this study considered the thematic roles of NPs within a sentence. Following Sohn (1992/2013), the study examined thematic roles beyond the grammatical subject that trigger the use of *-si-*. Sentences were categorized by whether the NP represented a possessor or experiencer, and predicates displaying similar patterns were classified. Contextual analysis was conducted to clarify sentence meanings.

## 5 Results

Of the 137 cases of *-si-* with non-human subjects, only 27 were classified as being triggered by the possessor of the grammatical subject. The remaining 110 cases were considered to be triggered by the experiencer topic or the locative element, with many of these triggers omitted.

### 5.1 The use of *-si-* with possessor

When a listener is the possessor of the subject of a sentence, the use of *-si-* seems natural. The most common structure in this category was the pattern *...i/ga eotteoke doe-si-eoyo?* 'What is ...?' This is the basic structure used to ask for information related to the addressee and is fixed in the form with *-si-*. There were no sentences where this structure would be used without *-si-*. The subjects of the following examples are *yeonse* 'age' and *haru ilgwa* 'daily routine,' which can be understood as 'your age' and 'your daily routine' from the context.

- (9) a. 지금 연세가 어떻게 되세요?  
Jigeum yeonse-ga eotteoke doe-si-eoyo?  
now age-Nom how become-SH-Pol  
'How old are you?'
- b. 하루 일과가 어떻게 되세요?  
Haru ilgwa-ga eotteoke doe-si-eoyo?  
day routine-Nom how become-SH-Pol  
'What is your daily routine?'

Similarly, the use of *-si-* was found when asking about personal information closely related to the listener, and it is thought to be triggered by the omitted experiencer topic. The subjects of the following examples can be interpreted as 'your marriage' and 'your personality.'

- (10) a. 결혼 안녕하세요?  
Gyeolhon annyeongha-si-eoyo?  
marriage well-SH-Pol  
'Are you doing well in your marriage?'
- b. 성격이 내성적이세요?  
Seonggyeog-i naeseongjeog-i-si-eoyo?  
personality-Nom interverted-Cop-SH-Pol  
'Is your personality introverted?'

There are occasions when possessive relationships are vague. Example (11) is taken from a situation where the host of a talk show is asking the guest about their children. The superficial meaning of (11A) is 'How are your daughter and son?' and the subject of the sentence is 'daughter and son.' However, considering the context and the following answer, the host already knows that the guest has a son and a daughter, and the intention of the question seems to be to inquire about the overall situation of their family. The omitted part may be reconstructed as *seonsaengnim-ui ttal adeul sanghwang-i eotteoke doe-si-mnikka?* 'How is your overall situation with your daughter and son?' Thus, the subject can be interpreted as 'the overall situation concerning your children,' and the omitted element triggering the use of *-si-* could be the possessor of this situation, namely, the listener.

(11) A: 딸 아들 어떻게 되십니까?  
 Ttal adeul eotteoke doe-si-mnikka?  
 daughter son how become-SH-Def  
 'How are your daughter and son?'

B: 아 큰 아이가 아들이고요. 작은 아이가 딸입니다.  
 A keun ai-ga akeur-i-goyo. Jageun ai-ga ttar-i-mnida.  
 well big kid-Nom son-Cop-and little kid-Nom daughter-Cop-Def  
 'Ah, the older one is a son, and the younger one is a daughter.'

Similarly, in the following situation, the guest talked about his experience with *pansori* (a genre of Korean traditional music), and the host is asking if he still performs *pansori*. She is simply asking about the general situation regarding the guest by saying *eotteoke doe-si-mnikka?* 'How is pansori for you?' The subject of the sentence is *pansori*, but the suffix *-si-* is used in the predicate. The possessive relationship between the guest and *pansori* is somewhat unclear but the omitted topic of the sentence is still the guest, which triggers the use of *-si-*.

(12) A: 그 판소리는 그냥 생활 속에 계시는  
 Geu pansori-neun geunyang saenghwal sog-e gyesi-neun  
 well pansori-Top just life inside-to stay-RI  
 겹니까 어떻게 되십니까?  
 geo-mnikka eotteoke doe-si-mnikka?  
 thing-Def how become-SH-Def  
 'Is pansori just a part of your everyday life, or how is it for you?'

B: 어 저는 이 판소릴 전공으로 한 사람이  
 Eo jeo-neun i pansori-l jeongong-euro ha-n saram-i  
 well I-Top this pansori-Acc major-as do-RI person-Nom  
 아니고...  
 ani-go...  
 not-and  
 'Well, I am not someone who majored in pansori, so...'

## 5.2 The use of *-si-* with experiencer

### 5.2.1 Predicate with possessive meaning

A significant portion of the data in this study comes from interviews, as there are many examples where an emcee asks questions to the guests. In such

examples, the meaning of the predicate can be interpreted as affecting the listener and the use of *-si-* is often found with non-human subjects. The most common representative of this is when *itda/epsta* 'to be existing/not existing' is used in the predicate. The adjective *issta* 'to be existing' and its negative form *epsta* may indicate simple existence in sentences like *mun ap-e jadongcha-ga iss-eoyo* 'There is a car in front of the door'. However, when the topic is included, as in *seonsaengnim-eun jadongcha-ga iss-eusi-eoyo* 'The teacher has a car', *itda* expresses that the topic possesses the subject, and the use of *-si-* sounds natural. In the data, when the *iss-eusi-eoyo* and *eop-eusi-eoyo* forms were found with non-human subjects, these cases could be interpreted as indicating possession and it is therefore considered that the omitted experiencer topic triggers the use of *-si-*. In the following examples in (13), the omitted topic can be restored as either *seonsaengnim-eun* 'As for you...' or *seonsaengnim-kke* 'To you... '.

- (13) a. 기억에 남는 거 혹시 있으세요?  
 Gieog-e nam-neun geo hoksi iss-eusi-eoyo?  
 memory-to remain-RI thing possibly have-SH-Pol  
 'Is there anything that stands out in your memory?'  
 b. 아직은 [그런 계획이] 없으십니까?  
 Ajig-eun [geureon gyehoeg-i] eops-eusi-mnikka?  
 yet-Top such plan-Nom not have-SH-Def  
 'Do you still not have such a plan?'

Furthermore, adjective phrases composed of 'NP + *itda/eopda*', such as *piryo-itda* 'to be in need, to be necessary', *piryo-eopda* 'to be unnecessary', *gwansim-itda* 'to have interests', and *gwansim-eopda* 'not to have interests', are found to be used with *-si-* when asking about the listener's psychological state. Structurally, the NP is the subject of the adjective *itda/eopda*, but 'NP + *itda/eopda*' phrases are interpreted as independent adjectives describing the topic's psychological state. The use of *-si-* is thought to be triggered by the topic.

- (14) a. 선생님도 그런 경험 있으세요?  
 Seonsaengnim-do geureon gyeongheom iss-eusi-eoyo?  
 teacher-also such experience have-SH-Pol  
 'Do you also have such experiences?'

- b. 돌아보시면          나름대로          어떤          면에          좀  
 Dorabo-si-myeon nareumdaero eotteon myeon-e jom  
 Look back-SH-if In your way what aspect-to little

보람이          있으세요?  
 boram-i          iss-eusi-eoyo?  
 worth-Nom have-SH-Pol

'When you look back, are there any aspects that you find fulfilling in your way?'

- c. 버섯은          필요          없으세요?  
 Beoseos-eun          piryo          eops-eusi-eoyo?  
 muchroom-Top necessity not have-SH-Pol  
 'Do you not need mushrooms?'

- d. 그런          데는          관심          없으십니까?  
 Geureon de-neun          gwansim eops-eusi-mnikka?  
 such          thing-Top interest not have-SH-Def  
 'Are you not interested in that kind of thing?'

Also, auxiliary verb phrases 'bound noun + *itda/eopda*', such as *-jeok itda* 'have an experience of doing...', and *-su itda* 'be able to' function similarly as in the examples in (15). Thus, when *itda/eopda* and its extended phrases and structures are used to express the possessive meaning, the use of *-si-* was found frequently and sounded natural.

- (15) a. 혹시          당해 보신          적          있으세요?  
 Hoksi          danghae bo-si-n          jeok iss-eusi-eoyo?  
 possibly experience-try-SH-RI case have-SH-Pol  
 'Have you ever experienced that, by any chance?'
- b. 샐러드          느낌으로          드실          수          있으세요.  
 Saelleodeu neukkim-euro deusil su iss-eusi-eoyo.  
 salad          feeling-as          eat-SH- can have-SH-Pol  
 'You can eat it like a salad.'

In addition to *itda*, adjectives like *manta* 'to be many; much' and verb *doeda* 'to become' are also used to convey possession. In such cases, the use of *-si-* was found.

- (16) a. 의원님은                    별명이                    많으세요.  
 Uiwonnim-eun    byeolmyeong-i man-eusi-eoyo.  
 congressman-Top nickname-Nom many-SH-Pol  
 'Mr. Congressman, you have many nicknames.'
- b. 삼 부 끝나고            시간 되세요?  
 Sam bu    kkeunna-go sigan doe-si-eoyo?  
 tree part end-and    time    become-SH-Pol  
 'Do you have time after the part 3 is over?'

In sum, when the predicate can be interpreted as possession of the experiencer topic, the use of *-si-* is often found. The most representative examples are *itda/eopda* and phrasal expressions with *itda/eopda*. Further, when *manta* and *doeda* can be interpreted as possession of the topic, the use of *-si-* is considered natural.

### 5.2.2 Predicate for describing psychological state

Adjectives or transitive verbs that describe psychological states also fall into this category. One frequently used adjective is *gatda* 'to be the same'. When *gatda* is used in the structure *-geot gatda* 'seems like', it describes one's psychological state. *Gatda* can also function as a descriptive adjective, as in *seonsaengnim, sikdang ajumma gat-eusi-eoyo* 'Teacher, you look like a restaurant worker', where the subject *seonsaengnim* 'teacher' triggers the use of *-si-*. However, the subjects of the sentences in (17) are *jeo* 'I' and *geomchal* 'prosecutor', respectively, yet *-si-* is still used in the predicate. As seen in the English translations, the *-geot gat-eusi-eoyo* structure here conveys *-geot gatdago saenggakha-si-eoyo* '(You) think/feel ...', which refers to the psychological state of the listener. Thus, in such cases, *-geot gatda* has an affective meaning, describing the psychological state of the experiencer, and the use of *-si-* sounds natural.

- (17) a. 제가    몇    살일            것    같으세요?  
 Jega    myeot sar-i-l            geot gat-eusi-eoyo?  
 I-Nom what    age-Cop-RI thing seem-SH-Pol  
 'How old do you think I am?'
- b. 검찰이                    제대로    수사할                    것    같으세요?  
 Geomchar-i            jedaero    susaha-l            geot gat-eusi-eoyo?  
 prosecution-Nom    correctly    investigate-RI    thing seem-SH-Pol  
 'Do you think the prosecution will conduct a proper investigation?'



Similarly, the adjective *eotteota* 'to be how' is used to express the state of something, but with an experiencer topic, it means how the experiencer feels about something. When it is used to ask someone how they feel or sense something, *eotteo-si-eoyo* form is used.

- (18) a. 소감이                      어떠세요?  
 Sogam-i                      eotteo-si-eoyo?  
 impression-Nom how-SH-Pol  
 'How do you feel about it?'
- b. 보시기에              [상황이]              어떠세요?  
 Bo-si-gi-e              [sanghwang-i] eotteo-si-eoyo?  
 see-SH-Nm-to situation-Nom how-SH-Pol  
 'How do you perceive the situation?'

When an adjective describes a psychological state, it takes *-si-*, as shown in the examples in (19). Verbs that describe uncontrollable psychological actions also fall into this category. As indicated by the translations, the sentences in (19) contain an omitted topic, namely the listener. Additionally, passive structures with *-doeta* function to describe the listener's psychological state and also fall into this category as shown in (20). In such cases, the listener is affected by the predicate, and the use of *-si-* is triggered by the omitted topic.

- (19) a. 영화가                      재미있으세요?  
 Yeonghwa-ga jaemiiss-eusi-eoyo?  
 movie-Nom interesting-SH-Pol  
 'Is the movie interesting to you?'
- b. 이 음식이              맛있으세요?  
 I eumsig-i masiss-eusi-eoyo?  
 this food-Nom delicious-SH-Pol  
 'Is this food tasty to you?'
- c. 어떤              느낌이              드세요?  
 Eotteon neukkim-i deu-si-eoyo?  
 what feeling-Nom rise-SH-Pol  
 'How do you feel?'

- d. 어떤 사건이 기억나세요?  
 Eotteon sageon-i gieongna-si-eoyo?  
 what event-Nom remember-SH-Pol  
 'Do you remember any particular events?'
- e. 어떤 게 떠오르세요?  
 Eotteon ge tteooreu-si-eoyo?  
 what thing float-SH-Pol  
 'What comes to mind?'
- f. 농업이 소중하세요?  
 Nongeob-i sojungha-si-eoyo?  
 farming-Nom valuable-SH-Pol  
 'Is agriculture important to you?'
- (20) a. 교수님은 대충 이해가 되셨습니까?  
 Gyosunim-eun daechung ihae-ga doe-si-eot-seumnikka?  
 professor-Top roughly understand-Nom become-SH-Pst-Def  
 'Did you roughly understand?'
- b. 근데 어쩌다가 고건축에 매료가 되셨어요?  
 Geunde eojjeodaga gogeonchug-e maeryo-ga doe-si-eoss-eoyo?  
 but how old-architecture-to fascination-Nom become-SH-Pst-Pol  
 'But how did you become fascinated by traditional architecture?'
- c. 그 이유가 뭐라고 추정이 되십니까?  
 Geu iyu-ga mwo-rago chujeong-i doe-si-mnikka?  
 that reason-Nom what-as guess-Nom become-SH-Def  
 'What do you suppose is the reason for that?'
- d. 어떤 기류라고 짐작이 되십니까?  
 Eotteon giryu-rago jimjag-i doe-si-mnikka?  
 what trend-as guess-Nom become-SH-Def  
 'What kind of trend do you speculate it might be?'

In summary, the use of *-si-* in adjectives and verbs describing psychological states, as well as in passive constructions like *-doeda*, reflects the speaker's respect for the listener, even when non-human subjects are involved. The examples provided show that *-si-* is triggered by an omitted experiencer topic.

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

This study examined the issues concerning the use of the subject honorific suffix *-si-* when applied to non-human subjects. This seemingly ungrammatical use of *-si-* has often been dismissed as an inappropriate application of honorifics due to the trend of overusing them in contemporary Korean society. However, as Baek (2016) and Lee (2022) have noted, many Koreans consider the use of *-si-* with non-human subjects to be natural, even if they recognize it as grammatically incorrect.

In this context, sociolinguistic studies have attempted to explain this so-called inappropriate use of *-si-* with examples from retail and customer service settings. While these studies offer insights into how *-si-* is perceived in contemporary Korean, they have not sufficiently addressed the elements that trigger the use of *-si-* with non-human subjects.

The current study identified some patterns in the use of *-si-* with non-human subjects. The naturalness of this usage seems to depend on the relationship between the triggering elements and the grammatical subjects. Firstly, *-si-* was observed with non-honorific subjects when the possessor of the subject merits honorification. The naturalness of such use of *-si-* appears to depend on the relationship between the possessor and the possessed. If the subject pertains to the possessor's trait, such as personality or appearance, the use of *-si-* seems to be considered natural. Conversely, if the possessed can be easily detached from the possessor or the possessive relationship is temporary, the use of *-si-* may seem unnatural. In the data for this study, there were few instances of this category, except for cases like ... *i/ga eotteoke doe-si-eoyo?* 'What is ...?' This structure is used as a fixed expression with *-si-* to request personal information from the listener, sometimes involving general information rather than specific details.

Secondly, the meaning of the predicate affecting the experiencer topic was found to influence the use of *-si-*. The use of *-si-* in adjectives and verbs describing psychological states, as well as in passive constructions like *-doeda*, seems to reflect the speaker's respect for the listener even when non-human subjects are involved. The data indicate that *-si-* is often triggered by an omitted experiencer topic, particularly when the predicate is interpreted as describing a psychological state or perception.

In the introduction section, the example sentences in (1) were initially presented as inappropriate, but they might be understood as omitting the experiencer locative, as illustrated in the example below.

- (1') a. (손님께) 커피 나오셨습니다.  
(Sonnim-kke) keopi nao-si-eot-seumnida.  
customer-to coffee come-SH-Pst-Def  
'Here is your coffee (for/to you).'
- b. (손님께) 이 디자인이 더 잘 어울리세요.  
(Sonnim-kke) i dijain-i deo jal eoulli-si-eoyo.  
customer-to this design-Nom more well match-SH-Pol  
'This design fits better (for/to you).'
- c. ?(손님께) 이 펀드는 이율이 높으세요.  
?(Sonnim-kke) i peondeu-neun iyur-i nop-eusi-eoyo.  
customer-to this fund-Top rate-Nom high-SH-Pol  
'The interest rate of this fund is high (for/to you).'

The results of this study further suggest that the use of *-si-* extends beyond its grammatical function, serving as a marker of politeness when the referent is the possessor of the grammatical subject or is affected by the predicate. Thus, the data demonstrate how *-si-* can be applied in a broader sociolinguistic context, reflecting both grammatical and pragmatic considerations.

Finally, it should be noted that this study has its limitations, as the data was collected exclusively from TV talk shows. Although the conversations were not pre-scripted, there were instances where the emcees directed the flow of conversation, and participants may have tried to use language in a more refined manner. Future studies examining more casual conversation genres may reveal additional uses of *-si-* with non-human subjects, expanding on the findings presented here.

## Abbreviations

Acc	accusative case particle
Cop	copula
Def	deferential sentence ending
Gen	genitive case particle
HT	honorific title
Nm	nominalizer
Nom	nominative case particle
Pol	polite sentence ending
Pst	past tense marker
SH	subject honorific suffix

Top	topic particle
Dc	declarative ending
Rl	relativizer

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