Korean honorification as a window to understanding animacy

1 Introduction. A component of a successful syntactic theory is an exhaustive but parsimonious feature inventory over which syntactic operations like Agree may apply. There is a tension between empirical adequacy and theoretical simplicity: a unique paradigm might seem to warrant a dedicated feature which does nothing but derive that phenomenon. Such a case is honorification (the grammatical marking of politeness) in Korean. There are two classes of approaches to honorification: syntactic (Koopman 2005, Choi & Harley 2019, Ackema & Neeleman 2018, Portner et al. 2019, Jou 2024) and semantic-pragmatic (Kim & Sells 2007, Kim & Findlay 2023, Song et al. 2019, Wang 2023). Syntactic approaches generally derive honorification via Agree over a bespoke feature like [HON]; one significant challenge levied against such approaches is the *ad hoc* nature of this feature. I address this serious counterargument by demystifying the identity of [HON], proposing it is an interpretable animacy-based gender feature housed on *n*, in the sense of Kramer (2015). Further, I suggest it is an already existing feature: I modify a proposal of asymmetrically entailing animacy features, ELDER ⊂ HUMAN ⊂ ANIMATE ⊂ π, which capture animacy-sensitive PCC-like effects in Zapotec (Foley & Toosarvandani 2022, Toosarvandani 2023, Sichel & Toosarvandani 2024), and argue [HON] is simply ELDER. Not only does this bolster existing syntactic approaches to honorification (e.g., Jou 2024), by folding the *ad hoc* [HON] into independently argued featural systems, but it enriches some feature-based semantic-pragmatic analyses (*pace* Wang 2023), too. Also, analyzing honorification as animacy-based gender has consequences for the theoretical status of animacy: I demonstrate that animacy in Korean is gender, unlike animacy in Zapotec, which is person.

2 Background. For the purposes of this abstract, I focus on subject honorification in Korean (1), which shows politeness towards the grammatical subject. The subject bears an optional nominative case allomorph *-kkeyse* (cf. non-honorific nominative *-i/-ka*), and there is an obligatory verbal reflex of honorification *-si-* (HON: honorific, S: subject). Subject honorification is distinct from addressee honorification, marked by a verbal morpheme *-supni-*, which shows deference to the addressee (Jou 2024). Omitting honorification does not give rise to ungrammaticality but rudeness (Jou 2024:3).

(1) Kamdok-**kkeyse** wuli-eykey selywu-lul ponay-**si**-ess-ta.
director-**NOM.HON** us-DAT document-ACC send-**HON**$_S$-PST-DECL
'The director sent us the document.' ('director', not Addressee, is to be honored) (Jou 2024:2)

Crucial to the current work are the following data: subject honorification can be controlled by an inanimate grammatical subject so long as it is inalienably possessed by an honored individual (2a); alienable possessors do not trigger subject honorification (2b). This is a point of dialectical variation (marked '%') noted by Kim & Findlay (2023:11), where more liberal dialects permit forms like (2b); to illustrate the point, I focus only on the conservative dialects of Korean which accept (2a) but reject (2b).

(2) a. [halmeni-kkeyse phal]-i aphu-**si**-ta. b. %[halmeni-uy chascan]-i alumtaw-**usi**-ta.
grandmother-NOM.HON arm-NOM hurt-**HON**$_S$-DECL grandma-POSS cup-NOM be.lovely-**HON**$_S$-DECL
'Grandmother's arm hurts.' Int.: 'Grandmother's cup is lovely.'

(Kim & Findlay 2023:6)

The data in (2) are strikingly similar to "inherited gender", where the gender of a possessed noun is determined by the natural gender of its inalienable possessor in e.g., Yanyuwa and Coastal Marind (Evans 1994, Olsson 2018). A noun's gender is not determined by alienable possessors in such languages.

3 Basic proposal. I extend the animacy features suggested by Foley & Toosarvandani (2022) *et seq.* (3) to account for the presented Korean facts. Note the animacy features ELDER, HUMAN, ANIMATE entail a "person" feature π, which can be read as the "inanimate" feature (Harbour 2016, Toosarvandani 2023).

(3) a. ⟦ELDER⟧^{c} = λx . x hold(s) a salient social role in c b. ⟦HUMAN⟧ = λx . x is/are human
c. ⟦ANIMATE⟧ = λx . x is animate d. ⟦π⟧ = λx . x is a potential discourse subject or object
(Toosarvandani 2023:782-6)

I reanalyze the *ad hoc* feature [HON] as the independently argued animacy feature ELDER, assuming "salient social role" includes the category of respected individuals targeted by Korean honorification (elders, employers, etc.). Specifically, I supplement existing syntactic analyses (e.g., Jou 2024), suggesting that the morpheme *-si-* is a reflex of agreement with ELDER. To further motivate the animacy features ELDER ⊂ HUMAN ⊂ ANIMATE ⊂ π in Korean, I briefly point out that inanimates, animates, and honored individuals

are distinguished by an alternation in the dative case marker (4): inanimates receive -*ey*, animates -*eykey*, and honored individuals -*kkey* (Sohn 1999:333-4). Abbreviations are IN: inanimate, AN: animate.

(4) a. cheli-ka   changmwun-**ey**/chinkwu-**eykey**/halmeni-**kkey**   ppoppo-hay-ss-ta.
       Cheli-NOM   window-**DAT.IN**/friend-**DAT.AN**/grandma-**DAT.HON** kiss-do-PST-DECL
       'Cheli kissed the window/(his) friend/(his) grandma.'   (anonymized colleague, p.c.)

I posit that these Case allomorphs are conditioned by π, ANIMATE, and ELDER, respectively. It is unclear that the feature HUMAN is active in Korean. Although these animacy features stand in an asymmetric entailment relation, they may not stand in a typological markedness relation, where the activity of a feature guarantees the activity of all lower features in that same language (see Béjar 2003, Harbour 2011, 2016).

4 Honorification is gender. It is an open question in the literature how animacy relates to other φ-categories. Toosarvandani (2023) and Sichel & Toosarvandani (2024) argue animacy in Zapotec is composed on the same functional head as person. However, noun class in Bantu, argued to be a complex system of grammatical gender (Carstens 1991), is semantically rooted in animacy, historically: classes 1/2 correspond to humans, classes 7/8 inanimates, and classes 9/10 animals (i.e., non-human animates) (Denny & Creider 1986, Carstens 2024). In Korean, animacy appears to be gender, not person. First, the full feature hierarchy presented in Sichel & Toosarvandani (2024:20) includes the local person features PARTICIPANT and SPEAKER, which both entail ELDER. Therefore, first- and second-person pronouns in a language where ELDER is active are predicted to bear ELDER. In Korean, this falsely predicts that first- or second-person pronouns always trigger honorification. Worse, if Korean addressee honorification is triggered by a syntactic representation of the Addressee (Jou 2024), it is erroneously predicted that addressee honorification is *always* triggered, if ELDER is entailed by local person features. This suggests at the very least that Korean animacy features are not be entailed by local person features, unlike in Zapotec.

     Second, and more crucially, interactions between Korean subject honorification and possession (2) suggest honorification-as-animacy is a gender, and not person, phenomenon. As stated above, the data in (2) appear to be an "inherited gender" phenomenon. Adamson's (2024) analysis of this fact that, in some languages, possessor-gender interactions are sensitive to alienable versus inalienable possession, while interactions between other φ-categories and possessors are not, combines two theoretical components: (i) gender is located on *n* (Kramer 2015), while other φ-features are hosted on heads higher in the nominal functional spine (Ritter 1991, Picallo 1991), and (ii) that inalienable possessors are internal to *n*P, in the specifier of *n*, while alienable possessors are external to *n*P, in the specifier of, e.g., PossP, (Myler 2016, 2018). The *n* of the (possessed) head noun bears an unvalued gender feature that may probe its specifier (Cyclic Agree; Béjar & Rezac 2009) for a value. Alienable possessors are external to *n*P, so they cannot provide their gender feature to the head noun and thus do not determine its gender. Other φ-features, being located elsewhere than *n*, are not expected to be se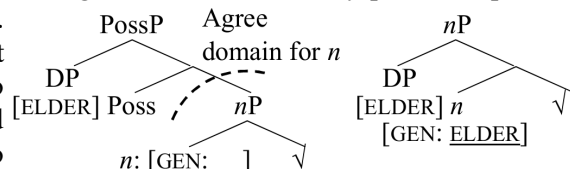nsitive to (in)alienable possession in this way. That Korean honorification is sensitive to (in)alienable possession (2) is captured under Adamson's (2024) analysis if (i) honorification is animacy, and (ii) animacy is gender in Korean, unlike in Zapotec, where it is person.

Figure 1: alienable vs. inalienable possession

5 Conclusion. This work suggests a reanalysis of Korean honorification as an animacy phenomenon by extending independently argued animacy features, for an unrelated language and *prima facie* unrelated paradigm. This not only assuages one stipulative sticking point for syntactic analyses of honorification by specifying the exact identity of [HON], but also advances debates over the theoretical status of animacy-as-φ. Namely, this work shows that animacy in different languages may be associated with different φ-categories. Possessor-honorific interactions in conservative dialects of Korean prove similar to "inherited gender" phenomena observed in other languages, showing a sensitivity to the distinction between alienable versus inalienable possession. This is expected for a gender-based phenomenon, but surprising otherwise. Animacy in Korean is interpretable gender, low on *n*, while in Zapotec, animacy composes on the same functional head as person, somewhere in the nominal functional spine above *n*. This points to a productive area of study, where additional patterns may be reanalyzed as animacy-based, in order to explore how animacy relates to other φ-categories and the nominal functional spine.

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