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Author

Lee, So Young

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Prosodic and Morphosyntactic Factors in Korean Relative Clause Attachment*

SO YOUNG LEE
Miami University

1 Introduction

Ambiguities in relative clause (RC) attachment have long played an important role in theories of sentence processing, as they provide insight into how comprehenders integrate structural, prosodic, and semantic information during incremental interpretation.

- (1) I saw the son of the teacher that visited the museum.
NP1 NP2 RC

In sentences such as (1), the RC permits two structurally distinct analyses: it may attach to the lower NP *the teacher* (low attachment, LA) or to the higher NP *the son of the teacher* (high attachment, HA). Preferred resolutions of relative clause attachment ambiguities vary across languages. Some languages show a preference for low attachment (LA), including Arabic (Abdelghany and Fodor 1999), Basque (Gutierrez-Ziardegi et al. 2004), Chinese (Shen 2006), English (Mitchell and Cuetos 1991), and Romanian (Ehrlich et al. 1999). Others exhibit a

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preference for high attachment (HA), such as Dutch (Desmet et al., 2002), French (Zagar et al. 1997), Korean (Lim 2012), Russian (Sekerina 2004), and Spanish (Carreiras and Clifton 1999). This cross-linguistic variation has motivated a shift away from purely structural accounts toward approaches that incorporate processing-based factors.

Among many, prosody has been argued to be particularly relevant, as prosodic organization encodes constituent grouping during speech. Building on this view, Fodor (1998) develops a prosody-based account of attachment by arguing that, when multiple attachment interpretations are available, comprehenders favor the interpretation that aligns with the language-specific prosodic grouping. Beyond this, she proposes that parsing decisions are guided by a preference for prosodically balanced configurations, formalized as the Same Size Sister Constraint (SSSC). According to this constraint, sister constituents are preferred to be comparable in prosodic weight, a property that is influenced by factors such as constituent length. Because alternative attachment analyses differ in how nominal constituents are grouped prosodically, differences in constituent length are expected to bias attachment toward structures that yield more balanced prosodic groupings.

Within this framework, attachment resolution can be shaped by prosodic length as well as by other grammatical cues that independently favor a particular interpretation. In many attachment configurations, morphosyntactic information provides clear guidance about the intended dependency, raising the question of how prosodic influences operate when such cues are available. Korean offers a relevant testing ground for examining this, as relative clause attachment may involve honorific agreement, which places morphosyntactic constraints on the possible antecedent and can bias attachment toward one noun phrase (e.g. Lee 2025). At the same time, prior research on Korean has primarily focused on prosodic grouping and interpretive preferences (e.g. Jun 2003), leaving the role of constituent length as a source of prosodic information largely unaddressed in the domain of relative clause attachment. The present study therefore investigates how prosodic length interacts with honorific agreement in shaping attachment decisions in Korean.

2 Background

2.1 Prosodic Phrasing in Silent Reading

Prosodic phrasing concerns how words are organized into hierarchical prosodic units during speech. While prosodic structure does not mirror syntactic structure in a one-to-one fashion, it is systematically constrained by syntax (e.g., Hayes 1989; Nespor and Vogel 1986; Selkirk 1986; Truckenbrodt 1999). Importantly, the mapping between syntax and prosody is not uniform across languages, giving rise to language-specific patterns of prosodic organization. Such differences have been argued to be relevant for sentence interpretation, particularly in cases of structural ambiguity.

Evidence for the role of prosodic phrasing in interpretation is directly observed in production. Studies of spoken language show that speakers systematically insert prosodic boundaries (//) in ambiguous relative clause (RC) constructions such as (2), and that the placement of these boundaries correlates with distinct attachment interpretations (e.g., Fodor 1998, 2002). In particular, the presence or absence of a prosodic boundary immediately preceding the RC biases the clause toward high or low attachment.

- (2) a. LA interpretation: NP1 // NP2 RC
 b. HA interpretation: NP1 NP2 // RC

Prosodic information plays a role in sentence comprehension beyond spoken language and is also engaged during silent reading. A substantial body of evidence suggests that readers activate phonological representations while processing written input, a process commonly referred to as phonological recoding (e.g., Bader 1998). Support for phonological activation in reading comes from findings such as priming effects for phonologically related word pairs, including rhymes (e.g., Tanenhaus, Flanigan, and Seidenberg 1980). Importantly, phonological activation in reading is not limited to segmental properties of words. Readers also appear to generate implicit prosodic representations, corresponding to the prosodic structure that a sentence would receive if spoken aloud (Fodor 2002; Bader 1998). These implicit prosodic representations have been argued to influence how sentences are parsed and interpreted.

Implicit prosody is generally assumed to arise from systematic mappings between orthographic input and phonological structure (e.g., Patterson and Coltheart 1987). Certain orthographic cues, such as punctuation, can facilitate the projection of prosodic boundaries during reading, although the strength and reliability of this mapping vary across languages and individual reading strategies (Hill and Murray 2000; Kerkhofs et al. 2008; Steinhauer and Friederici 2001). Prosodic grouping is also shaped by constituent length. (e.g., Colonna et al. 2000; Fernández and Bradley 1999; Hirose 2003; Fodor 1998, 2002; Pynte and Colonna 2000). In spoken language, speakers adjust prosodic phrasing as constituent length increases (e.g., Hirose 2003). Parallel effects have been reported in silent reading, where readers appear to rely on constituent length to construct implicit prosodic groupings, with downstream consequences for syntactic parsing (Hirose 2003; Hwang and Schafer 2009). Specifically, longer relative clauses tend to increase the likelihood of high attachment. This effect is illustrated in (3), where the longer relative clause in (3a) more strongly biases a high-attachment interpretation than the shorter relative clause in (3b).

- (3) a. The journalist read the critique of the film that was published in the Sunday newspaper.
 b. The journalist read the critique of the film that just came out.

Fodor (1998) formalizes the role of prosodic structure in syntactic parsing through the Same Size Sister Constraint (SSSC). The SSSC states that, when multiple syntactic analyses are available, comprehenders prefer parses in which sister constituents are comparable in prosodic size. Under the SSSC, short relative clauses tend to attach low because NP2 constitutes the lighter sister, whereas long relative clauses tend to attach high because the full NP, containing both NP1 and NP2, is prosodically heavier.

Together, these suggest that phrase length constitutes an important source of prosodic information that can shape sentence interpretation even in the absence of overt speech.

2.2 Korean Honorific Agreement

Korean employs honorific morphology to encode social relationships, involving a subject-verb dependency. Honorific meaning is expressed through dedicated morphemes on both nominals and verbs, including the nominal marker *-nim* and the verbal honorific affix *-si-*. These markers index the relative social status of the subject with respect to the speaker and contribute pragmatic information to sentence interpretation.

Honorific agreement in Korean differs fundamentally from the rigid subject-verb agreement systems found in Indo-European languages such as English. The honorific affix *-si-* may attach to the verb stem to mark agreement with an honorific subject, as illustrated in (4b), where the subject *sensayng-nim* ('teacher-HON') licenses the honorific marker on the verb. Crucially, however, the presence of an honorific subject does not require the honorific affix on the verb as in (4a); the omission of *-si-* does not result in ungrammaticality, and its use is conditioned by social and pragmatic factors rather than by syntactic necessity. In this respect, Korean lacks an obligatory subject-verb agreement system of the type found in Indo-European languages.

- (4) a. *sensayng-nim-i ppang-ul sa-ss-ta*
 teacher-NOM bread-ACC buy-PST-DECL
 'A teacher bought bread.'
- b. *sensayng-nim-i ppang-ul sa-si-ess-ta*
 teacher-NOM bread-ACC buy-HON-PST-DECL
 'A teacher bought bread.'

Nevertheless, Korean honorifics do impose systematic dependency relations between subjects and verbs (Brown and Yeon, 2015; Lee and Yoo 2023; Sohn 2001). Specifically, the honorific affix *-si-* cannot co-occur with a subject of low social status. As shown in (4b), a subject such as *ai* ('kid') fails to license honorific marking on the verb, rendering the sentence unacceptable.

- (5) a. *ai-ka ppang-ul sa-ss-ta*
 child-NOM bread-ACC buy-PST-DECL
 'A child bought bread.'
- b. **ai-ka ppang-ul sa-si-ess-ta*
 child-NOM bread-ACC buy-HON-PST-DECL
 'A child bought bread.'

Thus, while honorific marking in Korean is optional and pragmatically conditioned, the honorific affix *-si-* is nonetheless constrained by the honorific status of the subject noun phrase. These constraints have the potential to bias interpretation in relative clause attachment ambiguities. For example, when an honorific-marked predicate appears within a relative clause, these licensing conditions restrict the set of noun phrases that can serve as its antecedent, thereby biasing attachment toward a particular noun. Korean, therefore, can provide a linguistically informative context for examining the interaction between prosodic length and grammatical cues in attachment resolution.

Taken together, the SSSC and the properties of Korean prosodic structure and honorific agreement motivate an empirical examination of how prosodic length and grammatical cues jointly shape attachment resolution. In particular, Korean allows us to ask whether length-based prosodic grouping influences relative clause attachment and how such effects behave when morphosyntactic information independently biases attachment. The following experiment is designed to address these issues.

3 Experiment

3.1 Overview

The experiment examined relative clause (RC) attachment in Korean by manipulating *prosodic length* and *honorific agreement*, two factors hypothesized to influence attachment resolution through prosodic grouping and morphosyntactic licensing, respectively.

3.2 Materials and Procedure

Korean relative clauses are prenominal, allowing prosodic length and honorific agreement to be manipulated independently within the relative clause.

(6) RC NP1-uy NP2 (cf. English *NP2 of NP1 RC*).

In the present experiment, prosodic length was manipulated on the local noun phrase (NP1) by adding modifiers, while honorific agreement was manipulated on the relative clause (RC) verb through the presence or absence of the honorific affix *-si-*. The experiment employed a factorial design crossing three factors: (i) NP1 length (short vs. long), (ii) honorific marking on the RC verb (*-si-* present vs. absent), and (iii) the relative social status of the two noun phrases. The latter factor determined whether honorific agreement biased high attachment (HA), low attachment (LA), or neither. This design allows us to test whether length-based prosodic effects arise in Korean RC attachment and whether such effects persist when honorific agreement provides a competing interpretive cue.

To manipulate prosodic length, NP1 appeared either without modifiers (short) or with two additional modifiers (long), as schematized below:

- (7) a. Short NP1: [RC] [NP1-uy] [NP2]
 b. Long NP1: [RC] [M1 M2 NP1-uy] [NP2]

Lexical items were selected so that the noun phrases differed systematically in social status (e.g., *hyeng* ‘older brother’, *imo* ‘aunt’, *sonca* ‘grandson’), enabling controlled manipulation of honorific agreement. Three social-status relations between NP1 and NP2 were constructed: (i) HL, where NP1 had higher status than NP2; (ii) LH, where NP1 had lower status than NP2; and (iii) Equal, where both noun phrases were high status (HH, honorific-licensed) or both low status (LL, non-honorific). An example stimulus from the short–honorific–HL condition is given in (8).

- (8) Yengse hyeng-un [thipi-lul poko iss-ten] imo-uy sonca-wa sacin-ul ccik-ess-ta
 Y. brother-TOP [TV-ACC see-PROG-REL] aunt-of grandson-with photo-ACC take-PST-DECL
 ‘(My brother) Yengseo took a photo with the grandson of the aunt who was watching TV.’

Participants completed a comprehension task in which they read each sentence and indicated their interpretation of the RC attachment. Responses were coded as high attachment (HA) or low attachment (LA). A total of 56 native speakers of Korean participated in the experiment.

3.3 Predictions

If prosodic length contributes to attachment resolution in Korean, increasing the length of NP1 should modulate LA preferences (NP1 attachment interpretation), consistent with prosody-based accounts such as the Same Size Sister Constraint.

3.4 Analysis

Responses from the comprehension task were coded according to participants ($n = 56$)' attachment interpretations. For each trial, responses were classified as HA or LA. The primary dependent measure was the rate of HA responses, with LA responses treated as the complement. Data were aggregated by participant and condition to compute mean HA rates. The analysis focused on three sets of comparisons. First, attachment preferences in ambiguous baseline conditions (i.e., conditions in which honorific agreement did not disambiguate attachment) were examined to assess overall attachment tendencies in Korean. Second, conditions in which honorific agreement biased attachment toward one noun phrase were analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of honorific marking as a morphosyntactic cue. Third, constituent length effects were assessed by comparing short and long NP1 conditions within the same honorific and social-status configurations, with particular attention to whether length-based effects emerge only in the absence of honorific marking.

Statistical comparisons were conducted to evaluate differences between conditions. Where applicable, effects of NP1 length were tested separately within honorific and non-honorific conditions.

3.5 Results

Table 1, Figure 1 and Figure 2 summarize HA response rates across conditions.

Table 1 HA answer rate

	honorific on V	NP1-NP2	Long	long NP1	short NP1
a.	o	LH	Long	0.865	0.898
b.	o	HL	Long	0.430	0.441
c.	o	HH	Long	0.868	0.857
d.	x	LH	Long	0.548	0.506
e.	x	HL	Long	0.871	0.960
f.	x	LL	Long	0.837	0.841

We first consider attachment preferences in conditions where honorific agreement did not bias attachment. In both the **HH** condition with honorific marking and the **LL** condition without honorific marking, participants showed consistently high HA response rates across NP1 length conditions. This pattern indicates a robust baseline preference for high attachment (over 0.8) in Korean relative clause attachment, independent of constituent length when no morphosyntactic cue differentiates the two noun phrases.

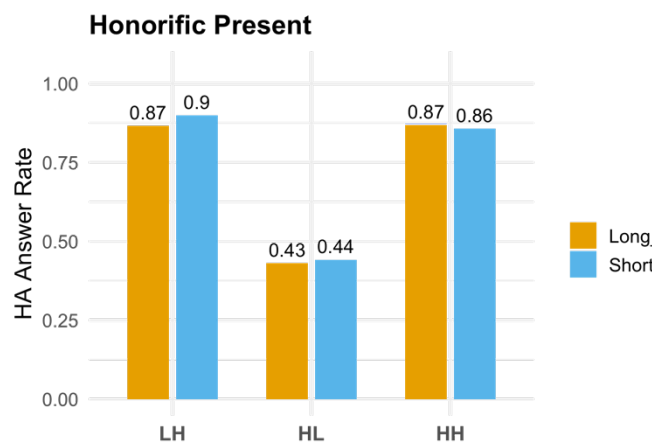


Figure 1 HA answer rates in honorific *-si-* present conditions

Turning to conditions in which honorific agreement provided a potential attachment bias, the presence of the honorific affix *-si-* on the relative clause verb systematically influenced attachment decisions. When honorific marking was present and only one noun phrase (**H**) satisfied the honorific licensing conditions, participants preferentially attached the relative clause to the honorific-compatible noun (**LH**: high HA answer rate (over 0.85), **HL**: low HA answer rate (below 0.5). Notably, although the honorific marker *-si-* is optional with high social-status subjects, its absence led participants to preferentially attach the relative clause to the lower-status noun (**L**) noun (**LH**: low HA answer rate (below 0.6), **HL**: high HA answer rate (over 0.85). This shift in attachment preference indicates that honorific agreement serves as an effective morphosyntactic cue for resolving attachment ambiguity, even though honorific marking in Korean is optional and its omission does not result in ungrammaticality.

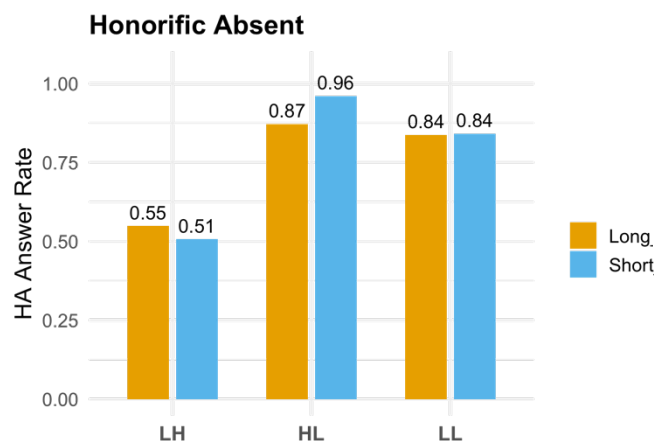


Figure 2 HA answer rates in honorific *-si-* absent conditions

In addition, a length-based effect emerged only in the absence of honorific marking. In the non-honorific **HL** condition, lengthening NP1 led to a statistically reliable increase in LA responses ($p < .05$), reflected as a reduction in HA response rates relative to the short NP1

condition. Although this length effect was modest and did not override the dominant HA preference, it indicates that prosodic length can influence attachment decisions when no competing morphosyntactic cue constrains interpretation.

In contrast, when the honorific marker *-si-* was present and biased attachment toward a particular noun phrase, NP1 length did not produce an additional shift in attachment preferences. Under these conditions, attachment behavior was driven primarily by honorific agreement, and no independent effect of constituent length was observed.

4 Discussion

The present study investigated how prosodic length and morphosyntactic licensing jointly shape relative clause attachment in Korean. Three main findings emerged: a strong baseline preference for high attachment, a robust influence of honorific agreement on attachment resolution, and a length-based prosodic effect that surfaces only when honorific marking is absent. Together, these results shed light on the conditions under which prosodic information contributes to attachment resolution and clarify how its influence is modulated by grammatical cues.

Across ambiguous baseline conditions, Korean speakers showed a consistent preference for high attachment. This pattern aligns with previous reports of HA preferences in Korean. This baseline preference was not altered by constituent length when no additional cues differentiated the two noun phrases, suggesting that length alone is insufficient to override the dominant attachment bias in the language.

Honorific agreement exerted a clear and systematic influence on attachment decisions. When the honorific marker *-si-* was present and only one noun phrase satisfied its licensing conditions, participants reliably attached the relative clause to the honorific-compatible noun. This finding confirms that honorific agreement functions as an effective morphosyntactic cue in attachment resolution, even though the use of *-si-* is optional in Korean and its absence does not lead to ungrammaticality. The results thus demonstrate that pragmatic–morphosyntactic information can guide attachment decisions in a way that goes beyond structural preferences.

With respect to prosodic length, the observed effect was highly constrained. A length-based shift in attachment preferences was observed only in the absence of honorific marking. In non-honorific condition, lengthening the local noun phrase (NP1) led to an increase in low-attachment responses, consistent with the idea that prosodic grouping shaped by constituent length can bias attachment. Importantly, this effect was modest and did not reverse the overall preference for high attachment. Rather than acting as a dominant cue, prosodic length appears to exert a secondary influence that becomes visible only when morphosyntactic constraints do not strongly favor one interpretation.

Prosody-based accounts such as the Same Size Sister Constraint predict that constituent length can influence attachment by shaping prosodic grouping, which in turn biases syntactic interpretation. The present results suggest, however, that the influence of prosodic length is conditional: it contributes to attachment resolution when the parser is not already guided by strong grammatical licensing cues, but its effect is attenuated when such cues are present. In this respect, the findings support a view in which prosodic information is integrated with, rather than independent of, morphosyntactic information during parsing.

More generally, the results bear on the question of the strength of prosodic influence in sentence processing. While prosodic representations implicit or overt can shape attachment

decisions, their contribution is not uniform across contexts. Instead, prosodic effects appear to be weighted relative to other available sources of information, including morphosyntactic cues that directly constrain interpretation. Korean, with its length-sensitive prosodic structure and honorific agreement system, provides a clear illustration of how these sources of information interact.

5 Conclusion

This study examined how prosodic length and morphosyntactic licensing interact in relative clause attachment in Korean. By manipulating constituent length and honorific agreement, the experiment provided a controlled test of whether length-based prosodic grouping influences attachment decisions and how such effects behave in the presence of a grammatical cue that biases interpretation.

The results showed a strong baseline preference for high attachment in Korean and a robust effect of honorific agreement on attachment resolution. A length-based prosodic effect emerged only when honorific marking was absent, indicating that prosodic length can modulate attachment preferences but does not override morphosyntactic constraints. These findings suggest that prosodic information contributes to attachment resolution in a context-dependent manner, with its influence attenuated when grammatical licensing provides clear guidance.

More broadly, the study contributes to prosody-based theories of sentence processing by clarifying the conditions under which constituent length affects attachment. Rather than acting as a primary determinant of structure, prosodic length appears to function as a secondary cue whose impact depends on the availability of competing grammatical information. Korean, with its length-sensitive prosodic structure and honorific agreement system, thus offers an informative case for understanding how prosodic and grammatical cues are integrated during sentence comprehension.

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