

Discourse Functions and Social Meanings of *-yo* After Non-Sentence-Ending Elements in Korean Conversations

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1 Introduction

One of the prominent characteristics of honorifics in contemporary Korean is the prevalent use of *-yo* (Park, 1976; Yoon, 1994). The polite sentence ending *-eyo/ayo* is the most commonly used speech style both in formal and informal situations. Also, *-yo* can be used after a single utterance of a noun or an adverb to make the utterance an honorific expression. Further, *-yo* can be used within the body of a sentence after transitional syntactic elements, case particles, nouns, etc. The last case *-yo* does not add one's intention of being respectful or polite, but has various discourse functions. Even though the use of *-yo* within the body of a sentence is very common, there has not been much research done about this phenomenon.

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To fill this gap, the purpose of this study is to investigate what *-yo* does when it is positioned within the body of the sentence. Yoon (2010, 2013) argues that the polite sentence ending *-yo* indexes a soft affective disposition on the part of the speaker, and is used in interactive situations when personal feelings and emotions are being shared. This study further examines the social meanings and discourse functions of *-yo* when it is used as something other than a sentence ending. For this examination, about one hundred hours of conversation from different genres of TV programs (i.e., news, interviews, debate programs, talk shows, drama and comedy shows) were qualitatively examined.

2 The history of the use of *-yo*

The prevalent use of *-yo* is thought to be a quite recent trend in the history of the Korean language. Choe (2003) explained that *-yo* is not found in documents prior to the 18th century, and first appeared in some literary works in the 19th century. Not much is known, therefore, about the actual origins of *-yo*. It has been thought that *-yo* was first derived from the combination of the copula *i* 'to be' and the blunt-style sentence ending *-o* (Sung, 1984; Choe 1937). In contemporary Korean, however, the polite style is thought to express a higher level of politeness than the blunt style.

Even though the most basic meaning of *-yo* is considered to be "respect," there have been discussions of possible additional meanings, as well. For example, Sung (1985) reported that some scholars thought that *-yo* conveyed meanings such as a soothing quality, softness, emphasis, etc. Lee & Im (1983) also argued that the meaning of *-yo* is [+ intimacy]. Yoon (1996) mentioned that *-yo* can be found more often in the speech of women, and that its usage sometimes expresses the idea of "elegance." These studies considered these to be simply supplementary meanings to politeness, and they did not further investigate possible social meanings in various contexts of real conversations.

The polite and the intimate styles are sometimes classified outside of the regular classification of speech styles. The polite style is referred to as *panmal nophim*, "raised half-talk," by some scholars since it uses *-yo* as a form added to the *panmal*, "half-talk," or the intimate style. Because intimate style endings are often simply regarded as incomplete forms rather than independent sentence endings, the polite style is also thought to simply use *-yo* as a form added to these incomplete forms. From this perspective, *-yo* is regarded as a particle or a suffix that has the meaning of respect, rather than as an independent sentence ending. In contemporary Korean, however, it seems to be more appropriate to regard the intimate style as an independent style of speech, in that there are independent sentence endings that are

recognized as indicating the intimate style, and these are being used more and more widely (Han, 2002).

In summary, the sentence ending *-eyo/ayo* has a relatively short history compared to other sentence endings, and it seems like *-yo* has meanings of intimacy, politeness, respect, elegance and the like. As will be discussed below, when *-yo* is used in the middle of a sentence, it expresses similar social meanings to when it is used as a sentence ending.

3 The use of *-yo* as a non-sentence ending

Yoon (1996) explained that the use of *-yo* following a non-verbal element is a redundancy whose function is to create a pause and a feeling of closeness between interlocutors. In addition, Choe (2003) argued that when *-yo* is in the body of a sentence, this does not have the same connotation of politeness. However, when a sentence ends in non-honorific styles such as the intimate and plain styles, the use of *-yo* after other sentence elements sounds quite unnatural, as in example (1). Thus, it seems as if the use of *-yo* within the body of the sentence is still indicative of “respect” and is compatible only with honorific speech styles which are the deferential and polite styles.

- (1)
- | | |
|--------------------|----------------|
| *na-nun- yo | haksayng-i-ya |
| I-TC- yo | student-be-INT |
| ‘I am a student.’ | |

When *-yo* is used after non-sentence-ending elements, it creates a small pause, which then divides the sentence and puts a slight emphasis on the element that precedes *-yo*. This small pause and the use of *-yo* creates various discourse functions depending on the nature of the conversation and the speakers’ intentions at the moment.

3.1 Expressing soft affective disposition

In a very strict and formal situation, the most frequently used speech style is the deferential style. For example, reports in news programs or announcements in show programs were made mainly in the deferential style in the data for this study. However, Yoon (2010) found that *-yo* often appears after sentence connectives, such as *-ko* ‘and,’ *-ese* ‘so,’ and *-nuntey* ‘under such circumstances’ in reports in news programs or announcements in talk show. Especially in weather forecasts, this phenomenon is commonly found.

(2) Weather forecast in news program

1 *hyencay Kangwen pwukpu cipang-ey howu*
 now Kangwon northern place-at heavy.rain
cwuuyipo-ka naylyeci-n kawuntey i ciyek-ul
 warning-Nm issue-MD middle this area-Ac
cwungsim-ulo sikan-tang 10 mm anphakk-uy
 center-as hour-per 10 mm about-Gen
taso kwulk-un pi-ka nayli-ko.iss-supnita
 somewhat coarse-Md rain-Nn fall-being-Def
 ‘Currently, it is raining heavily, at about 10 mm per hour,
 while a heavy rain advisory is in effect in the Northern
 part of the Kangwon area.’

→ 2 *tto namhayan-ul cwungsim-ulo kyeyso*
 also south.coast-Ac center-as continuously
pi-ka ieci-ko.iss-nuntey-yo
 rain-Nm continue-being-so-Pol
 ‘Also, centering around the South Coast, rain is
 continuing.’

3 *cangma-censen-i pwuktongcin-ha-m-ey*
 seasonal.rain-front-NM North.East.process-do Nom-to
ttala pam-sai Kyengnam-cipang-eyse
 follow night-during South.of.Kyengsang-area-at
kulk-un pi-ka nayli-l kanungseng-i
 coarse-MD rain-Nm fall-MD possibility-NM
iss-supni-ta
 exist-DEF-DC
 ‘As a seasonal rain front is advancing north-east, there is a
 possibility of heavy rain in Kyengnam area.’

4 *onul cangmacensen-un nampwucipang-kkaci*
 today seasonal.rain.front-Tc southern area-until
ollaw-ass-taka cikum-un namhay-ey
 come.up-Pst-then now-Tc South.Sea-at
memwul-ko.iss-supnita
 stay-being-Def
 ‘Today, a seasonal rain front has come up to the southern
 area, and it is staying around the southern coastal area.’

- 5 *nac-kkaci* *yenghyang-ul* *cwu-taka*
 daytime-until influence-Ac give-and.then
cemcha *mwillena-l* *kes-ulo poi-ko-yo*
 gradually take.back-Md thing as seem-and-Pol
 ‘It will last until midday, and will go back gradually.’
- 6 *cwumal-ccum* *tasi* *puksang-ha-keyss-supnita*
 weekend-around again going.north-do-will-Def
 ‘It will move up again around the weekend.’
- (Yoon 2010)

While the overall report is being made in the deferential style, the weather forecaster often uses *-yo* after sentence connectives such as *-nuntey* ‘under such circumstances’, *-ko* ‘and.’ Yoon (2010) argues that the use of *-yo* after sentence connectives presents a softer image than sentence connectives alone. The general news contents are delivered in a serious and dry tone, but the weather forecasts are delivered in a friendly way, and it seems like the use of *-yo* contributes to create a kind and friendly atmosphere to the report.

3.2 Signaling a significant place of transition

The suffix *-yo* can be placed after the major components of a sentence, such as subjects, objects, adverbial phrases, and transitional syntactic elements. Yoon (1994) argued that *-yo* cannot be attached randomly, and that there are priorities that govern where *-yo* can be most easily attached. According to him, the order of these priorities depends on the separability of the sentence, which is based on the speaker’s intentions regarding the structure of the discourse. For example, Yoon (1994) argued that the use of *-yo* following a topic is more separable than when following the subject.

(7)

- a. *Chunhyang.i-nun-yo* *elkwul-i* *yeypp-eyo.*
Chunhyang.i-TC-yo *face-Nm* *pretty-POL*
 “As for Chunhyang, her face is pretty.”
- b. ?*Chunhyangi-nun* *elkwul-i-yo* *yeypp-eyo.*
Chunhyang.i-TC *face-Nn-yo* *pretty-POL*
 “As for Chunhyang, her face is pretty.”

(Revised from Yoon, 1994)

In addition, the use of *-yo* following transitional syntactic elements is more separable than when following other sentence elements.

(8)

- a. elkwul-i yeypu-ko-yo kyoyang-i iss-eyo
 face-Nn pretty-and-yo culturedness-Nm have-POL
 “(Her) face is pretty and (she is) cultured.”
- b. ?elkwul-i-yo yeypu-ko kyoyang-i-yo iss-eyo
 face-Nm-yo pretty-and culturedness-Nm-yo have-POL
 “(Her) face is pretty and (she is) cultured.”

(Revised from Yoon, 1994)

Yoon (1994) further explained that even though the place of separation depends on the speaker’s intention regarding the structure of the discourse, *-yo* is more easily attached following a major grammatical unit (e.g., sentence, clause, phrase, etc.).

The data for this study show that *-yo* is often followed by head nodding by the listener(s), and is sometimes accompanied by a back-channel signal such as *ney*, “yes,” or a, “ah”. Hatch (1992) explained that a slight pause after a syntactic completion (e.g., the end of a phrase) can offer a place where the listener may give a back-channel signal. The *-yo* clearly signals this opportunity. In the following example, Kim, a guest on a show, continues her conversation using *-yo* while continually inviting the host to follow what she is saying.

(9) Park Joong-Hoon Show (Talk Show)

- 1 Park: yenkica-ka toyn kes-ul hwuhoyha-n cek-un
 actress-NOM become thing-Acc regret-DC occasion-TC
eps-eyo? *kukes* *ttaymwun.ey?*
 not.exist-POL that because.of
 “Don’t you have any regrets for having become an actress?
 Because of that (criticism)?”
- 2 Kim: kukes ttaymwun.ey hwuhoyha-ci-nun anh-ass-e.yo
 that. because.of regret-Com-TC not-Pst-POL
 “I didn’t have any regrets because of that (criticism).”

- 3 acik acik ce-nun hyencay cinhaynghyeng-i-lako
 still still I-TC present progressive-be-as
 sayngkak-ul ha-ko iss-kwu-yo
 think-Acc do-and exist-and-POL
 “I think that I am still using the present progressive form...”
- 4 pwunmyenghi palcenha-ko iss-tako sayngkak-ul
 clearly develop-and exist-as think-Acc
 ha-ko iss-kwu-yo
 do-and exist-and-POL
 “I think that I am clearly developing now...”
- 5 kuliko macimak. choykun-ey ha-yss-ten
 and last recent-at do-Pst-Ret
 ssawum-kath.un cakphwum-eyse-nun po-si-n
 fight-like work-at-Tc see-Hon-Dc
 pwuntul-to manh.i chingchan.ul
 people-also much praise-Ac
 hay cwu-sy-ess-e.yo
 do give-Hon-Pst-Pol
 “Also, people praised me for the work ‘Fight’ that I did recently.”

In this example, the speaker moves her gaze to the host while nodding each time she ends a sentence or a clause with *-yo*. The speaker looks at the host as she nods her head as if she is seeking a sign of their mutual agreement. This kind of gaze accompanied by head nodding often invites the listener to nod in return, and is sometimes accompanied by a back-channel signal. It can be argued here that the use of *-yo*, generally accompanied by head-nodding and a slight rise in intonation, serves to invite the active attention of the listener and for the listener to share their affect.

3.3 Amplification of Topicality

Another prominent function of *-yo* is that it is often attached after the topic of a sentence in order to amplify the topicality. As mentioned above, *-yo* separates the discourse and puts a slight emphasis on the element that precedes it. This brief pause may serve to invite the listener’s attention, via affect sharing, to draw attention to the topic of the discourse.

Choe (2003) points out that *-yo* can not only be used after the topic particle *-(n)un*, but can also be directly attached to a noun that is used for the topic of the sentence. In fact, in a common situation, *-yo* cannot be directly

attached to a subject or an object without a case particle. In the following example (10-a'), if one simply attaches *-yo* after the subject *sonnim*, 'guest,' it sounds unnatural, unless they are talking about a specific guest. However, in examples (10-b') and (10-b''), it is clear that the speaker and the listener both know Minsu, and the use of *-yo* after the topic particle *-nun* or the direct attachment of *-yo* to Minsu are both possible.

(10)

- | | | | | |
|------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| a. | sonnim.i-yo
guest-Nm-yo | o-sy-ess-e.yo.
come-SH-Pst-POL | | |
| a'. | ?sonnim-yo
guest-yo | o-syess-e.yo.
come-SH-Pst-POL | | "A guest came." |
| b. | Minswu-nun
Minsu-Tc | onul
today | an
not | o-ass-e.yo.
come-Pst-POL |
| b'. | Minswu-nun-yo
Minsu-Tc-yo | onul
today | an
not | o-ass-e.yo.
come-Pst-POL |
| b''. | Minswu-yo
Minsu-Tc | onul
today | an
not | o-ass-e.yo.
come-Pst-POL |
- "Minsu didn't come today."

(Revised from Yoon, 1994)

When *-yo* is used to amplify the topic, the speaker seems to call for the listener's attention to the topic in order to share the common ground of their affect. Sohn (1993) noted that the topic marker *-nun* is used to mark information that the speaker assumes is part of the listener's register. In example (10-b), it seems evident that the speaker assumes that the listener knows Minsu. If *-yo* is attached after the topic particle, it sounds as if the speaker is trying to remind the listener of Minsu in order to create a common ground of affect regarding Minsu and what happened to him.

The repeated use of *-yo* may signal that the speaker is trying to build consensus with the listener(s). In the following example, the speaker is using *-yo* while comparing the legal system and public opinion on the Internet. He demonstrates the contrast between these two topics by using *-yo* with polite sentence endings.

(11) Talk show

- 1 pep pep-un-yo ilsim i-sim samsim-i
 law law-Tc-yo first.trialsecond.trial third.trial-Nm
 iss-canh.a-yo
 exist-you.know-Pol
 “When it comes to the law, there are first, second, and third trials.”
- 2 kulayse kihoy-ka iss-e.yo
 so chance-Nm exist-POL
 “So, there is a chance.”
- 3 kulentey intheneys-uy kul-tul-un-yo i-lsim
 but Internet-Gen writing-Pl-Tc-Pol first-trial
 i-sim sam-sim-i eps-e.yo
 second-trial third-trial-Nm not.exist-Pol
 “However, when it comes to postings on the Internet, there are no first, second, and third trials.”

In this conversation, this person is arguing that it is a form of injustice when people post groundless rumors on the internet. Indeed, he was a victim of such rumors, and by using *-yo* after two contrasting topics, it sounds as if he is appealing to the show’s audience for agreement with his point of view.

In this way, the use of *-yo* after a topic serves the function of drawing attention to the topic and inviting listeners to share a common ground of affect. Such a function can be accomplished via sentence coordination that uses the polite style ending.

3.4 Use of repeated *-yo* to express hesitation

There were also frequent cases when *-yo* was used after discourse markers such as *isscanha* ‘you know’, *maliya* ‘tell you what’, *kuntsey* ‘well’ and *kulssey* ‘well,’ adding the meaning of hesitation and politeness. The common functions of these discourse markers are also related to inviting the listener’s attention (Ahn, 2012; Yang, 2001) and active participation in the conversation, and *-yo* adds this kind of social meaning along with the honorific function. Use of such discourse markers with multiple *-yo* makes an utterance express one’s hesitation, which makes a statement softer and less direct.

(11) Drama

→ Sujung: *isscanha-yo* *pyenhosa-nim*
 you know-yo lawyer-HT
 pyenhosa-nim *malssumha-si-l* *ttay-yo*
 lawyer-HT speak-SH-RL time-yo
 ‘Well, you know, Mr. Lawyer, when you speak’

Kang: (2.0)

→ Sujung: *yeki* *chim* *thwinun-ke* *a-sey-yo?*
 here saliva sputter-thing know-SH-yo
 ‘Do you know you spit when you speak?’

This character in the drama is trying to express her complaints with a discourse maker *isscanha-yo* ‘you know-yo’ and repeated *-yo* as tokens of hesitation to express her complaints. As the basic function of *-yo* is to express the speaker’s soft affective disposition while inviting the listener’s attention, the use of *-yo* seems to be functioning like a hedge to signal caution in some speech acts.

4 Conclusion

This study has examined the social meanings and discourse functions of *-yo* when it is used after non-sentence ending elements. The most basic function of this type of *-yo* is that it separates the discourse and puts a slight emphasis on the element that precedes it, and this brief pause serves to invite the listener’s attention. Depending on the context, this *-yo* has appeared to have various social meanings and discourse functions.

Firstly, the use of *-yo* after connectives in very formal reports or announcements has the function of making the atmosphere of the whole discourse softer and friendier. Secondly, in conversations that include long narratives, the use of *-yo* marks the major transitional place of the contents, which helps the understanding of the listener(s). The data for this study shows that on such occasions, *-yo* often occurs with a rising tone, and it is followed by head nodding by the listener(s), and is sometimes accompanied by a back-channel signal such as *ney*, “yes,” or *a*, “ah”. Thus, using *-yo* appears to invite the listener’s active attention.

Thirdly, *-yo* is often attached after the topic of a sentence, amplifying the topicality. The repeated use of *-yo* after the topic particle *-(n)un* may signal that the speaker is trying to build consensus with the listener(s) while emphasizing the topics. Finally, it is found that *-yo* is used as a hedge to

mitigate illocutionary force (Lee & Park, 1991). There are frequent cases when -yo is used after discourse markers such as *isscanha* 'you know', *maliya* 'tell you what', and *kuntey* 'well'. The common functions of these discourse markers are also related to inviting the listener's attention and active participation in the conversation, and -yo adds this social meaning.

This study concludes that the most basic discourse function of -yo is to express one's soft affective disposition. When it is used in the middle of a sentence, it is found to be used after the completion of a major syntactic unit, and such use emphasizes the significance of the transition point of the discourse, which leads to inviting the listener's active attention to the conversation.

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