Discourse functions and social meanings of -yo after non-sentence-ending elements in Korean conversations

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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 these days. Also, attaching -yo after a single utterance of a noun or an adverb makes 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 still has an honorific function, but its usage is not obligatory and it is totally dependent on the speaker’s choice. 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. There are various discourse functions of this -yo, but there has been not much discussion about using -yo within a sentence.

To fill this gap, the purpose of this study is to investigate the discourse functions of -yo when it is positioned within the body of the sentence. Yoon (2010) 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 discourse functions of -yo when it is used as something other than a sentence ending. For this examination, this study investigated about one hundred hours of conversation from different genres of TV programs (i.e., news, interviews, debate programs, talk shows, drama and comedy shows.)

This study examined social meanings and discourse functions of -yo other than the honorific purpose. First, -yo is often attached after the topic of a sentence amplifying the topicality. It is shown that -yo 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 to the topic of the discourse. Similarly, there were also 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 (Ahn, 2012; Yang, 2001) and active participation in the conversation, and -yo adds this social meaning along with the honorific meaning. Further, -yo is often used after a clausal connective such as -nuntey ‘but’, -ciman ‘but’, -ese/ase ‘so’ and -ko ‘and’ in long narratives. The use of -yo, with a slight pause, marks the major transitional place of the contents, which helps 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, again, using -yo appears to invite the listener’s active attention. Finally, it is found that -yo is used as a hedge to mitigate illocutionary force (Lee & Park, 1991). Repeated use of -yo within a sentence makes an utterance less direct and softer. It is also found after the hesitation discourse marker kulssey ‘well,’ adding the meaning of hesitation and politeness.

This study concludes the most basic discourse function of -yo is to invite affect sharing between the speaker and the addressee(s). When it is found 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.
(Example 1) Amplification of the topicality (Talk show)

1. pep. pep-un-yo ilsim i-sim samsim-i iss-canh.a-yo
   law. law-TC-yo first.trial second.trial third.trial-Nm exist-you.know-POL
   “When it comes to the law, there are first, second, and third trials.”

2. kulentey intenheys-uy kul-tul-un-yo il-sim
   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.”

(Example 2) -yo in a narrative (Talk show)

3. acik acik ce-nun hyencay chinyanghyeng-i-lako sayngkak-ul ha-ko iss-kwu-yo
   still still I-TC present progressive-be-as think-Acc do-and exist-and-POL
   “I think that I am still using the present progressive form…”

4. pwunmyenghi palenha-ko iss-tako sayngkak-ul ha-ko iss-kwu-yo
   clearly develop-and exist-as think-Acc do-and exist-and-POL
   “I think that I am clearly developing now…”

5. kuliko macimak. choykun-ey ha-yss-ten sswum-kath.un
   and last recent-at do-Pst-Ret fight-like
   cakphum-eyse-nun po-si-n pwunul-to manh.i chinchan.ul
   work-at-TC see-Hon-DC people-also much praise-Acc
   hay cuw-sy-ess-e.yo
do give-Hon-Pst-POL
   “Also, people praised me for the work ‘Fight’ that I did recently.”

(Example 3) -yo after an interactive discourse marker and also -yo as a hedge (Drama)

Sujung: isscanha-yo pyenhosa-nim pyenhosa-nim malssumha-si-l tay-yo
   you know-yo lawyer-HT lawyer-HT speak-SH-RI 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?’

References


