

Sentence-final intonation in Korean

Introduction: Korean linguists have generally agreed that different types of sentences can be distinguished by distinctive intonation contours at the end of the sentence in Korean, but there have been conflicting observations on which intonation contour signals which sentence type. The common impressionistic description is that declarative sentences (DCLs) and *wh*-questions (WHQs) have *falling* intonation, while yes-no questions have *rising* intonation at the end of the sentence (Hur, 1991; Kwon, 2002; I. Lee & Ramsey, 2000; K. M. Lee, Kim, & Lee, 1984; Martin, 1951; Suh, 1989). On the other hand, Jun and Oh (1996) reports a production experiment that suggests the most common sentence-final tone of DCLs are L%, WHQs are LH%, YNQs are H%, and a more recent production study in Yun and Lee (2015) confirms the same pattern for questions. These experimental observations deviate from the common view in the case of WHQs since LH% indicates a rise contour rather than a fall. However, another experimental observation by Hwang (2007) on question intonation associates WHQs with HL% and YNQs with H%, which is consistent with the common view that WHQs have falling intonation. Thus a question arises: what caused the conflicting observations on sentence-final intonation in the literature?

Hypothesis: I propose that the seemingly conflicting observations is due to the lack of consideration of another factor, the type of sentence-final particles. We can divide sentence-final particles into two groups depending on whether they explicitly indicate the illocutionary force of the sentence (i.e. statement vs. question endings: -다, -네 vs. -니, -까, -냐) or they can be used for both statements and questions (i.e. neutral endings: -어/아). My hypothesis is that these two types of sentence-final particles associate with different types of intonation contours in the case of WHQs (i.e. question ending: HL%, neutral ending: LH%). In addition, there is a special neutral ending, -지, which shows a yet another pattern of sentence-final intonation (i.e. HL% for YNQs and H% for WHQs). I single it out from neutral endings and label it separately as confirmative ending, since the main function of the particle -지 is to confirm what the speaker already knows. Table 1 shows my prediction on the typical sentence-final tone for each combination of sentence types and sentence-final particles.

Experiment: To verify the hypothesis, I conducted a production experiment with 40 Seoul Korean speakers (20 male and 20 female students at Seoul National University) and recorded 5280 utterances in total (40 speakers × 12 sentences × 11 combinations of sentence types and sentence-final particles). The analysis of the recorded data indicated that the most frequent sentence-final tone for each combination was as predicted in Table 1, which confirms my hypothesis. The descriptions of WHQs in the literature were indeed dependent on whether the data involved a neutral ending (Jun & Oh, 1996; Yun & Lee, 2015) or a question ending (Hwang 2007 and others). In addition, the confirmative ending provides a new type of data in the discussion of sentence-final intonation that has not been previously noted in the literature. In particular, the question ending and confirmative ending showed the opposite patterns of question intonation (YNQs and WHQs), suggesting that there is no absolute correspondence between question types and sentence-final tones (cf. H.-Y. Lee, 1997).

	-어/아	-니	-지
DCL	L%		L%
YNQ	H%	H%	HL%
WHQ	LH%	HL%	H%

Table 1. Typical sentence-final tone

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