

Interactional and Rhetorical Functions of *-nka* in Korean

— A Discourse-Based Analysis Across Spoken and
Written Modes

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I. Introduction

The interrogative sentence-final ending *-nka*¹ in Korean represents a particularly interesting case for examining mode-sensitive grammar. Recent corpus-based research by Chae (2024), which analyzed the 21st Century Sejong Corpus, shows that in written Korean corpora, *-neunga/(eu)nga* occurs most frequently (11,162 instances), whereas in spoken corpora *-neunga/(eu)nga* ranks as the second most frequent ending (949 instances). This pattern suggests that *-nka* is a high-frequency, functionally salient ending across both written and spoken modes, making it an ideal target for investigating differences in use across discourse types.

Studies in linguistics and applied linguistics have long emphasized that grammatical forms and structures are shaped by mode, register, and communicative context (Biber, 1988; Biber & Conrad, 2009; Carter, Hughes, & McCarthy, 2000; Chafe, 1994). Spoken grammar is often characterized by immediacy, interactivity, and co-construction, while written grammar exhibits planning, rhetorical organization, and

1 Chae (2024) represents the forms as *-neunga/(eu)nga*. In this study, they are simplified to *-nka* for conciseness, clarity, and consistency with the Yale romanization system.

reader-oriented structuring. These cross-linguistic insights highlight that comparing spoken and written usage of a single grammatical marker can reveal meaningful differences in its functional deployment.

Despite its high frequency and potential as a window into mode-sensitive usage, limited attention has been paid to how *-nka* is employed in contemporary spoken and written Korean. Prior studies have mainly focused on historical development or descriptive categorizations, leaving open questions regarding its interactional and rhetorical functions in authentic discourse.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines *-nka* across spoken and written corpora to explore mode-dependent usage patterns. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. For what interactional or rhetorical purposes is *-nka* employed in spoken and written Korean?
2. How do the frequency and functional distribution of *-nka* differ across these modes?
3. What pedagogical implications can be drawn from these findings for teaching sentence-final endings in Korean language education?

By situating the analysis within a broader framework of spoken vs. written grammar and register-sensitive research, and by building on corpus-based evidence from Chae (2024), this study not only addresses an empirical gap in Korean linguistics but also demonstrates the pedagogical relevance of understanding functional variation in grammatical items across discourse modes.

II. Research Background and Previous Studies

Research in linguistics and applied linguistics has long recognized that grammar varies systematically across mode, register, and genre. Corpus-based studies have shown that spoken and written registers differ not only in lexical and syntactic features but also in functional and interactional aspects. For example, Biber (1988) demonstrated that spoken discourse emphasizes immediacy, interactivity, and co-construction, whereas written discourse relies on planning, hierarchical organization, and rhetorical structuring. Biber & Conrad (2009) further formalized a register framework, showing that different communicative contexts impose specific demands on linguistic forms. Chafe (1994) highlighted how spoken grammar reflects real-time cognitive processes, while written grammar allows for revision and deliberate shaping. Carter et al. (2000) synthesized research on conversational grammar, emphasizing that spoken grammar often operates at a co-constructed, non-sentence-based level, largely absent in written discourse. Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of mode-sensitive analysis for understanding how grammar functions in authentic communication. Insights from these cross-linguistic findings suggest that examining grammar in context is equally crucial in Korean, where sentence-final endings play a central role in managing interaction and conveying pragmatic meaning.

In Korean linguistics, sentence-final endings have been recognized as key sites for examining interactional and pragmatic functions. Empirical conversation-analytic studies show that endings such as *-ci*, *-ney*, and *-kwun(a)* help manage social actions, including signaling epistemic stance, marking speaker awareness, and organizing turn-taking (Chung, 2014; Kim, 2004; Kim, 2010). These findings suggest that Korean grammatical forms cannot be fully explained through structural or dictionary-based descriptions alone; their meanings are dynamically co-constructed within specific discourse

contexts. In this sense, sentence-final endings function as interactional resources that shape the flow of communication rather than as fixed semantic units.

Research on the interrogative ending *-nka* has mostly focused on historical development and functional classification. Lee (2002) examined 15th-century Korean texts and found that *-nka* appeared primarily with first- and third-person subjects, indicating that its addressee-directed, information-seeking function emerged later. Park (1998) and Seo (2008) observed that *-nka* interrogatives generally do not specify a particular addressee and do not consistently expect a response, highlighting their role as issue-raising or self-reflective markers. While these studies provide valuable diachronic and semantic insights, they rely largely on written texts or historical data, leaving contemporary usage in authentic spoken and written discourse underexplored. Understanding how *-nka* operates in real communicative contexts is not only theoretically significant but also has practical implications for language teaching, as learners must navigate subtle distinctions in meaning, stance, and addressee orientation in authentic interactions.

Pedagogical implications of register- and discourse-informed grammar research have also been emphasized. Scholars such as Biber, Conrad, & Reppen (1998) and Carter et al. (2000) emphasize the importance of incorporating authentic spoken and written language data in instruction in order to account for mode-sensitive grammatical use. Studies on Korean sentence-final endings further show that learners face challenges in navigating distinctions in stance, politeness, and addressee orientation. Data-driven, corpus-based approaches can help learners understand how grammatical forms function in real communicative contexts, supporting both pragmatic competence and formal accuracy.

Taken together, the literature highlights three key points. First, spoken and written discourse impose different functional and structural demands on grammar. Second, Korean sentence-final endings

are interactionally and pragmatically rich, requiring analysis within authentic discourse contexts. Third, understanding these discourse-conditioned uses is crucial for designing pedagogically meaningful materials. Despite this, studies examining *-nka* across spoken and written modes using corpus-informed methods remain scarce. The present study addresses this gap by investigating the interactional and rhetorical functions of *-nka* in authentic discourse, bridging theoretical understanding and pedagogical application.

III. Methodology and Data

This study investigates the interactional, epistemic, and rhetorical functions of the Korean sentence-final interrogative ending *-nka* through a discourse-analytic approach, drawing primarily on Conversation Analysis (CA) and insights from Interactional Linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018; Heritage, 2012; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). The analysis is fundamentally qualitative and interpretive, emphasizing sequential organization, action formation, and epistemic stance management.

While CA and interactional discourse analysis are primarily suited to spoken data, the study adopts a mode-sensitive discourse-analytic perspective: in spoken discourse, sequential interaction and action formation are foregrounded, whereas in written discourse, the focus is on rhetorical organization, evaluative stance, and discourse-level communicative functions. This approach allows the study to capture the versatile functions of *-nka* across spoken and written modes without conflating interactional and rhetorical analyses.

1. Methodology

The analysis focuses on four key dimensions. Sequential organi-

zation examines how *-nka* utterances relate to prior talk and project next actions. Action formation considers the social actions *-nka* accomplishes (e.g., information requests, candidate understandings, thinking-aloud, etc.) and how co-participants respond. Epistemic stance investigates how speakers index uncertainty, mitigate claims, or signal limited knowledge, contrasting these conversational uses with the rhetorical functions of *-nka* in written discourse. Mode differences highlight how *-nka* adapts to the co-constructed, real-time nature of spoken interaction versus the monologic, planned structure of written texts. This framework provides a unified account of *-nka*'s flexible, context-sensitive functions across modes.

2. Data

Two corpora representing contrasting discourse modes—spontaneous spoken interaction and planned written discourse—were selected to examine mode-specific functions of *-nka* and to enable a systematic comparison of interactional versus rhetorical uses. The contrast between private telephone conversations and public newspaper articles highlights how *-nka* adapts to distinct communicative ecologies, reflecting differences in interactional constraints, cognitive planning, and discourse organization (Biber, 1988; Biber & Conrad, 2009; Carter et al., 2000; Chafe, 1994).

1) Spoken Corpus

A 91,437-word subset of the Linguistic Data Consortium (LDC) Korean conversational telephone speech corpus was analyzed.² Telephone conversations provide naturally occurring, co-constructed interaction, revealing sequential contingencies and real-time strategies for managing epistemic uncertainty. Spoken excerpts were presented

2 The LDC dataset employed in the present study constitutes a subset of the dataset analyzed in Jeong and Bae (2020).

in a three-tier transcription format (original utterance, Yale romanization-based morphemic/lexical gloss, English translation)³. Transcription focused on lexical content, turn shape, and sequential placement; fine-grained phonetic details, pauses, and overlaps were not systematically annotated. Speaker roles were anonymized as A (caller) and B (receiver) to foreground interactional organization.

2) Written Corpus

A 132,843-word subset of the 21st Century Sejong Corpus, consisting of newspaper articles, was examined. Written examples were formatted using the same three-tier structure—original text, Yale romanization-based gloss, and English translation—to ensure comparability with the spoken data.⁴ As planned, public-facing discourse, these texts provide an environment in which *-nka* fulfills primarily rhetorical, evaluative, and stance-marking functions rather than turn-by-turn interactional ones.

3) Token Identification and Selection

All instances of *-nka* used as sentence-final interrogatives were identified using AntConc. Tokens in subordinate clauses were excluded to avoid conflating structurally constrained forms with clause-final interactional or rhetorical uses. A total of 57 spoken tokens and 64 written tokens were retained.

3 Transcription abbreviations follow the conventions in Sohn (1999). The abbreviations used in the examples, listed in alphabetical order, are as follows:

COMM = committal suffix; **DC** = declarative sentence-type suffix; **GN** = genitive particle; **INT** = intimate speech level/suffix; **NM** = nominative case particle; **PST** = past-tense suffix; **Q** = question marker; **RT** = retrospective mood suffix; **TC** = topic-contrast particle.

4 Written examples follow the same three-tier format and transcription abbreviations as noted in Footnote 2.

IV. Data Analysis

This section presents a systematic analysis of the interactional and discourse-pragmatic functions of *-nka* across spoken and written registers. Building on the methodological framework outlined in Section 3, the analysis focuses on how speakers and authors employ *-nka* to organize epistemic stance, manage participation, and frame social action. The findings are organized into two major functional categories: other-/self-addressed interrogative enders. Within the first category, four subtypes—information-seeking, confirmation-seeking, rhetorical, and issue-raising—are distinguished based on interactional context and pragmatic intention.

1. Interactional Functions of *-nka*

The functional categorization of *-nka* emerged from careful examination of speakers' purposes in deploying *-nka*-marked interrogatives and of recipients' uptake in subsequent turns. While *-nka* is conventionally treated as an interrogative marker in Korean grammar descriptions, the corpus data demonstrate that its functions extend beyond information elicitation, encompassing stance display, alignment-seeking, and issue framing. The following subsections discuss each function with representative examples drawn from the LDC spoken corpus and the Sejong written corpus.

1) *-nka* as an Other-Addressed Interrogative Ender

(a) Information-seeking interrogatives ender (ISIE)

In its prototypical interrogative function, *-nka* occurs in questions genuinely addressed to an interlocutor who is presumed to possess relevant knowledge. In such contexts, *-nka* explicitly signals epistemic asymmetry, whereby the speaker designates the addressee as the more knowledgeable party (Heritage, 2012; Raymond & Heri-

tage, 2006). This usage was observed exclusively in spoken discourse, highlighting the interactive negotiation of information between participants.

Example 1 (excerpted from LDC corpus)

- 01 A: yocum ku phd kwaceng kathun kyengwu
 Recently that Ph.D. course like case
- 02 ettehkey mwe hakpi poco kathun kulen-key
 how well tuition aidlike that-thing
- 03 wenhwalha-**nka** yocum?
 go smoothly-**nka** recently
 So, recently, what's going on with the- something like the financial aids
 in Ph.D. programs?
- 04 B: ((breath)) ku hakkyo-mata cokumssik taruntey,
 ((breath)) that school-ever little by little different
 Each school is more or less different,

Example 1 illustrates this canonical function. Speaker A asks about the current status of financial aid in Ph.D. programs, directly seeking information that B is presumed to know. B's immediate provision of the requested information confirms that the *-nka*-marked question functions as a prototypical information-request, facilitating the transfer of knowledge from a more informed to a less informed interlocutor within a collaborative discourse setting.

(b) Confirmation-seeking interrogatives (CSIE)

A second subtype involves situations where the speaker has a tentative hypothesis or partial knowledge and seeks the addressee's confirmation. This aligns with Yoon's (2010) notion of *confirmation request questions*, in which the speaker displays a candidate understanding while requesting validation.

Although prior descriptions of *-nka* have not highlighted this function, the spoken data contain numerous tokens where *-nka* indexes epistemic uncertainty combined with a candidate proposal. In Example 2, Speaker A produces a tentative guess (“Art of Fighting”) and formats it with *-nka*, inviting B to confirm or correct it.

Example 2 (excerpted from LDC corpus)

01 A: e ((laugh)) kulego tto mwe iss-ci?
 Uh ((laugh)) and also what be-Q:COMM
 Uh ((laugh)) what else is there?

02 B: ((laugh))

03 A: e Art of Art kuke mwe-tela Art of Fighting i-**nka**?
 Uh art of art that what-RT:Q Art of Fighting be-**nka**
 Uh, Art of, Art, what was that? Is that Art of Fighting?

04 B: Art of Fight

05 A: ung.
 Yes.

In Example 2, although A does not recall the exact title of the video game, he nevertheless displays a partial understanding of the target information by producing a candidate answer, *Art of Fighting*, in line 3. This practice—formulating a candidate understanding for the recipient to confirm or disconfirm—is a well-documented interactional resource in spoken discourse, as speakers routinely propose “candidate answers to seek validation from more knowledgeable interlocutors (cf. Heritage, 2012, on epistemic gradients). This pattern contrasts with Example 1, where the speaker poses an information-seeking interrogative without offering any tentative formulation of the sought-after information.

In line 4, B responds by rejecting and correcting A’s candidate answer, replacing *Art of Fighting* with *Art of Fight*. This correction

indexes B's epistemic authority regarding the lexical item in question. Subsequently, A produces the acceptance token *ung* ('yes'), ratifying B's correction and thereby orienting to B's higher epistemic status in this local domain of knowledge. The exchange illustrates how *-nka* can function as a confirmation-seeking interrogative ender (CSIE): its use simultaneously conveys the speaker's uncertainty and invites the recipient's epistemic confirmation, situating the interlocutors within an asymmetrical but collaborative knowledge organization.

(c) Rhetorical interrogatives (RIE)

Third, *-nka* also appears as a rhetorical interrogative ender (RIE), marking interrogatives whose primary function is not to elicit information but to convey a stance or pursue affiliation from the addressee. Although this use shares with information-seeking and confirmation-seeking *-nka* the surface feature of being directed toward the addressee/reader, it differs fundamentally in that the speaker does not project a response. Instead, rhetorical *-nka* functions to foreground the speaker's evaluative or affective stance toward a proposition, while implicitly inviting the addressee's alignment. Such usage aligns with prior observations that rhetorical questions operate as stance displays and affiliative bids rather than as genuine information requests (Koshik, 2005).

Examples 3 and 4—taken from the spoken and written corpora, respectively—illustrate this rhetorical deployment of *-nka*. Consider Example 3. In the preceding interaction, B has announced the decision to move out of his current residence. In response to this news, A asks in line 1 where B plans to live after moving out. Following A's inquiry, B explains in line 2-3 that he can rent an apartment designated for unmarried students.

Example 3 (excerpted from LDC corpus)

01 A :	kurem	ne-nun	eti	ka-se	sal-lye-ko?
	If so	you-TC	where	go-and	live-will-Q

If so, where will you live?

02 B : e, hon- honca

uh, alo- alone

03 tunggal apathu et-ese sal-myen toy-ci,
single apartment get-and live-so become-INT:COMM,
Uh, I can get any apartments for unmarried students in any places and
live there alone.

04 mwe kuke mwen mwuncey-**nka**#?

what that problem problem-**nka**

Is that a problem?

05 A : tunggal apatu iss-e? ku-tongney-ey?

unmarried apartment to be-Q that-neighborhood-in

Is there an apartment for unmarried students in your neighborhood?

In line 4, B then produces the rhetorical interrogative *mwe kuke mwen mwuncey-nka?* ('Is that a problem?'), employing *-nka* to articulate a stance of confidence and to downplay any potential difficulty. Crucially, B does not issue this interrogative with the expectation that A will answer; rather, it serves as a stance-laden assertion packaged in interrogative form. This is evidenced by A's subsequent action in line 4: instead of responding to B's question, A initiates a new course of action by posing another question. B's *-nka*-marked interrogative in line 4 therefore operates as a rhetorical device that upgrades and strengthens his position more forcefully than a simple declarative would allow. In this respect, rhetorical *-nka* can be understood as a resource for epistemic and affective positioning, used to project a strong stance while simultaneously inviting tacit affiliation from the interlocutor.

Example 4 presents a parallel case from the written corpus, where the author articulates a strong affective stance toward South Korea's first victory in the 2002 World Cup. In this instance, the rhetorical

interrogative marked with the sentence-final ending *-nka* does not serve to solicit factual information but instead functions as a resource for amplifying evaluative and emotional meaning in written discourse.

Example 4 (excerpted from 21st C. Sejong Corpus)

01. “o! chessung” 4700 man-i haynay-ss-ta.
 “oh!, first win” 47 million-NM accomplish-PST-DC
 Oh, it’s the first victory! 47,000,000 people altogether accomplished it!
02. “kolin, kolin~” elmana kitaly-ess-te-**nka?**
 “goal in, goal in~” How long wait-PST-RT-**nka**
 Goal! Goal! How long have we been waiting?

In line 2, the author poses the question *elmana kitaly-ess-te-nka?* (‘How long have we been waiting?’). Although grammatically interrogative, the utterance does not function as an information-seeking request, as no concrete response is expected from the reader. Rather, the rhetorical question serves to dramatize the prolonged anticipation collectively experienced by the Korean people prior to the victory—a discourse function widely observed in rhetorical questions across languages, which often operate as stance-bearing assertions rather than genuine inquiries (Koshik, 2005). By invoking a shared temporal and emotional trajectory, the utterance intensifies the sense of collective joy and national elation, encompassing both the author and the wider readership. Through this construction, the sentence-final ending *-nka* contributes to an affect-laden narrative voice that foregrounds the author’s stance while simultaneously inviting readers to align with this shared affective experience (Du Bois, 2007).

(d) Issue-raising interrogatives (IRIE)

A fourth functional domain in which the sentence-final ending *-nka* appears is what may be termed issue-raising interrogatives (IRIE). In this usage, *-nka* does not serve to elicit information or confirm

a candidate answer but to introduce a socially salient question for public consideration. While rhetorical interrogatives (*-nka* used as RIE) primarily function to dramatize the speaker's affective stance and invite readers to align emotionally, issue-raising *-nka*-questions serve a distinct purpose: they urge readers to critically reflect on the issue being foregrounded rather than to affiliate with the author's emotional evaluation. In this sense, IRIEs operate as stance-guiding devices that frame a public problem and encourage broader engagement with it.

This interpretation aligns with observations in discourse-pragmatic studies showing that interrogatives in public or journalistic writing often function as issue-framing rather than information-seeking acts, prompting readers to consider the author's framing of a social or political matter (Ilie, 1999). Consistent with Seo's (1999) description in *The Learner's Dictionary of Korean*, this issue-raising function of *-nka* was attested only in the written corpus, particularly in contexts where authors seek to stimulate critical reflection on matters of public concern.

Example 5 (excerpted from 21st C. Sejong Corpus)

01	sintang-changtang-uy	tayuymyengpwun-un		kwayen
	mwuess-i- nka ?			
	A new party-form-GN	great justification-TC	really	what-be- nka
	What would the great cause of forming a new party?			

In Example 5, drawn from a newspaper article, the author employs an *-nka*-marked interrogative to question the political legitimacy behind the merger of two opposition parties during a presidential campaign. By asking *kwayen mwuess-i-nka?* ('What would be the great cause?'), the author does not anticipate a direct answer from readers; nor does the question function to mobilize an emotional response, as in rhetorical interrogatives. Instead, the interrogative raises an issue for collective consideration, prompting readers to evaluate

the underlying rationale for the party merger. The subsequent discourse elaborates on the author's critical viewpoint, thereby encouraging readers to engage in reasoned reflection and potentially align with the author's evaluative position.

By functioning as an IRIE, *-nka* thus serves as a discursive resource for issue formulation and stance-guided interpretation in written public discourse.

2) *-nka* as a Self-Addressed Interrogative Ender

In addition to its role as an other-addressed interrogative ender, *-nka* also appears as a self-addressed interrogative in the spoken corpus. In this function, it indexes the speaker's uncertainty about propositional content, serving as a mechanism for self-directed questioning rather than eliciting information from a listener. Chae (2024), building on her earlier work (Chae, 2023) and prior Korean linguistics studies, notes that self-directed *-nka* functions soliloquy-like, reflecting internal evaluation without presupposing a listener's contribution. While sharing features with confirmation-seeking interrogatives in expressing epistemic uncertainty, self-addressed *-nka* differs in that it is oriented to the speaker themselves, signaling an introspective, evaluative stance.

Previous research consistently recognizes this introspective function, highlighting *-nka*'s role in self-reflection and knowledge monitoring (Jeong & Bae, 2020; Lee, 2002; Sohn, 1999). Cross-linguistically, self-directed questions similarly allow speakers to manage cognitive and epistemic states—articulating uncertainty, confirming tentative knowledge to themselves, or planning discourse moves (Heritage, 2012; Stivers & Sidnell, 2005). In Korean, self-addressed *-nka* likewise externalizes internal deliberation and facilitates monitoring of knowledge without presupposing a responsive addressee.

Example 6 from the spoken corpus illustrates this use: Speaker A inquires about the starting date of her husband's school (line 1), posing a question within her own information domain.

Example 6 (excerpted from LDC corpus)

- 01 A: Sinlang-un encey hakkyo ka?
Husband-TC when school goes?
When does your husband start to go to school?
- 02 B: Sip, sip-yuk il-i-**nka**?
Ten, ten-six(sixteen) day-be-**nka**?
Is it the sixteenth?
- 03 Ku-ttay-pwute kayhak-i-ya
That-time-from starts school-be-INT
He starts to go to school from that date.

Here, B's utterance indicates uncertainty regarding the specific date. Crucially, this question is not addressed to A, as the requested information falls outside A's domain of knowledge; B does not expect A to provide a response. Instead, B employs *-nka* to externally articulate internal evaluation, effectively monitoring her own knowledge state. Subsequently, B continues the narrative without waiting for or receiving confirmation from A, demonstrating the monologic, self-reflective nature of this function of *-nka*.

This example highlights that self-addressed *-nka* allows speakers to manage and express epistemic uncertainty independently within spontaneous discourse, without presupposing an interactive addressee. The utterance thus functions as a cognitive and discursive tool, enabling speakers to articulate, test, and monitor their own knowledge while maintaining the flow of discourse. This observation corroborates the broader typological pattern of *-nka* as a self-addressed interrogative ender, complementing its interactive, other-directed uses.

2. Functional Distribution of *-nka* Across Modes

This section examines how the interrogative ender *-nka* is functionally distributed across spoken and written discourse, based on the

functional categories identified in Section IV.1. By comparing the relative frequencies and discourse environments in which *-nka* occurs, this study clarifies how the form is differentially mobilized depending on the epistemic, interactional, and institutional expectations associated with conversational interaction and journalistic writing.

1) Overall Distribution Across Discourse Types

The frequency distribution of *-nka* in spoken and written data is summarized in Table 1. As shown, spoken discourse exhibits both other-addressed and self-addressed uses of *-nka*, whereas written discourse exclusively employs *-nka* as an other-addressed interrogative ender.

Table 1. Functional distribution of *-nka* as other-/self-addressed interrogative ender across spoken and written discourses

Type	Other-addressed	Self-addressed	Total
Spoken	36 (63.2%)	21 (36.8%)	57 (100%)
Written	64 (100%)	0 (0%)	64 (100%)

The absence of self-addressed *-nka* in written data aligns with the institutional expectations of newspaper writing. Self-directed questions typically index epistemic uncertainty or internal deliberation, functions well documented in conversational studies (Heritage, 2012). Because journalistic discourse requires writers to project epistemic authority and present information coherently, the display of uncertainty through self-addressed *-nka* is incompatible with the professional persona expected of journalists.

In contrast, spoken conversation affords a wider range of epistemic practices—including self-monitoring, hesitation, and knowledge checks—allowing speakers to use *-nka* to externalize internal cognition. This asymmetry reflects well-established distinctions between spoken and written registers (Biber, 1995; Chafe & Daniele-

wicz, 1987), particularly the relative spontaneity of talk and the monologic, argumentative nature of news writing.

2) Distribution of Other-addressed *-nka* Across Functional Subtypes

Table 2 provides the functional distribution of the four subcategories of other-addressed *-nka*: (a) information-seeking interrogatives (ISIE), (b) confirmation-seeking interrogatives (CSIE), (c) rhetorical interrogatives (RIE), and (d) issue-raising interrogatives (IRIE).

Table 2. Functional distribution of *-nka* as other-addressed interrogative ender across spoken and written discourses

	ISIE	CSIE	RIE	IRIE	Total
Spoken	7 (19.4%)	27 (75%)	2 (5.6%)	0 (0%)	36 (100%)
Written	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	33 (51.6%)	31(48.4 %)	64 (100%)

(a) Information-seeking interrogatives (ISIE)

In spoken conversation, ISIE accounts for only 19.4% of the *-nka* tokens. This finding aligns closely with Yoon's (2010) empirical observation that information-requesting is not the most frequent action accomplished by interrogatives in Korean conversation. Based on an extensive analysis of naturally occurring spoken interaction, Yoon (2010) reports that although information-seeking is commonly assumed to be the prototypical function of questions, only 31% of all Korean interrogatives actually perform information-requesting actions. The remaining majority are used for socially and epistemically more complex purposes—such as stance display, alignment seeking, and managing shared knowledge—which exceed the narrow function of soliciting new information.

Against this backdrop, the fact that *-nka* is used for ISIE in only 7 out of 36 spoken tokens (less than 20%) is fully consistent with Yoon's distribution: *-nka*, when deployed in conversation, participates more

prominently in epistemic negotiation and stance management rather than straightforward information requests.

In written discourse, no instances of ISIE were found. This is expected given the institutional orientation of journalistic writing: journalists are positioned as providers of information, and therefore the use of interrogatives to solicit information from readers is pragmatically and institutionally incongruous.

(b) Confirmation-seeking interrogatives (CSIE)

Spoken discourse shows a strong preference for CSIE (75%). This mirrors findings in question design research showing that speakers frequently use interrogative forms to seek acknowledgment, alignment, or confirmation regarding shared knowledge, especially in informal or collaborative tasks (Raymond & Heritage, 2006; Enfield, 2010).

In contrast, written discourse shows no instances of CSIE, consistent with the journalistic need to maintain an authoritative epistemic stance. Directly seeking confirmation from readers would violate the epistemic asymmetry central to news reporting, where writers—not readers—are positioned as knowledge providers.

(c) Rhetorical interrogatives (RIE)

A striking contrast emerges in the distribution of rhetorical interrogative enders (RIE), with 5.6% in spoken discourse and 51.6% in written discourse. Rhetorical interrogatives are a well-known device for stance expression, argument structuring, and reader alignment in opinion writing and persuasive discourse (Frank, 1990). Thus, their prominence in journalistic writing is consistent with the argumentative functions of editorials and political commentary.

In casual conversation, RIE is rare because interlocutors typically do not orient to strong argumentative positioning, especially among intimates or peers where affiliative talk and progressivity take precedence.

(d) Issue-raising interrogatives (IRIE)

IRIE occurs only in written discourse (48.4%). This form is characteristic of discourse that seeks to introduce public issues, open argumentative space, and frame topics for further discussion, functions typical of newspaper articles discussing societal problems.

To determine whether IRIE might appear in other types of spoken institutional discourse (e.g., lectures, presentations), four lecture/presentation texts from the 21st Sejong Corpus (10,685 words) were examined. Only two instances of *-nka* were found, both occurring when a professor read aloud written material (e.g., textbook headings). This suggests that IRIE is fundamentally a written discourse phenomenon, tied to monologic issue-framing rather than spontaneous interaction.

3) Summary of Distributional Patterns

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the distribution of *-nka* arises from the interplay of epistemic asymmetries, mode-specific interactional affordances, and institutional role expectations. In spoken interaction, where knowledge is negotiated moment by moment, *-nka* is mobilized for a wide array of epistemic actions such as self-monitoring and confirmation-checking. In contrast, written discourse—constrained by monologic reasoning and an authoritative stance—restricts its use primarily to rhetorical and issue-raising functions. These contrasts indicate that the functional patterning of *-nka* is not merely a case of linguistic variation but a window into the interactional organization that differentiates spoken and written communicative environments.

V. Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

1. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications for teaching the sentence-final ending *-nka* in Korean. Although *-nka* belongs to a familiar speech style and occurs less frequently than polite or intimate forms in everyday interaction (Ko & Ku, 2008), it remains functionally significant in both spoken and written discourse. Its instruction is therefore relevant not merely for stylistic completeness but for understanding how Korean speakers manage stance, epistemicity, and discourse organization.

A central pedagogical point concerns *-nka*'s multifunctionality. In spoken discourse, it serves not only as an information-seeking marker but also to express epistemic uncertainty, seek confirmation, and formulate self-addressed questions, reflecting speakers' moment-by-moment management of knowledge and social action. Instruction should move beyond presenting *-nka* as a simple interrogative and instead address its context-sensitive meanings.

Genre-sensitive instruction is also important. In spontaneous conversation, *-nka* frequently appears where speakers display limited knowledge, check assumptions, or verbalize internal reasoning—practices widely documented in Conversation Analysis as key resources for negotiating alignment and epistemic asymmetries (Schegloff, 2007; Stivers & Rossano, 2010). Teaching materials should show learners how to use *-nka* to signal tentativeness, manage uncertainty, and coordinate perspectives.

In contrast, in newspaper discourse, *-nka* primarily functions rhetorically and evaluatively, raising issues, framing arguments, and guiding reader interpretation, consistent with studies on rhetorical questions in persuasive discourse (Frank, 1990). For advanced learners, instruction should emphasize its role in argumentative structure,

issue-framing, and projecting authoritative stance.

Taken together, instruction on *-nka* should address:

- Interactional uses in spoken discourse: indicating uncertainty, seeking confirmation, and formulating self-directed questioning;
- Rhetorical and evaluative uses in written discourse: raising issues, structuring arguments, and displaying stance;
- Functional and distributional differences across discourse genres, enabling learners to understand why *-nka* appears frequently in some registers but not others.

By foregrounding the relationship between linguistic form, epistemic meaning, and discourse context—a principle emphasized in usage-based and interactionally informed pedagogies—Korean language instruction can better prepare learners to interpret and produce *-nka* appropriately. Its pedagogical significance lies not merely in style, but in revealing the interactional and rhetorical work that sentence-final endings accomplish across communicative settings.

2. Conclusion

This study investigated the interactional and rhetorical functions of the Korean interrogative ending *-nka* across spontaneous spoken interaction and planned written discourse. Drawing on discourse analysis and conversation analysis, the findings demonstrate that the meaning of *-nka* is not inherent to the form itself but emerges through its alignment with epistemic stance, interactional contingencies, and genre-specific communicative goals. These results underscore the importance of analyzing sentence-final endings as usage-based, context-sensitive resources rather than as fixed semantic units.

In spoken telephone conversations, *-nka* was closely tied to real-time epistemic management. Speakers employed the ending to display uncertainty, seek confirmation, and monitor the epistemic status

of their claims, thereby coordinating mutual understanding within the sequential organization of talk. In contrast, written newspaper discourse revealed a predominantly rhetorical use of *-nka*, where it functioned to raise issues, structure argumentation, and position readers within the writer's evaluative stance. This cross-mode contrast illustrates how the same grammatical form adapts to distinct interactional and institutional demands.

By juxtaposing spoken and written data, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the functional flexibility of Korean sentence-final endings and affirms the value of integrating conversation analysis and interactional linguistics into Korean grammar research. Examining *-nka* as an interactionally mobilized resource reveals dimensions of meaning that are not readily captured by structural descriptions or frequency-based corpus analyses alone.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that instruction on *-nka* should move beyond formal description to address the discourse environments that shape its interpretation. Rather than proposing direct classroom applications, this study aims to provide an empirical and analytical foundation for pedagogical design by clarifying how *-nka* indexes epistemic stance in conversation and frames argumentative positioning in written discourse. Future research can build on these findings to develop learner-level- and genre-sensitive instructional models.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the number of analyzed tokens constrains the generalizability of the findings. While the present analysis prioritizes depth and functional consistency across spoken and written modes, expanding the dataset would facilitate finer-grained functional distinctions and comparisons with other sentence-final and connective endings, positioning *-nka* within the broader system of Korean clause-linking and stance-marking resources. Second, although efforts were made to minimize temporal variation by selecting spoken and written corpora from broadly comparable periods, the data do not fully reflect the most recent patterns

of language use. Accordingly, future studies should incorporate more contemporaneous spoken corpora, including newly constructed datasets, alongside up-to-date written materials to achieve tighter control over diachronic variables.

In sum, this study demonstrates that *-nka* is a multifunctional interrogative ending whose meanings are dynamically shaped by epistemic stance, interactional participation, and discourse goals. Extending this line of inquiry to additional genres—such as broadcast media, digital communication, and academic writing—will further illuminate how Korean sentence-final endings adapt to evolving communicative ecologies and support a more comprehensive, usage-based account of Korean grammar.

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한국어 ‘-니까’의 상호작용 및 수사적 기능 — 구어와 문화 담화 양식 비교 분석

정승곤·배은영

본 연구는 한국어 의문형 종결어미 ‘-니까’가 구어와 문어 담화에서 어떠한 방식으로 기능하는지를 분석하고, 상호작용적 용도, 양식별 분포 양상, 그리고 교육적 함의를 중심으로 세 가지 연구 문제를 검토하였다. 이를 위해 구어 전화 대화와 문어 신문 기사 텍스트를 분석 대상으로 삼아 서로 다른 담화 생태를 포착하고자 하였다. 연구 자료는 Linguistic Data Consortium(LDC) 코퍼스와 세종 코퍼스에서 추출하였으며, 담화 분석과 상호작용 분석에 기반한 질적 연구 방법을 통해 ‘-니까’의 기능적 사용 양상을 규명하였다. 분석 결과, ‘-니까’는 구어 상호작용에서는 불확실성의 관리, 확인 요청, 자기지향적 질문 형성 등의 기능을 수행하는 반면, 문어 담화에서는 필자의 태도 표명과 연관된 수사적·쟁점 제기 기능으로 주로 사용되는 것으로 나타났다. 이러한 결과는 ‘-니까’의 교수·학습에서 형식적 의미 설명을 넘어 장르별 기능과 인식적 태도(epistemic stance)의 조절을 함께 다룰 필요가 있음을 시사한다. 이를 바탕으로 본 연구는 한국어 종결어미 교육에서 담화 맥락을 통합적으로 반영하는 교수 접근의 교육적 가치를 강조한다.

핵심어 니까, 의문형 종결어미, 인식적 태도, 담화 분석, 구어-문어 양식, 한국어교육

ABSTRACT

Interactional and Rhetorical Functions of *-nka* in Korean

— A Discourse-Based Analysis Across Spoken and Written Modes

Jeong, Seunggon · Bae, Eunyung

This study examines how the Korean interrogative ending *-nka* functions across spoken and written discourse and addresses three research questions concerning its interactional purposes, mode-specific distribution, and pedagogical implications. Spoken telephone conversations and written newspaper texts were analyzed to capture distinct discourse ecologies. Using data drawn from the Linguistic Data Consortium (LDC) Corpus and the Sejong Corpus, the study conducted a qualitative discourse- and interaction-based analysis to identify the functional patterns of *-nka*. The findings show that *-nka* is used in spoken interaction to manage uncertainty, seek confirmation, and formulate self-addressed questioning, whereas in written discourse it serves rhetorical and issue-raising purposes tied to stance-taking. These results suggest that teaching *-nka* requires attention to genre-specific functions and epistemic stance management. The study thereby highlights the pedagogical value of integrating discourse context into instruction on sentence-final endings in Korean.

KEYWORDS *-nka*, interrogative ending, epistemic stance, discourse analysis, spoken-written mode, Korean language pedagogy