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The Grammatical and Moral Order of Language Change: The Metapragmatics of Samwul Contay ('Inanimate Object Honorifics') in Korean

Abstract

“Death, taxes and language change” (Silva 2010) neatly summarizes the accepted and empirically established position within linguistics that language change is an inevitability, or what Lippi-Green (1997) refers to as a “linguistic fact of life” (Lippi-Green 1997). However, the inevitability of language change is of course not always accepted at the folk linguistic level, in other words, in the way that everyday language users perceive such change, or the ways in which language authorities attempt to police it. Language change may face resistance or even rejection at the folk linguistic level, particularly when it is perceived as breaking abstracted rules of grammar and established moral orders.

Against this backdrop, this study uses critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 2013) to analyze metapragmatic discourse in South Korean society regarding samwul contay: a recent innovation in the usage of grammaticized honorific markers. With the literal meaning of ‘inanimate object respect’, samwul contay refers to the application of subject honorifics in situations where an inanimate object (rather than the intended human target of the honorification) appears in subject position. Prevalent in sales talk, this produces sentences such as *khephi-ka nao-si-ess-supnita* ‘coffee is.ready-HON’ which, in a literal sense, pay respect to the inanimate sentence subject (in this case, ‘coffee’) rather than the customer. Samwul contay has been viewed within Korean linguistics as representing a shift from subject honorifics to addressee honorifics.

The metapragmatic analysis shows that the South Korean media and language authorities (i.e. The National Institute for Korean Language and other pressure groups) utilized discourses of ungrammaticality and immorality to delegitimize the emergence of samwul contay. Invoking ideologies of grammatical agreement and literal readings of samwul contay sentences, the materials build interdiscursive connections between the perceived misuse of honorifics and wider social problems related to consumerism, individualism and westernization. The analysis confirms the normalizing function and value-based nature of folk linguistic metadiscourses on language change (Cameron 1995), as well as the importance of moral (and grammatical) orders in the metapragmatics of politeness (Haugh and Kadar 2013).