The Social Meanings of Korean Honorifics

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[Abstract]

Previous research on Korean honorifics has tended to focus on the grammatical organization of honorific forms, the pragmatic usage of honorifics according to socially normative convention and the prototypical expressive meanings of honorifics, often assumed to be “deference”, “respect” and/or “politeness”. Only recently, research has started to look at how honorifics as indexical forms can in fact communicate a wider range of context-specific meanings and can be used to say something about the speaker’s own identity. It is these “social meanings” of honorifics that become the focus for this paper. I ask the question: What does it “mean” for a speaker to use honorifics according to prescriptive norms? And: What “meanings” can a speaker produce by varying their use of honorific forms and/or departing from the prescriptive standard? Finally, I discuss how honorifics are tied up with gendered meanings in Korean speech and how phonetics may be playing a role.