Evolution of Korean Honorifics: A Grammaticalization Perspective

Abstract

Korean honorifics are assumed to have evolved due essentially to the three language/culture-specific and interdependent forces, i.e. structural, socio-cultural and interactional, as well as the strong language-universal principles and processes of grammaticalization. Structural forces are the agglutinative, predicate-final, and head-final morpho-syntactic nature of Korean. This typological saliency is a crucial condition for the germination of honorific affixes and particles. Socio-cultural forces are the traditional and contemporary socio-cultural values and norms of hierarchism and collectivism, which underlie the genesis of honorifics in Korean, as language is regarded as reflecting culture and society. Interactional forces are speaker-hearers’ interpersonal relations and dynamic communicative interactions in various discourse contexts, which lead to the development of (inter)subjectified linguistic elements such as addressee and referent honorifics. It is assumed that, based on these three underlying forces, the universal principles and processes of grammaticalization have derived stage-by-stage honorifics in Korean. The present paper is an attempt to account for the evolution of Korean honorifics along the lines of the above hypotheses and thus provide some principled bases to account for the evolution of Korean honorifics and to reconcile the divergent claims advanced by different scholars.