

<HONORIFICS AND SPEECH STYLES>

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In any language, there are differences in speech that depend upon relative social rank. In English, choosing to call the other person by a first name instead of a title plus last name is a speech style decision of this kind. Telemarketers who use the first name of a potential customer are saying, "Now relax; I'm using an intimate style because there are no social barriers between us." Such people are using the linguistic rules of society for their own commercial purposes. But there is relatively little differentiation by social rank in America in any case. It often happens, for example, that one is on a first-name basis within a few hours of meeting, even when the other person is seven or eight years older, or is even one's teacher.¹⁾ Such a thing would be unimaginable in Korea. In Korea, one would never call someone five or six years older, or one's teacher, by their first name, nor would one ever address that person by the intimate-style pronoun, *ne* 'you'. (The meaning of this pronoun is roughly similar to that of French *tu* or German *du*.) For Korean students, among the most exotic experiences they have when studying abroad in America are the universal use of the pronoun "you," and calling one's professor by his or her first name. For them, the only form of address they have ever known for teachers is *sensayng-nim* [literally,] 'respected teacher'. It is not even permissible for the students to add the teacher's surname to that title and say, for example, *Kim sensayng-nim* 'Professor Kim'²⁾; nor can they use a second-person pronoun, even one that might otherwise be considered similar to French *vous* or German *Sie*. These interpersonal rules never change, even if the student himself later becomes president of the teacher's university or of the nation; the teacher from one's student days must always be called *sensayng-nim*.

In this way, the Korean language strictly reflects the hierarchical order. Speech styles are divided according to a system of honorifics, and this system is complex and richly textured. In fact, it may well be that no language on earth has a more finely differentiated system of honorifics. Only Japanese is of a similar level of complexity. Even the famous honorific distinctions of Javanese appear to be of a much simpler dimension than those of Korean. Korean society accepts as a norm a complexity of honorific language mastered completely by few Koreans but to which the majority of its citizens aspire. This chapter is devoted to those norms, and the extent to which they are used in everyday life.

1. PRONOUNS

In many languages, second-person pronouns are divided into a plain and an honorific form. In French there is *tu* and *vous*, in Italian *tu* and *Lei*, in German *du* and *Sie*, in Russian *ты* and *вы*; these are typical of European languages. English is of course the exception, but in the past it, too, had a similar distinction between "thou" and "you." The use of different expressions depending on rank is commonly found in the pronouns of a language.

In the honorific system of Korean, second-person pronouns are also differentiated by rank, but the distinctions are not confined to a two-way one between plain and honorific. For example, if the sentence "Is this your book?" were a translation from Korean, at least six different words could be what is represented by "your." Which of the six pronouns "your" represents would depend upon the speech style--and thus the relative rank of the person being addressed:

- (1) a. 이거 너-의 책-이니?
Ike ne uy chayk ini? (*Panmal* or Plain Style)
- b. 이거 자네 책-인가?
Ike caney chayk inka? (Familiar)
- c. 이거 당신 책-이오?
Ike tangsin chayk io? (Semiformal)
- d. 이거 택-의 책-입니까?
Ike tayk uy chayk ipnikka? (Polite or Formal)
- e. 이거 어르신-의 책-입니까?
Ike elusin uy chayk ipnikka? (Formal)

In other words, depending on that other person's rank, "you" could correspond to *ne*, *caney*, *tangsin*, *tayk*, or--being extremely polite, as, for example, to an elderly patriarch--*elusin*. The pronoun *ne*, which is the most intimate, is used with one's friend or one's son or daughter or a child, and as one progresses through each of the other pronouns, the social rank of the other person rises correspondingly.

To a certain extent, focusing upon pronominal differences to examine the Korean honorific system reflects a bit of Western-language bias, for the weight of

the Korean honorific system does not rest solely, or even primarily, upon second-person pronouns. In fact, some sociolinguistic distinctions are not covered by pronoun use at all. In a great many cases it is not permissible to use a pronoun, and some other kind of appellation, a title or the like, must be used instead. There are many constraints on pronouns.

First, the pronoun *caney* is commonly used, for example, by university professors to address their students. This usage contrasts with that of elementary and secondary school teachers, who use the more intimate *ne*, and the shift to a different style at the university level is undoubtedly because the students are then considered to be no longer children. The fact that elementary school teachers address their former students in their thirties or forties as *caney* shows this generalization to be true. However, there must be a fairly great difference in age--say around twenty years or so--for the older person to use *caney*. The younger person cannot be as young as a middle or high school student, and even a senior professor has to be careful using *caney* with an unfamiliar person past his thirties. The reason is that, though it may be polite to use *caney* to a person of the right age, to a certain extent, the pronoun also signals that the other person has a social rank below that of the speaker. In short, the pronoun *caney* expresses an age difference, but it also implies that the speaker is in a position of authority, and for that reason it can offend the sensibilities of the other person if not used with care.

The pronoun *tangsin* is typically used by middle-aged and older married couples to address each other.³⁾ In addition, it is commonly used in advertising and in the titles of books to refer to an unspecified reader.

- (2) a. 당신의 고민을 덜어드립니다. (a newspaper ad)

Tangsin uy komin ul tel.etulipnita.

‘(We) will eliminate your pain.’

- b. 당신의 우리말 실력은? (a book title)

Tangsin uy wuli-mal sillyek un?

‘(How is) your Korean ability?’

However, *tangsin* must be used with great care when speaking to someone in ordinary, daily conversations. This pronoun may indicate a higher social rank than *ne* or *caney*, but the elevation is not of a particularly great degree, and the person hearing it might feel that he is not being treated with enough respect; therefore, *tangsin* can cause some feeling of discomfort. The kind of retort seen in

(3a), below, is actually quite common, and in disputes like those in (3b, c) the pronoun *tangsin* is habitually used as a sign of some disrespect.

- (3) a. 누구더러 ‘당신’이라는 거야?
Nwukwu tele ‘tangsin’ ilanun ke 'ya?
‘Who are you calling ‘*tangsin*’?’
- b. 당신 같은 사람은 처음 보겠어.
Tangsin kath.un salam un cheum pokeyss.e.
‘I’ve never seen anyone like you (*tangsin*).’
- c. 당신이 뭔데 이래라 저래라 하는 거야?
Tangsin i mwe 'ntey ilay la celay la hanun ke 'ya?
‘Who do you think you are, doing whatever you want?’
[literally, ‘What are you (*tangsin*), ...’]

One additional and particularly nettlesome complication is that *tangsin* is usually considered the nearest Korean equivalent to English "you". As a result, when confronted by a Korean-speaking foreigner, many Koreans habitually incorporate the pronoun into their speech in places where often no pronoun would be required at all. Since it is in any case difficult for Koreans to know where in the social hierarchy these outsiders belong, the social signals of the pronoun becomes garbled, to say the least.

In daily conversations *tangsin* has these restrictions. It has some special uses--for example, police officers often use it when making inquiries--but except between married couples, it is not a particularly easy pronoun to employ, regardless whether the other person is an acquaintance or a stranger.

The pronouns *tayk* and *elusin* are greatly constrained in their usage. The specialized word *elusin* is a term showing high respect, but it is not used for any public social relationship. It can be highly appropriate when addressed to someone in their seventies or eighties from the rural countryside, or one might use it as in (4), below, when one meets an older person respectably dressed in traditional Korean clothing on the subway. But it would not be natural to use this pronoun to address a school principal, or a cabinet minister, or the president of the Republic of Korea. In other words, *elusin* is used in a traditional Korean setting, but it is not a word that is actively used even in those kinds of circumstances. The pronoun *tayk* is even more constrained than *elusin*; in fact, the existence of this pronoun is barely maintained in the modern language. Together with *elusin*, *tayk* is a pronoun

that is difficult to use for anyone not steeped in Korean tradition. And one more thing: while *elusin* can be used regardless whether one has a personal relationship with the other person, the same is not true of *tayk*, which can only be addressed to someone with whom one has no such relationship. Since *tayk* is a more respectful term of address than *tangsin*, there is no worry that it could cause the trouble or discomfort that *tangsin* might; still, the situations in which a sentence like (5) can be used are extremely limited.

(4) 여기가 어르신의 자리입니다.

Yeki ka elusin uy cali ipnita. (to an elderly person on the subway)

‘This is your seat, Sir (or Ma'am).’

(5) 이 개가 택의 개인가요?

I kay ka tayk uy kay inka yo?

‘Is this your dog, Sir (or Ma'am)?’

Pronouns are used far less in Korean than they are in Western languages. Third-person pronouns, in particular, play a very minor role in the language. There is no rule in Korean, for example, that a noun used in an earlier sentence has to be replaced by a pronoun. To illustrate this point, we can see that in (6), below, the word *nwuna* ‘(a male's older) sister’ is simply repeated again and again rather than pronominalized.

(6) 누나는 부산에서 태어났다. 누나가 고향인 부산을 떠난 것은 고등학교를 졸업하고서였다. 그 후 누나는 다시는 부산에 가지 못하였다. 그러나 고향을 향한 누나의 애정은 한 시도 식은 적이 없다.

Nwuna nun Pusan eyse thay.e nass.ta. Nwuna ka kohyang in Pusan ul ttenan kes un kotung-hakkyo lul col.ep-hakose 'yess.ta. Ku hwu nwuna nun tasi nun Pusan ey kaci mos ha.yess.ta. Kulena kohyang ul hyang-han nwuna uy ayceng un han-si to sik.un cek i eps.ta.

‘Sister was born in Pusan. She left her home in Pusan after (she) had graduated from high school. After that, she never went back to Pusan. However, her love for her old home has never diminished one bit.’

In this short narrative, the noun *nwuna* is translated into English with a pronoun after the first occurrence, but in the Korean original it remains the same noun, unchanged. The usages of second-person pronouns such as those discussed

above--*tangsin*, *tayk*, and *elusin*--are not unrelated to this characteristic. In addressing a person to whom the polite referents *tayk* or *elusin* would be appropriate, it is usual to refer to that person instead with a noun, such as *sensayng-nim* 'respected Teacher, Doctor', *son-nim* 'respected Guest', *acwumeni* 'Auntie', or the like.

First-person pronouns are also distinguished by speech level. For the singular, 'I/me', there is both a plain-form *na* and an humble-form *ce*. The corresponding plural forms are *wuli* and *cehuy*.⁴⁾

(7) a. 누나, 나도 가겠어.

Nwuna, na to kakeyss.ta.

'Sister, I'm going, too.'

b. 아버지, 저도 가겠어요.

Apeci, ce to kakeyss.e yo.

'Father, I'm going, too.'

(8) a. 누나, 우리가 이겼어.

Nwuna, wuli ka i.kyess.e.

'Sister, we won.'

b. 선생님, 저희들은 이만 물러가겠습니다.

Sensayng-nim, cehuy-tul un mulle kakeyss.supnita.

'Teacher, we'll take our leave now.'

The basic third-person pronoun is *ku*, 'he, she, it', a word which is also a demonstrative meaning 'that (one), those (things), the'. The use of this word as a pronoun is exceptional, because as a demonstrative, the element always occurs as the modifier of a noun. As a referent for people, *ku i* is more polite than *ku*, and *ku pun* politer still. The other two Korean demonstratives, *i* 'this (one)' and *ce* 'that (one over there)' also appear in this latter usage as *i i* and *i pun*, and *ce i* and *ce pun*. (All of these forms would be translated as 'he' or 'she'.) But, unlike *ku*, *i* and *ce* do not appear as independent pronouns. The pronoun *ku i* 'he' serves the role of elevating a bit above *ku* the person to whom it refers. It is mainly used by wives to refer to their husbands. Otherwise, it is not a commonly used word. When a Korean husband refers to his wife he generally uses an expression such as *ku salam* 'that person', which signals a somewhat lower social rank. The pronominal reference *ku pun* (literally) 'that esteemed person' is the next level up from *ku i*. It functions to signal a relatively high social status for the other person.

It is used much more widely than *ku i*.

There are a variety of idiosyncratic constraints on the use of these pronouns. As was pointed out above, successive occurrences of a noun are not normally pronominalized in Korean, and so, for example, *ku pun* would not be used in a sentence as an anaphoric reference for *eme-nim* 'Mother'. But it is in any case extremely rare to refer to someone with whom one has a close relationship as *ku pun*. To refer to one's own mother as *ku pun* is something that would happen only in unusual circumstances, such as, for example, when looking at old photographs, as in (9),

(9) a. 그분은 우리 어머니셔.

Ku pun un wuli emeni 'sye.

'That person [pointing to her photograph] is my mother.'

b. 그분은 너희 5대조 할아버지시다.

Ku pun un nehuy 5-tayco hal.apeci 'sita.

'That person [pointing to his photograph] is your great-great grandfather.'

What we see in all of these third-person pronouns except *ku* is that structurally they are composed of a demonstrative plus a noun and mean 'that (or this) person'. And the use of *ku* itself as a pronoun is not particularly common--except of course in translations of the pronouns in Western languages. Korean does not have a well-established category of words that could be called third-person pronouns.

2. TITLES

The honorific system of Korean is reflected in great detail through the use of titles.⁵⁾ To illustrate, let us say someone is being called, as in "Minho, where are you going?" Let us say further that the person is named Kim Minho, and he is a section chief in a Korean company. In this case he could be called by about fourteen different appellations, depending upon the rank and relationship of the person speaking. These fourteen appellations are arrayed, roughly in order of relative rank, as follows:

(1) ① *Kwacang-nim* ② *Kim Kwacang-nim* ③ *Kim Minho-ssi*

- ④ *Minho-ssi* ⑤ *Minhyo-hyeng* ⑥ *Kim Kwacang* ⑦ *Kim-ssi*
 ⑧ *Kim-hyeng* ⑨ *Kim-kwun* ⑩ *Kim Minho-kwun*
 ⑪ *Minho-kwun* ⑫ *Kim Minho* ⑬ *Minho* ⑭ *Minho ya*

As we have seen, there are approximately fourteen levels of appellations in the Korean honorific system. Depending on how they are viewed, some of these levels can be merged. But several levels could also be added. One example of the latter is the use of only the last character in a name as a way to call that person. The shortening of the name works like this: A typical Korean name, such as *Minho* or *Chengswuk*, consists of two characters--that is, two syllables. A friend calling out to this person will usually say *Minho-ya* or *Chengswuk-a*, but it also happens sometimes that the person may say simply *Ho-ya* or *Swuk-a*. Leaving off the first syllable this way signals a closer relationship; in other words, the abbreviated form is like a nickname. And speaking of nicknames, Koreans make up and use these much as everyone else does. Whether cruel or simply jocular, nicknames like *Ccangkwo* 'Pumpkin Head', *Ppayngkho* 'Needle Nose', and *Twayci* 'Piggy, Chubbo' are very much a part of Korean culture.

Another strategy used in a workplace for relatively high-ranking people is simply to call them by the most honorific title, *Sensayng-nim* (*Kim Sensayng-nim*, *Kim Sensayng*), regardless what the person's actual job title might be. Among school compatriots, the title *Senpay-nim* 'Respected Senior' is rather widely used without regard to whether the person is actually senior or not. A middle-school student living in the same neighborhood as Section Chief Kim would call him using a family term, *Acesi* 'Uncle' or, in case he were around seventy years old, *Halapeci* 'Grandfather'.

As these multi-layered titles indicate, Koreans live in a complex web of social relations. Family relationships are particularly finely differentiated, and there are any number of different appellations Section Chief Kim's family and relations might use with him. Corresponding to what in English would be an "uncle," there are eight different Korean words. First, a father's unmarried younger brother would be called *Samchon*; once that uncle had married, the appellation would change and from then on he would be called *Cak.un Apeci* ('Little Father'). An older brother of the father, on the other hand, would be called *Khun Samchon* ('Big *Samch'on*') before marriage, and *Khun Apeci* ('Big Father') after marriage. If the "uncle" were one's father's first cousin, he would be known as *Tangswuk*. The husband of one's father's sister is *Komopu*, while the husband of one's mother's

sister is *Imopu*. Mother's brother is *Oy samchon* ('Outside Samch'on'). And, finally, there is a general term for 'uncle', *Acesi*, and that word can also be used.

When a woman marries, each of her in-law's must be called by the word appropriate for their relationship to her. This system is at least as complex as the one used within the family she has left. Whereas her husband calls his father and mother *Apeci* and *Emeni*, she must use the more polite terms for them, *Ape-nim* and *Eme-nim*. The daughter-in-law certainly cannot use the hyperchoristic words for father and mother her own children use, *Appa* 'Daddy' and *Emma* 'Mommy'. For her husband's older brother, she uses *Acwupe-nimi*; for her husband's younger brother, she uses *Tolyen-nim* before he marries and *Sepang-nim* afterwards. For the husband's older sister, she does not use the expected female term *Enni* 'Older Sister', but, curiously, the male term *Hyeng-nim* (in other cases, 'Older Brother') instead. For her husband's younger sister, the wife is traditionally supposed to use *Akassi* before the sister marries and *Akissi* afterwards, but in recent years the situation has changed, and wives have begun to use *Komo* instead, a word which is originally the term used by a woman for her father's sister.

In Korean, the rules for using personal names are especially complex and restricted. If a sibling is only one year older, Koreans cannot call that sibling by name. If a relative is younger, but in the structure of the extended family is of an earlier generation (for example, a father's cousin), that person also cannot be called by name. Within the family, the only people one calls by name are one's younger brothers and sisters and one's children. However, even here there is a sub-rule. When a younger brother or sister grows older and has children of their own, one cannot, without some reticence, call them by name anymore. Instead, one says *Tongsayng* 'Younger sibling' or, borrowing the name of one of their children, calls them 'So-and-so's Father' or 'So-and-so's Mother'. If, in the structure of the extended family, a older relative is of a younger generation, one again does not use a personal name but rather the familial term *Cokha* 'Nephew' or *Cokha-nim* 'Respected Nephew'. The social constraints on name use are particularly strong in the cases where one is obliged to show great respect, toward one's teacher, for example, or toward one's father. In a situation where it becomes necessary to tell someone else what one's father name is, one cannot simply say the name. Instead, Koreans use an indirect, convoluted method of conveying the information. For example, let's say the father's name is Kim Minho. In that case, the son or daughter would say '*Kim*, the character (字) *Min*, the character *Ho*'.

Besides the rules for names and titles used in a family and at a workplace,

there are also rules that apply when addressing strangers one meets on the street or encounters in shops. There are many situations in which Koreans feel great discomfort as they grope for the appropriate way to address the other person; there are sometimes even unpleasant scenes in which an adult is scolded for the misuse of these terms. The uncertainly Koreans themselves feel about such situations underlies the popularity of volumes on the Korean book market like *Wuli mal uy yeycel* ('The Ceremonial Language of Korean')(Chosŏn Ilbo-sa 1991), and the complexity of the subject is shown by the fact that a description of the terms and how they are used fills up the entire book. Part of the reason for the complexity of the system it describes can perhaps be placed upon the structure of the Korean family and the many terms that must be used for familial relations. But a more basic reason is surely the complexity of the Korean honorific system itself, and the obligation Koreans feel to living by those rules and to using them with social grace and elegance.

1). Cf. Brown and Ford 1961. This tendency of Americans to use first names has become even more pronounced since Brown and Ford's work was published.

Today the use of a first name is rapidly become a badge of anonymity instead of a signal of friendliness. A clerk or telephone operator who reveals only her first name is keeping the customer at arm's length.

2). This particular sociolinguistic rule is not found in the otherwise similar honorific system of Japanese, where it is perfectly normal for a person to address his old college professor as *Tanaka sensei* or the like, using surname plus title.

3). These days younger wives have taken to using the reflexive pronoun *caki* '(your)self' with their husbands; young husbands, for their part, tend to simply use the more intimate *ne*.

4). As is illustrated in example (8b), these plural pronouns can also take what appears to be a pleonastic plural suffix, *-tul*: *wuli-tul*, *cehuy-tul*. In native Korean usage, the suffix *-tul* is not so much a plural marker but an indication that the noun to which it is attached is part of a group, is together with others. For a discussion of how this suffix works in

Korean, see 4.2.1 (p. 137). But *-tul* is also frequently used to represent the plurals of English, and as a result its use in that sense has become more and more common. (Cf. Martin 1992:829–30.)

5). To the best of our knowledge, there has never been a serious study of the speech-level distinctions reflected in Korean titles, partly because of the complexity, but also because grammarians have been preoccupied with the honorific distinctions reflected in verb morphology.

1. What are special expressions in Korean caused by socio-linguistic factors?
2. How do Korean personal pronouns vary depending on honorific system?
3. How do Korean titles vary depending on honorific system?