

# The Handbook of Korean Linguistics

Edited by

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# 28 Linguistic Emblems of South Korean Society

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NICHOLAS HARKNESS

## 1 Introduction

When we speak of a language, we are, in a sense, speaking of the total sum of recognizable communicative registers and genres that, in practice, presuppose a particular symbolic code. Similarly, when we speak of a society, we are, in a sense, speaking of the total sum of recognizable forms of human interaction and institutionalization that, in practice, presuppose a particular structure of generalizable relational positions or identities. Despite disciplinary perspectives that treat the construct of language as separable from social context and the construct of society as separable from linguistic mediation, linguistic communication and sociality are inherently linked in practice, inseparable as dimensions of meaningful social behavior. To speak at all is to invoke and instantiate both language and society.

Any account of what we might call a culture of linguistic sociality must consider not only structure and practice, but also ideology, or the assumptions speakers have about normative language structure and situationally appropriate usage (Kroskrity 2000; Schieffelin et al. 1998; Silverstein 1979) (see also Chapter 23 Social Aspects of Korean as a Heritage Language). As dimensions of both language and society emerge as objects of explicit and focused reflection, fractions of a linguistic repertoire come to serve for speakers as particularly salient examples of what they understand their society to be about. That is, speakers come to view some area of language available to conscious reflection as standing for or representing their society in important ways. When many people interpret these often complex signs to stand for society both in terms of contiguity, causality, or proximity (i.e. indexically), as well as by some perceived formal resemblance or shared quality (i.e. iconically), we refer to them as *emblems*.

An emblem is what semioticians in the tradition of Charles S. Peirce call a conventional or widely recognized “indexical icon.” An emblem, like a totem, can serve as a sign of identity (Agha 2007; Silverstein 2004; Singer 1984). For citizens of

a country, the flag is an emblem, at once standing for the country by being directly linked with it, and also standing for it by exhibiting in it some idealized qualities or properties understood to inhere in the population (or place) for which it stands. In communicative interaction, speakers deploy such emblems of social persona as a means of positioning themselves with respect to interlocutors and groups. One way to study linguistic sociality at the intersection of structure, practice, and ideology is to locate and analyze what speakers take to be linguistic emblems of their society.

For this chapter, I consider linguistic emblems of South Korean society. I focus on four areas of language that speakers in South Korea<sup>1</sup> can and often do point to as standing for, or even explaining, aspects of their social world and history. Two of these emblems are quite traditional: the complex honorific system of deference and demeanor indexicals, and the indigenous morphophonemic writing system called *Hangul*. Two of them are relatively new: English language learning, instruction, and use in popular media; and slang, both spoken and written. Combined, these four linguistic emblems begin to sketch a picture of the semiotic stuff of Korean sociality.

## 2 Deference and demeanor indexicals

One of the most striking features of Korean from the point of view of comparative pragmatics is the complex system of indexes of what Irving Goffman called “deference and demeanor” (Goffman 1956), consisting of grammatically encoded honorifics and speech styles (see Chapter 17 Honorifics and Politeness). Korean speakers are aware of this fact and casually refer to this area of their language as one of the things that makes Korean difficult for outsiders to master. Brown (2011b) explores this issue in his comprehensive study of second-language learners of Korean.<sup>2</sup> Of course, all languages have their own complex socially significant linguistically mediated systems of intersubjective orientation, requiring for “fluency” a combination of both control over multiple semiotic forms and awareness of higher indexical orders of generalizable identities and their relations. However, in the case of Korean, as with other pragmatically comparable languages (e.g. Japanese or Javanese), these forms are clearly and overtly coded as both referential and non-referential indexes, which speakers (and linguists) often construe as obligatory in usage (see Brown 2011a).

Speech as a form of social behavior is continuous with social behavior more generally. To know how to speak is to know how to behave. So it is unsurprising that this overtly formalized dimension of Korean is particularly salient for speakers when considering appropriate modes of sociality. Deference and demeanor indexicals serve as an essential part of a culture of what speakers refer to as “politeness,” “respect,” “etiquette,” or “manners”; and native discourse that draws on these concepts to describe kinds of speech offers explicit ethnometapragmatic (Silverstein 1979) framings of appropriate behavior. In this way, the indexical coding of deference and demeanor in language becomes continuous with, but also a model of, the enactment of social relations as a practical, culturally stipulated fact of life in South Korea. Social interactions are saturated with the formal expectation of performance of relative distance and closeness on the one hand, and status symmetry or asymmetry on the other. And thus the overt coding of these dimensions of social

relations in speech forms a powerful emblem of what speakers understand or expect to be taking place in every interaction.

Formal deference and demeanor indexicality as a linguistic emblem of Korean society is well documented. A striking example comes from the ethnolinguistic history of religion, particularly of Christianity in Korea, where an omniscient, omnipotent deity is addressed directly in prayer. Take the following account by John Ross, the first translator of the New Testament into Hangul:

In one particular, I have taken the liberty of introducing considerable change in my translations. Coreans in both in speech and writing are punctilious in distinguishing the social position of persons. Equals in age or rank may employ the direct form of speech, but strangers or persons socially unequal could not use the direct "thou" or "you" of English and Greek. To them such use of the second personal pronoun is disrespectful in the extreme. This has influenced, all the translations. When God is addressed I have always used the indirect mode of address, e.g. in the Lord's prayer every "Thy" is translated by "father's," the term with which the prayer commences. When the disciples address Jesus, they are translated as always using the indirect mode "Lord" or "Teacher." Even in Chinese, I always use the indirect mode in prayer as the direct is not reverential. Coreans attach much more importance to the form of address than do the Chinese; this change is essential to accurate translation."

(Ross 1883, 493–494)<sup>3</sup>

In this example, the verbally mediated interaction with deity presents a particularly vivid glimpse into the ideological conceptualization of the link between language and society.<sup>4</sup>

The usage of and explicit discourse about such personal deictics and other honorific forms are illustrative of changes in the culture of linguistic sociality. Three decades ago, Sohn (1986[1983], 392) observed the relative simplification of Korean's honorific system; he wrote, "power variables have significantly weakened and formality has given way considerably to casualness."<sup>5</sup> Sohn discussed, in particular, the transformation of the honorific verbal ending, *-naita*, from a colloquial reality to an "historical relic," and the emergence of the *-yo* ending as much more extensive.

An explicit Korean culture of "manners" frames and stipulates the alternation of lexical and grammatical forms in everyday speech for "a socially defined group that shares both linguistic and cultural knowledge of honorifics" (Wang 1990).<sup>6</sup> Of course, terms such as "manners," "politeness," or "respect" themselves are linked to cultural ideologies of meaningful behavior applicable to multiple areas of social life. Indeed, if we do observe some change or variation in the use of these indexicals in interaction, this empirical fact likely points to some change or variation in how speakers view and understand their society.

The same may be said for the use of kin terms, which describe kinds of relations and invoke frameworks for evaluating behavior (Agha 2007). The system of descriptive kin terms for members of a Korean family is extensive and complex, with *hoching* 'terms of address' being mostly native Korean and *ciching* 'terms of reference' being Sino-Korean (King 2006, 102).<sup>7</sup> Sohn (1986[1983], 400; citing Suh 1979) observed in the 1980s what is now commonplace, namely that a few basic kin terms, for example, *hyeng* 'older brother of a male,' *nwuna* 'older sister of a male,' *oppa* 'older brother of a female,' and *enni* 'older sister of a female,' as well as *halmeni* 'grandmother,' *halapeci* 'grandfather,' *acwumeni* 'aunt,' and *acessi* 'uncle,'

are used widely as kinship tropes to address non-kin. If, as Park (1975, 5) generalized, people in Korea “seem to have the tendency to regard almost any organized social institution as a type of family structure,” then these terms become performative of this fact each time they are used.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1980s, Sohn (1986[1983], 400) also made the following observation: “the productive use of such address-reference terms as *sensayng* ‘lit. teacher’ to all levels of adults, regardless of their occupation, suggests that Koreans are moving toward egalitarianism.” My own ethnographic research in a large Christian church of around 70,000 members tells a somewhat different story (see Harkness, forthcoming). There was indeed an explicitly stated belief in Christian spiritual egalitarianism, which was lexicalized in the tropic kin terms *hyengcey* ‘brother’ and *camay* ‘sister,’ neither of which differentiate age or speaker gender. However, the cultural stipulation to hierarchical ordering and status marking within the church remained extremely powerful. This took place at the level of dyadic relations, with the general asymmetric kin terms mentioned above—*hyeng*, *nwuna*, *oppa*, and *enni*—preferred over the symmetric and markedly Christian terms *hyengcey* and *camay* for both the intimacy and the respect that they displayed. This preference for the explicit coding of status also took place at the institutional level, where official church titles such as *cipsa* ‘deacon,’ *canglo* ‘elder’ or even less official titles describing highly specified roles, such as *chinkyong pucang* ‘fellowship manager’ and *senguy pucang* ‘choir robe manager,’ were preferred over semantically bleached egalitarian status terms such as *sensayng*. Indeed, as my informants made clear, to call someone *hyengcey(-nim)* or *camay(-nim)* (and sometimes even *sensayng[-nim]*), was to distance them, and to refer to or address someone by anything other than the status title they had acquired was to degrade them—in effect, to treat them as a stranger with an indeterminate or unrecognized social position. Such terms of address and reference are closely linked with the pragmatic system of deference and demeanor indexicals and productive of culturally stipulated codings of both intimacy and status.

In his classic paper on the subject, Samuel Martin (1964) predicted that, “We shall probably have speech levels in Japanese and Korean as long as we have plurals in English.” Even as the somewhat rigid term “speech levels” has given way to the more flexible analytical notion of “speech styles,” the highly reflexive cultural tenets of appropriate behavior in Korea are still expressed in terms of politeness, respect, humility, and manners according to social position, and, as predicted, the system of explicitly coded deference and demeanor indexicals will likely live on not just as a part of the language but also as an emblem of Korean sociality.

### 3 Hangul

If deference and demeanor indexicals such as speech styles and honorifics are recognized by speakers as forming an emblem of social process and structure in South Korea, the indigenous writing system, known in the south as *Hangul*, can be taken to be a self-appropriated emblem of Korea’s culture of science and innovation in the service of humanity.

What people refer to now as *Hangul* originated in 1443 with the invention of the alphabet *Hwunmin Cengum* ‘Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People,’ with

further explanation in 1446 with the *Hwunmin Cengum Haylyey* ('Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People'). The writing system was invented by King Sejong (r. 1418–1450), the fourth king of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910), possibly with the help of other scholars.<sup>9</sup> The modern script contains 24 simple letters (14 consonants and 10 vowels), which can be modified via diacritic strokes and combinations to amount to 40 simple and complex letters (see Song 2005, 49–51), resulting in more than 11,000 possible syllables. Both the simplicity of the basic system and the potential for complex combinations of its elements are taken in Korea to express the poetic "genius" of the nation, a true emblem of the character of the *Volk* (or, in Korean, *mincok*) in an Herderian sense (see King 1998 for a discussion of what he terms "script nationalism"). So important is the commemoration of Hangul that the South Korean government reinstated "Hangul Day" on October 9, 2013 as a public holiday for celebrating the script (the holiday had been canceled since 1991).<sup>10</sup>

The praise of King Sejong hinges on two important, ideologically loaded points. The first celebrates Sejong's intellectual brilliance as a scientifically minded genius. The second celebrates Sejong's benevolence: against the will of Confucian literati, Sejong created a writing system for the benefit of those untrained in literary Chinese.<sup>11</sup> Thus Sejong, and by extension Hangul, come to stand for both innate talent and social consciousness as essentialized attributes of the larger Korean social group to which they are attached and for which they stand. As a hero of the nation, Sejong is memorialized with a statue in Gwanghwamun plaza. He shares this space with a figure of Yi Sun-shin, the revered admiral who fought off the Japanese navy during the Imjin Invasions of the sixteenth century. Like Yi Sun-shin's tough, powerful, and agile "turtle boats" (*kepuksen*), Sejong's Hangul is seen as a powerful shield, protecting the independence of Koreans from outside encroachments. For some, Hangul becomes a linguistic fortress for withstanding the Sinophillic influence of Hanja (Sino-Korean characters). These two men are thus linked as embodiments of ideal Korean personhood, and the inventions associated with them become emblems of Korean ingenuity.

Present-day Hangul is being rebranded as an ideal system for linking Korea to the world. In particular, Hangul is celebrated as an adaptable and phonetically accurate script that can operate as a good representational system for other languages. For example, in a video exhibit at the National Museum of Korea on the invention and use of Hangul, the Korean script is depicted as far superior to Chinese and Japanese in its capacity to represent foreign pronunciations accurately (Figure 28.1). The narrator of the video announces:

*Yenge palum-uy phyoki-lul talu-n oykwuke-wa pikyo-hay po-myen Hangul palumphyoki-uy cenghwakseng-ul al swu iss-ta*

'If you try to compare the script of different languages for English pronunciation, you can recognize the exactitude of Hangul's phonetic inscription.'

Despite the absence of the North American [r] in the Korean spelling (which, note, is included in the IPA transcription), this comparison suggests that Korean spelling can reproduce the English pronunciation more precisely than the others. It also presents the writing system as phonetic and universal (*palumphyoki*, literally 'pronunciation inscription') rather than morpho-phonemic and based on the





Figure 28.1 National Museum of Korea, video exhibit. Photo by Nicholas Harkness, 2006.<sup>12</sup>

distinctive features of Korean phonology (see Harkness 2012, 365–366 for a full discussion).

Hangul itself becomes a sign of Korea's global presence when it is exported to other language communities. Take as an example just a few sentences from a single page of the book, "Hangul in the World," which speaks of the "righteous duties of Hangul users for the development of the world's linguistic culture" (Hong 2008, 26). Hong writes: "Currently a movement is underway to make an alphabet by using Hangul for races which do not have their own writing system ... Hangul is a better writing system than any other in transcription, so it can be adopted in transcribing most languages." This statement describes the activities of the Hunminjeongeum (*Hwunmincengum*) Society. Just as Sejong intended the script for those Koreans unschooled in Chinese, in recent years, the Society has attempted to market and export Hangul as an adaptable script for use by small-scale societies by "reach[ing] out to illiterate peoples to help them adopt a writing system appropriate to their own language."<sup>13</sup> As Kim Juwon, a former president of the institute stated:<sup>14</sup>

*Cosang-uy cihyey-lul pakkathseysang-ulo phyelchi-koca hakhoy-lul changli-p-ha-yess-supnita.*

[We] founded the society to expand the wisdom of the ancestors to the outside world.

The most recent flurry of news on this front had to do with the fact that the Society had been supporting the teaching of Hangul in a village on the island of Buton, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia (see Song 2013).

Claims such as "Hangul is a good writing system scientifically and functionally and [...] is excellent in an aesthetic aspect" (Hong 2008, 26) are intensified when the script is linked with other forms of innovation, such as the Samsung "anycall" keypad design for mobile phones. In the same exhibit mentioned above, the Hangul-based input system is compared with a Roman script input system with the goal of demonstrating the efficiency and elegance of Korea's intellectual treasure. As demonstrated in the video, a user must press the keypad thirteen times to spell the five-letter word "Seoul" in English, while it takes only eight presses to spell the five-letter word for Seoul in Korean (Figure 28.2).

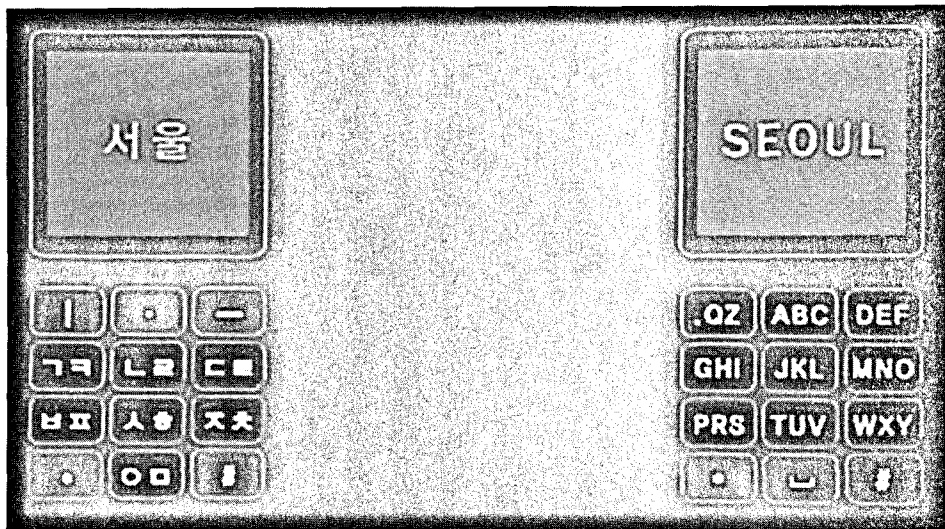


Figure 28.2 National Museum of Korea, video exhibit. Photo by Nicholas Harkness, 2006.

In this way, Hangeul comes to express in its very forms and functions certain qualities of the society deemed worthy of celebration, namely scientific innovation and enlightened leadership. Within this framework, it does indeed become the “righteous duty” of Koreans to “advertise Hangeul as a symbol of the Korean culture” (Hong 2008, 29), on the principle that “an alphabet, just like a spoken language, is basically not only a communicative means to write but also a cultural condensate” (Lee 2008, 214). These phrases bespeak the power of Hangeul to stand for Korean society to Koreans, not merely as a point of pride, but as an actual expression of Koreaness—as an emblem of Korean society.

## 4 English

The Korean personal plural (possessive) deictic *wuli* captures a key dimension of speakers’ ideological reflections on the relationship between the Korean language and Korean society. One says *wuli nala* ‘our country’ to refer to the country called South Korea. One says *wuli cip* ‘our house’ to refer to one’s house. One says *wuli namphyen* ‘our husband’ to refer to one’s husband. And one says *wuli mal* ‘our speech/language’ to refer to the Korean language. While all of these phrases rely on deixis, the first and last explicitly presuppose a speaker of Korean, who claims a Korean identity, and who is speaking about Korea or the Korean language. It would sound odd for a non-native speaker of Korean to refer to Korea or the Korean language as “our” in Korean, and it would sound awkward (if not incoherent) for a non-native speaker of Korean to refer to his or her own native country as *wuli nala* or native language as *wuli mal*. In this way, language purity movements, such as the *wuli mal wuntong* ‘Our Language Movement,’ which seek to expunge remnants of Chinese, Japanese, and now English from Korean, rely on this kind of culturally framed deixis to link the purity of a code to the legitimate, authorized speakers of that code.

The impulse toward purification can be linked to the Korean saying: *kolay ssawu-m-ey saywu tung theci-n-ta*, 'When whales fight, a shrimp's back is broken.' This statement points to a commonly held geopolitical view of Korea as a society that, for structural reasons, has been constantly under attack—directly or indirectly—by powerful outsiders. Certainly, some of this is grounded in actual events: the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, the Imjin invasions of the sixteenth century, the Russo-Japanese War, Japanese colonialism from 1910–1945, the Sino-Japanese War, the Korean War, postwar Soviet and Chinese influence in the North, and ongoing postwar U.S. military presence in the South. Despite South Korea's program of globalization, there remain widely held anxieties about dominating external economic, military, and sociocultural influences. One of the clearest forms of this anxiety is around the "English fever" of recent decades. To many, it feels like an attack.<sup>15</sup>

Park (2009, 26–27, 74–95) points out that the widespread and pervasive English-learning practices in South Korea are framed by three ideological discourses, what he terms "necessitation," "externalization," and "self-deprecation." *Necessitation* treats English as "valuable and indispensable" to "survive and flourish in the globalizing world." *Externalization* treats English as "a language of the Other," which is "incongruent with and opposed to" Korean identity. And *self-deprecation* refers to the way Koreans are viewed as "lacking sufficient competence to use English meaningfully." Park argues that these ideologies form an "ideological complex" that is immanent in everyday linguistic practices in which English is encountered or invoked. Furthermore, Park explains that, although some of these ideologies might appear oppositional, they nonetheless are linked and inseparable in the sense that they all are present and thus contribute to ambivalent, often contradictory stances toward English in South Korean Society.

Framings of English as necessary, external, and difficult are directly linked to Korean understandings of South Korea as a monolingual society, with Seoul standard positioned as the top-and-center of a hierarchy of value. As Park notes, this opinion is linked to other claims of Korea's ethnic homogeneity, as well as the stigmatization of regional dialects (see Chapter 26 Varieties of contemporary Korean). In this sense, Korean society can be said to embrace a culture of "monoglot standard" (Silverstein 1996[1987]). In this context, the characterization of English as a difficult, external language that is fundamentally necessary for success poses a number of challenges for ideologies of Korean monolingualism and ethnic homogeneity.

The combination of ideologies of English in South Korea has fueled the English instruction industry, constituted by the employment of foreign teachers in Korean schools and private study academies and, more recently for families with means, early study abroad (*coki yuhak*, see below). In both cases, the encouragement and management of English education for children and young adults has figured into a Korean culture of "cosmopolitan striving" (Park and Abelmann 2004). Directly confronting the vision of linguistic uniformity discussed above, Park and Lo (2012, 149) explain that "The heavy emphasis on language learning (of English or other dominant languages) as an important goal of *coki yuhak* appears to imply a valorization of a multilingual, cosmopolitan identity less bound to the monolingual culture of Korea."

For decades study abroad had been associated with post-secondary education, but since the 2000s it has become increasingly common for pre-university students

among the middle classes (Park and Lo 2012, 148). Kang and Abelmann (2011) show how this form of study abroad has become a contentious subject in South Korea. Part of the debate concerns the target countries of study, which are increasingly Asian countries such as China, Singapore, and the Philippines (Kang 2012). With this trend, “the locus of modernity and cosmopolitanism is moving away from the US-oriented overseas Korean (*kyophu*) and towards the figure of the elite transnational returnee (*saltaon salam*)” (Lo and Kim 2012, 255). In the context of this shift, the relation of English to issues of gender in South Korea has been particularly pronounced. Along these lines, Lo and Kim (2012, 261) point out that the “English multilingualism of Korean women is often negatively associated with hypersexualization and immoral behavior. For Korean men, however the hypersexualization associated with English is viewed positively.” And in the context of these more recent developments—pre-university study abroad and the increasing numbers of cosmopolitan English-speaking returnees—Korean-American male English teachers also find themselves losing their “patriarchal privilege” as their linguistic capital is devalued when Korean cosmopolitans return from abroad (Cho 2012).

The study, use, and instruction of English in South Korea, then, serves as a particularly powerful linguistic emblem of South Korean society’s ambivalent stance on multiculturalism, multilingualism, and globalization.

## 5 Slang, spoken and written

An emergent linguistic emblem of South Korean society comes in the form of rapidly changing and often digitally mediated slang. If, for many Koreans, English represents a threat from “without” in a rapidly changing world, slang represents a threat from “within” a rapidly changing society—often taken as a sign of laziness, corruption, or secrecy. Slang in Korean can be referred to by a few different terms, each of which highlights an important cultural dimension of the social behavior linked to and the social relations enacted through slang.

*Soke* (or *pisoke*), referring to language that is local, low, or vulgar (i.e. non-standard), is probably the most direct and most common translation. *Soke* presupposes the stratification of language along class and education lines, implicitly drawing on a long history of Sino-Korean and “native” Korean linguistic differentiation, and its reflection in the distinction, maintained by the educated male elite during the Chosun Dynasty (see King 2007, 203–204), between Literary Sinitic Hanja or “true” writing (*cinmun*) and Hangul or “vulgar” writing (*enmun*).

*Une*, meaning, literally, secret language or insider language, does not so much highlight linguistic differentiation as emphasize the social intimacy of groupness that forms through covert prestige (Labov 1966; Trudgill 1972). In this manner, social relations are enabled and strengthened through the use of in-group terms that are incomprehensible to outsiders.<sup>16</sup> For example, it is sometimes precisely this term, and the vocabulary that it describes, that Korean students studying abroad (*yuhaksayng*) use to explain the difference between themselves and children of Korean immigrants (*iminca*) in their host country (Shin 2012, 190–191). *Une* becomes a site of “linguistic ownership” (Bucholtz 2011; Wee 2002) through which some young speakers become more authentically “in-group” than others.

Finally, *yuhaynge*, meaning literally “fashion language,” describes the dimension of rapidly changing linguistic forms. With its emphasis on linguistic trends, the term introduces an axis of temporality into the intersection of language ideology and linguistic differentiation (see Irvine and Gal 2000). It accounts for linguistic change as part and parcel of the broader concern in Korean society with fashion and performative displays of contemporaneity within a specifically Korean cultural model of time, space, and personhood—a “chronotope” in Bakhtin’s terms (1981). Furthermore, beyond the pressure to be “up-to-date,” there is also the importance of being indexically anchored to a legitimate prototype or authorized ritual site. Then the question becomes: who sets the trend and where is the trend set? Each instance of *yuhayngne* becomes a sign pointing to important semiotic centers of cultural influence.

These three terms (*soke*, *une*, *yuhaynge*), which are often interchangeable, and the three axes of differentiation they describe, point to the way slang in Korean serves as a major communicative nexus of important, higher-order social concerns and processes. What is normally referred to as slang in Korean has a number of different forms, often organized around the mutations and contractions of the formal elements of the word, whether simple abbreviations, phonological mutations, playful elaborations, or semantic substitutions (from euphemism to pun). These changes to language form have a functional relation to the role of these words in social usage, linking up pragmatics of usage to wider-scale patterns in variation.

Abbreviation and phonological contraction are forms of informal speech used both for practical purposes and as a means of establishing intimacy. Digital technologies of real-time written communication further facilitate and encourage abbreviation, contraction, and mutation.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Korean, reductions and abbreviations in the digital medium carry over into speech where they are highly influential (Lee 2003).<sup>18</sup> Some well-known forms of this kind of abbreviation can be found as status terms for address and reference. The abbreviation is achieved by combining a metonymic section of the original word with phonologically reduced approximation of the rest of the word, allowing multiple syllables to be collapsed:

*chotunghaksayng* → *choting* (elementary school student)  
*cwunghaksayng* → *cwungting* (middle school student)  
*kotunghaksayng* → *koting* (high school student)

Abbreviation is, of course, a widespread practice in informal speech and institutional registers across languages. In Korean such abbreviations intersect directly with pragmatically rich formalizations of personal address and reference mentioned above. In professional registers of interaction in Korea, role and status terms describing a person’s occupation or relation to the speaker are widely used to address and refer to others. However, this emphasis on formality has softened somewhat in relation to new forms of digital communication in which graphic representation, rather than speech, increasingly is the medium through which social relations are managed. The forms below, unlike those above, contain the honorific suffix *-nim*, the “m” of which is preserved (in the manner of the word-final “ng” above).

*sensayngnim* → *ssaym* (teacher)  
*taylinim* → *taylnim* (deputy, proxy, representative)

By indexing both the title and the honorific suffix, while also indexing a more informal register of communicative interaction, slang forms of address like these perform intimacy while also invoking an authorizing institution of identity formation and differentiated status. In contrast, Lee (2011, 40) gives an account of playful “hyper-” honorification in internet slang, in which the suffix “-nim” is attached to various forms of relatively informal, intimate address, such as in *ne-nim* (second person pronoun), *tongsayng-nim* ‘younger sibling,’ *yeching-nim*, abbreviated from *yecachinkwu* ‘girlfriend.’<sup>19</sup>

The pervasive presence of digital graphic real-time communication in Korea has contributed to other forms of slang as well, some of which make innovative use of Hangul as well as Roman script. Drawing on cultural knowledge of pragmatics, code, and script, these forms of written slang make innovative use of graphic metonymy and metaphor.

Some examples of graphic metonymy:

- The reduplicated letters ㅇㅇ, representing the glottal onset to a syllable, form a graphic metonym of the informal Korean word *ung* ‘yes,’ which is normally reserved for *panmal* or half speech. The letter automatically differentiates it from *ney* (the plain form of ‘yes’), and the slang register overall automatically excludes *yey* (the formal and respectful form of ‘yes’).
- The reduplicated letters ㄴㄴ (n n) form a graphic metonym of the Korean word *ani* ‘no.’ While some informants told me that the slang draws from the intervocalic “n” of *ani*, others thought it came from the initial consonant of the English word *no*.
- The reduplicated pattern ㅇㅋㅇㅋ (ch kh ch kh) is a sequence of consonant-initial metonyms of the phrase *chwu-kha chwu-kha* (추카추카), a non-standard spelling of the phrase *chwuk-ha chwuk-ha* (축하축하), meaning ‘congratulations.’
- When responding to the suggestion, “Let’s go somewhere,” (*eti kaca*) a person can simply respond with the letters ㄱㄱ (kk) These form a metonym of the phrase *kokossing*, meaning “let’s go!” *Koko* is the Korean loan version of the English *go go*. *Ssing* comes from the reduplicated onomatopoeic term *ssingssing*, describing something speeding by, such as a vehicle. So in this phrase, the rich system of Korean denotational iconism combines with English and Hangul to contribute to written slang.

Some examples of graphic metaphor:

- To represent laughing in written communication, a person can type ㅋㅋ (kh kh) or ㅎㅎ (h h), both of which are taken to be graphic representations of consonants that are vocal icons of laughter.
- Crying, however, is represented by visual icons of tears falling from eyes, making use of a vowel: ㅜㅜ (wu wu) or ㅠㅠ (yu yu).
- The roman letters “OTL” form an icon of a bodily state. These letters, respectively, represent the head (O), torso and arms (T), and legs (L) of a person crawling or collapsing on the ground. The icon is used to represent despair.

Furthermore, the Sino-Korean counting system is popular for phonological puns, which businesses sometimes use as mnemonic devices for telephone numbers:

- The numbers “8253,” pronounced in Sino-Korean as *phal i o sam*, stand for the phrase, *ppalli o-sey-yo*, or ‘come quickly’ with an honorific infix (-*si-*) and “polite” sentence ending (-*yo*).
- The numbers “8585,” pronounced in Sino-Korean as *phal o phal o* stand for the phrase, *palo palo*, or ‘right away.’
- The numbers “7979,” pronounced in Sino-Korean as *chil kwu chil kwu*, stand for the phrase *chinkwu chinkwu*, or ‘friend friend.’ A drunk person can dial “7979” for a “proxy driver” (*tayli wuncen*) to drive them and their car home.

Of course these examples represent only a tiny portion of the rich and innovative corpus of slang forms in Korean (see Kim 1999; Park 2006), much of which is of a spicier nature. But as we consider the issue of slang in South Korea more generally, the question arises of when and with whom to use such terms. In many cases, speakers will not use the forms with audiences they don’t believe are able to decode them. In other cases, these slang techniques emerge precisely as a way of avoiding decoding. It is commonly stated that slang takes the forms that it does, and changes as rapidly as it does in South Korea in functional relation to the multiple forms of state and social surveillance people are subject to. And speakers often bemoan, while being thrilled by, the challenges of keeping up with it.

South Korea is well known as one of the most “wired” countries in the world. The internet is pervasive in everyday life and is also vigilantly monitored for content that the government deems to be inappropriate (e.g. pornography) or politically suspect (e.g. pro-North Korea sentiments). Until recently, users were required to submit the equivalent of a social security number to register for certain sites (now one can use a universal ‘I-pin’). Regarding internet freedom and monitoring, Reporters without Borders has labeled South Korea a “country under surveillance.”<sup>20</sup> In addition to this kind of state surveillance, younger speakers are under social surveillance in many situations in daily life—from school, to home, to public spaces where elders traditionally have been able to monitor and discipline them for what might be perceived as indecorous or disrespectful behavior. Speech and digital communication are no exception. They are also under regulation and surveillance by language authorities like the National Institute for Korean Language (*Kwuklip Kukewen*), which seeks to standardize communicative practices by providing rules for pronunciation, spelling, and the incorporation of loan words—thereby controlling what constitutes “good” or “correct” Korean.

So in addition to facilitating in-group forms of sociality as informal *soke*, secret *une*, or fashionable *yuhaynge*, Korean slang can also address the very real problem of speaking “around” state and social surveillance. The joy Korean speakers describe of savoring the insider quality of slang, as well as the freshness of rapidly changing, playful innovations in forms of linguistic masking and euphemism, is embedded within a culture of ongoing awareness and self-monitoring of linguistic behavior that is closely linked to the communicative privacy afforded by digital media. For these reasons, slang can be considered an emergent linguistic emblem of South Korean society.

## 6 Conclusion

While this chapter certainly does not claim to present a comprehensive account of all linguistic emblems of South Korean society, it does introduce some of the most salient ones. Deference and demeanor indexicals give us a view into the interactional pragmatics of status and hierarchy so central to Korean sociality. The ideological discourse around *Hangul* reveals the narratives of exceptionalism that Korean speakers tell about their society. The institutionalization of English instruction in South Korea and, increasingly, abroad paints a picture of a society's ambivalent engagement with globalization. And the development and rapid change of slang illustrates how younger generations' communicative practices perform South Korean youth identity by drawing on linguistic and digital resources to confront and avoid both social and state surveillance. Each of these emblems provides a glimpse into the continuities and contestations of a culture of linguistic sociality in South Korea.

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## NOTES

- 1 Hereafter "Korea," unless otherwise specified.
- 2 Brown (2011b, 1) cites an observation (Sohn 1989) that it is the honorific system that the Defense Language Institute used to designate Korean as a category 4 language, alongside Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese as one of the most difficult languages for English native speakers to learn.
- 3 The spelling of Koreans as Coreans is in the original.
- 4 In Korean, for example, God is addressed with the utmost honorific forms, whereas in German, God is addressed with the non-honorific *Du* form. In a similar vein, Brown and Gilman's (1960) classic paper, *The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity*, pointed out how the difference between the personal deictics *thou* and *you* became ideologically charged in seventeenth century England. When the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) adopted the *thou* as a universal form of address, their social aim was to project a social world of Christian spiritual egalitarianism. Silverstein (1995[1985], 534–544) has shown the effects of this attempt at "leveling:" the stigmatization of the relatively symmetric and solidary *thou* form as an emblem of Quaker sociality led to the adoption of the symmetric and but non-solidary *you* among the broader non-Quaker population. Silverstein (2003) also shows that Brown and Gilman's variables of "power" and "solidarity" are first-order accounts of what is actually a second-order indexical phenomenon, namely the pragmatically invoked structure of generalizable social identities in terms of which role relations in the here-and-now of enregistered communicative interaction are established.
- 5 For more on honorifics and speech styles in Korean, see Martin (1964), Wang (1984), Dredge (1983), Hwang (1990), Kim-Renaud (1990).
- 6 See Irvine (1992) and Agha (2007) for more general, comparative theorizations of speech styles and honorific language. See Koyama (2004a) and Koyama (2004b) for language ideologies regarding Japanese honorifics.
- 7 See Wang et al. (2005), Pak (2001, 263–279) for more on Korean forms of address.
- 8 By the 1970s, Lee (1975, 280) had observed that, as younger generations increasingly began to reflect on earlier forms of kinship obligation as "old-fashioned, out-dated, and undemocratic," they envisioned the transformation as institutional progress from those



based on authority and submission to those based on of "Western-style exploitation of individual talents and abilities."

- 9 See Ledyard (1998[1965]); Lee (1997); Song (2005, 45–50), Kim-Renaud (1997); Kim-Renaud (1998); Yeon (2010), for discussions regarding Sejong's role in the creation of Hangeul and the possibility of assistance by other scholars.
- 10 In North Korea, Hangeul is called Chosongul and is celebrated on January 15.
- 11 See Ledyard (1998[1965]) and Kim-Renaud (2004) on Hanja, Hangeul, and literacy in Korea.
- 12 The transcription and Korean transliteration of the Japanese are incorrect. They should read "[hanba-ga-]" and "한바가" (or, for spoken Japanese, "[hamba-ga-]" and "함바가" due to assimilation). Figure 28.1 originally appeared in Harkness (2012, 365) (see bibliography for full citation).
- 13 <http://scripta.kr/scripta2010/en/>, access November 1, 2012.
- 14 [http://scripta.kr/scripta\\_kr/m\\_01\\_a](http://scripta.kr/scripta_kr/m_01_a), accessed November 1, 2012.
- 15 Whereas Hangeul is celebrated for its supposed ability to accurately represent sounds from foreign languages, and thereby marketed as a global intellectual asset, it can also serve in the further penetration of Korean by English, not only through loan words but also in the movement away from Chinese characters as the basis for names toward Western names written in Hangeul (Kim-Renaud 2004, 173).
- 16 For Leonard Bloomfield, this social dimension of non-standard speech had a nefarious, corrosive quality, suggesting collusion and questionable intentions, as expressed in *Language* (1984[1933], 50): "If the special group is at odds with the rest of the community, it may use its peculiarities of speech as a secret dialect, as do the English-speaking Gypsies. Criminals in various countries have developed such secret dialects."
- 17 Take, for example, publications intended to translate such terms for the uninitiated, e.g. Cho et al. (2002).
- 18 See Lee (2010) for a phonological study of spelling mutations in digitally mediated Korean communication. See Bae (2010) for a comparison between standard abbreviation and Korean internet language.
- 19 See also Brown (2013) on sarcastic uses of honorifics in Korean.
- 20 <http://en.rsrf.org/surveillance-south-korea,39757.html>, accessed November 1, 2013.

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