

Apjonpeop and an emerging new politeness strategy in contemporary Korean

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1. Introduction

A reference term is a linguistic expression that the Speaker (S hereafter) employs in his/her utterance to ‘name’ the target, or the Referent (R hereafter), for the benefit of the Hearer (H hereafter). By definition, R can be any person. It can be the first person, i.e., S him/herself, the second person, i.e., H, or a third person.

As in many other languages, reference terms in Korean are more than just pronouns and personal names. They include kinship terms, title terms, and various other expressions such as combinations of a demonstrative and a pronominal epithet, e.g., *ibun/keubun/jeobun* (this/the/that person, honorific), *yae/kyae/jyae* (this/the/that person (Lit. child), neutral and can be dishonorific), *inom/keunom/jeonom* (this/the/that person, dishonorific), etc. More ‘open’ combinations are also in use, such as those consisting of a surname or a full name and a title term, e.g., *Bakchanho sajang* ((company) President Bak Chan Ho, neutral), *Bak sajangnim* ((company) President Bak, honorific), etc., and those of a possessive pronoun and a kinship or a title term, *neohui eomma* (your mum/mummy, neutral or endearment), *uli seonsaengnim* (our teacher, honorific), etc. The inventory is evidently huge, with the availability of variant forms such as indicated in the examples above as honorific, neutral, dishonorific, etc.

A reference term encodes, however minimally, some properties of R by virtue of its semantics (Malsh (1987)), and hence we can say that the choice of a reference term for a particular R reflects how S sees R in the given speech situation. However, in making the choice of a reference term for a particular R, S is not entirely free. S’s social relationship with H plays an important part. This is clear when we want to have a functional answer as to why in Korean there is more than one pronoun form for the first person singular: *na* (I, neutral), and *jeo* (I, humble). Since the first person pronoun is for S to refer to him/herself for the benefit of H, when the particular H is a senior person, the Korean S would choose *jeo*. Choosing *na* can be inappropriate, because (1) the choice is indicative of S’s understanding of the social relationship between him/herself and H and (2) the senior H may not be happy about the represented relationship.

Referring to H, that is, ‘naming’ *you* to tell H that S is talking about H, can be a difficult task in Korean, as is widely known. There are three pronoun forms for the second person singular: *dangsin* (you, not lowered but not exalted either), *jane* (you, lowered but somewhat elevated), and *neo* (you, lowered). Yet none of them can be employed to refer to H who is senior to S — in this case kinship or title terms are used instead. Again, the difficulties involved in referring to H can be easily accounted for if we assume the importance of the S – H relationship in the choice of a

reference term.

What is less clear and appears not to have been pursued seriously in Korean linguistic circles is the relevancy, and its implications, of the S – H relationship to S's choice of a third person reference term. The availability of a large set of reference terms and their variant forms, which seems rather redundant from a purely grammatical point of view, suggests that reference is not just a grammatical means through which S and H achieve, for instance, discourse cohesion (cf. Halliday and Hassan (1976)). The central claim of this paper is that third person reference terms can also indicate or define the distant and formal, or the close and informal, relationship between S and H, and hence if the choice is inappropriate in the given speech situation, some serious consequences follow for the social relationship between S and H.

In this paper we limit ourselves to pragmatics of third person reference terms in Korean. Our concern is how S refers to an in-group third-person R for the benefit of an out-group H, where the in-group R is senior to S but not to H. As has been reported in Chosun Daily & National Academy of the Korean Language (hereafter CD & NAKL) (1996), many contemporary Koreans find it difficult to find an appropriate third person reference term in this speech situation. More importantly, this is where we find the traditional politeness rule in this culture, known as *Apjonbeop*, or 'rules for suppressing respect', is being replaced by a new politeness strategy. We characterise the strategy as 'new' in the sense that it is a different way of language use that has emerged over the past one or two decades reflecting the changing nature of interpersonal relations in this rapidly changing society. Our aim in this paper however is to bring out the linguistic characteristics of the new way of language use, rather than the changing nature of the society behind it.

2. The data

Politeness pertains to the meaning that arises from interaction between speakers. Observing objectively people's language use in establishing, maintaining and changing personal relations with others, in particular, how they manipulate categories like honorifics in their private world, is a difficult task. As an alternative, we looked at two sources: CD & NAKL (1996) and a videotape of a contemporary TV drama.

CD & NAKL (1996) are the revised Second Edition of the book originally published as *Ulimal-ui yejeol* (Etiquette in our language) in 1992 with the subtitle *Hwabeop-ui silje-wa pyojun* (Polite speech: realities and the standard). From October 1990 to December 1991, the Korean Ministry of Culture, the Chosun Daily Newspaper, and the National Academy of the Korean Language jointly did a national project, entitled *Hwabeop pyojunhwa sa-eop* (Project for the standardisation of polite speech). The objective of the project was to produce guidelines for polite language use; in particular the terms of address and reference. The book *Ulimal-ui yejeol* reports on the findings of the project and includes, questions, opinions and justifications from readers and the general public regarding their own language use, survey results, a few short writings of various writers to highlight the 'chaotic' situation of language use (or misuse), as well as the proposed inventories of correct terms of address/reference. All in all, the book contains invaluable real-life information about ordinary Koreans' language use.

The TV drama we studied is entitled *Maheun sal-e ed-eun haengbok* (A happy life gained at the age of forty), and was broadcast in Korea in February 1994. Set in our own times, the drama describes what happens to a forty-year-old

unmarried man, *nochonggak* (old bachelor) in the Korean expression, in his daily life during one winter. The language in the drama strikes native speakers (six others as well as myself) as naturalistic, normal and appropriate to the situations in which it is used, and to the characters who speak it. The development of the story, particularly the progress of incidents within the story, and the characters' views on the world all seem 'ordinary'. While its running time is approximately an hour, the drama contains plenty of scenes where we can observe in context linguistic interactions among the characters. With the manageably small number of characters, there is a reasonable number of 'minimal pairs' in terms of who speaks to whom, about whom, in the presence of whom and in what situation, it has been possible to conduct a controlled experiment in linguistic analysis (cf. Brown and Gilman (1989)).

3. *apjonpeop*, the normative tradition

The *apjonpeop* appears to have been a verbal repertoire amongst Yangban speakers in traditional Korea, and is essentially a means to recognise H's seniority over S by suppressing respect to Rs who are 'closer' to S than to H. The normative tradition has survived even after the collapse of the Yangban – Sangmin division followed by Japanese rule and the Korean War, but rather than remaining as Yangban speech it has become a means available to anyone who wants to show that they are, perhaps, well-bred.

The *apjonpeop* in its more traditional use involves the knowledge of a long, elaborate list of reference terms for one's family and clan members, e.g., great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, husband, wife, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, various 'uncles' and 'aunts', and various 'cousins' and their sons and daughters. Korean etiquette books published even recently, e.g. Kwon (1999), tend to contain the list. These reference terms are male speaker oriented Sino-Korean expressions, and there is a sharp division for those to be used in referring to one's own and those to be used for other's family and clan members. For instance, when talking about one's father one is to use, e.g., *gachin*, but when talking about other's father one uses, e.g., *chunbujang*. Likewise, for one's own mother one is to use, e.g., *jachin*, but for other's mother use, e.g., *jadang*.

However, the generation fluent in the long list of reference terms is growing old, or more precisely, is dying out. As reported in CD & NAKL (1996:37-39), these Sino-Korean reference terms are mainly a source of confusion to the younger generation, although there remains in their consciousness a 'modified' version of *apjonpeop*: use of a non-exalted variant form when referring to an in-group senior R for the benefit of an out-group senior H.

Consider the following case, reported in CD & NAKL (1996:29).

- (1) ... A company director in his sixties felt embarrassed when one of his young male employees referred to his father who is alive as **seonchin** (Sino-Korean expression for one's deceased father) when requesting special leave. He would like to perform his duty as son and celebrate his father's 70th birthday in his hometown. ...

The young employee may have tried to create for his boss an impression of being well-bred — so as to promote his family's face (in terms of Brown and Levinson (1987)) — by employing the normative tradition, but has unfortunately gaffed by using *seonchin*, a term for a dead father. It is natural that the boss gets embarrassed when the young employee (he describes the employee as a promising, fine young man) comes to him and says that he would like to take leave to go to his deceased father's 70th birthday party. As mentioned above, *gachin* would have

been appropriate in this normative tradition, which connotes that the young man is not elevating his own father in front of his boss.

Reference terms for one's father that are currently used include *abeoji* (father/dad, neutral), *abeonim* (father, exalted), *appa* (daddy, endearment), and *aebi* (male parent(?), deprecatory). Quite possibly the young employee may have juggled with *abeonim* and *abeoci* on his way to his boss, could not decide which one to use, and so chose the 'obscure' reference term. In complying with the *apjonbeop* with the set of more current reference terms, the problem is that none of the terms can be a good replacement for the archaic Sino-Korean terms, which connotes in an 'elegant' way that S is not elevating the in-group R at the expense of the senior H. *Aebi* for one's own father is patently rude, *appa* is too childish a term, *abeoji* by definition has no flavour (it is a neutral term), and *abeonim* sounds contradictory. We contend that this is the very nature of the problem, when many contemporary Koreans report that they have difficulties with *apjonbeop*.

Before closing this section, let us add that *apjonbeop* is still operative in talking to a senior H about an R whose seniority to S is unclear. Examples of this are a wife referring to her husband as *aebi* (male parent(?) of her children, deprecatory) for the benefit of her parent-in-law; and a husband naming his wife as *emi* (female parent(?) of his children, deprecatory) when talking to his parent.

4. Aspects of the new politeness strategy

Within the context of the difficulties involved in, and the changing nature of, the *apjonbeop*, we find a few examples of interesting language use in the TV drama, i.e., a new way of referring to a senior R for the benefit of H who is senior to R. This is what we call the new politeness strategy: where the S – H relationship is distant and formal, S employs an exalted reference term (if there is one), not a non-exalted one, for the senior R even if the R is junior to H. That the relevant examples come from a TV drama does not mean that the new strategy is an unnatural, idiosyncratic language use, however. It simply means that the talented scriptwriter has captured this emerging, new way of naming one's senior in the real world and 'recreated' it in the drama. From my personal experience, this new politeness strategy is already practiced by a noticeable number of speakers.

Consider (2). In the drama, the main character has a twenty-eight-year-old younger brother, who lives away from home. This twenty-eight-year-old has a relationship with his boss's daughter, who is now pregnant, and wants to marry her. This younger son would normally have to wait until his elder brother gets married, as Korean culture dictates. However, he is desperate, and in the following scene is seeking his parents', particularly his father's, approval for marrying before his elder brother. The father in the drama is a stern, authoritarian figure. The younger son is now speaking to him, but in a very careful manner.

- (2) ceo ... ajik ogaewol-i-la ajik pyo-neun an na-jiman
INTJ yet five.months-COP-because yet mark-TOP NEG stand.out-but
 jogum hu-myeon bul-leo o-l-ges
a.little.bit after-if be.swollen-CONJ come-REL(FUT)-thing(PRO)
 gat-aseo-yo. jeo-du **hyeong-nim**-i jeil
seem-because-AHON I-also **elder.brother-HON-NOM** the.first
 geolli-neunde-yo, yakhon-man ha-e-du-ko **hyeong-nim**
worrying-TRANSIT-AHON engagement-only do-CONJ-place-and **elder.brother-HON**
 menje ga-n daum-e po-llyeo-gu-haess-neunde ...
first go-REL(PAST) next-LOC1 see-VOLITN-CONJ-do.PAST-TRANSIT

jeo ... eojujeo-da po-ni sajeong-i geuleohke
 FILLER do.such.and.such-CONJ see-when situation-NOM that.way
 dwaess-supnita
 Become.PAST-HDEF.DECL

“Well, ... it's only five months, so people can't see it (that she's pregnant) yet, but soon they will notice her pregnancy, I suppose. ... I'm also worried about my brother (Lit. **elder brother, exalted**) most. I thought I would just have an engagement and wait until he (Lit. **elder brother, exalted**) gets married. ... But, ... well, somehow, ... things haven't developed that way.”

Notice that the younger son refers to his elder brother as *hyeongnim* (male speaker's elder brother, exalted), not as *hyeong* (male speaker's elder brother, neutral). (In the drama, the younger son addresses his elder brother generally as *hyeong*.) This is a clear contradiction to the spirit of the *abjonbeop*.

The sort of social pressure cast upon this particular S is perhaps that as an adult he should talk like an adult, i.e., give proper deference to his seniors, and more importantly, he has to show this to the even more senior H. In other words, H is then more like a ‘judge’ who has the authority to determine the ‘correctness’ of S's attitude towards R; the more distant and formal the relationship is between S and H, the more care S would exercise in the choice of a reference term to refer to the senior R. The result is, as it stands, that S employs a more deferential reference term for the senior R. Under this new strategy, had the younger brother said (2) to his mother, for example, we would expect him to refer to his elder brother as *hyeong* (elder brother, neutral) — the brothers in the drama are much less distant and formal to their mother. Unfortunately, however, we do not have data to substantiate this in this particular drama.

As mentioned above, many contemporary Koreans report that they find it difficult and confusing to follow the *abjeonbeop*. If one assumes this new politeness strategy, then complying with the normative tradition would create a dilemma. This is because on the one hand S has to ‘show’ to H that he/she can give deference to the senior R in an expected manner by employing a proper, exalted reference term, but on the other hand they are prohibited from doing so. From this we can infer that this new politeness strategy is operating already in contemporary Korea, and that our characterisation of the strategy is more or less correct.

Where does this new strategy come from? It appears that an analogy can be drawn between S's choice of a more elaborated reference term for R when the S – H relationship is distant and formal and S's choice of a more careful language when there is a Bystander in the speech situation. Consider (3), another interesting scene from the TV drama. The forty-year old main character telephones his mother from an express bus — he is travelling to Busan — which has temporarily stopped at a kiosk on the way. He picks up the phone, presses the buttons, and after a few seconds, says:

(3) *yeposeyyo* ... **eomma!**
 Hello mummy/mum

“Hello (a pause in which he presumably hears his mother's voice) Mum!”

He then lowers his voice and continues to say:

(4) *eo, eo, eomeoni-seyo?* *jeo-eyo* ...
 mother-RHON.COP.C'MOOD-AHON I(HUMBLE)-COP.C'MOOD-AHON

“... I mean, is that you, Mother? It's me.”

What the main character is doing here is that he initially calls his mother *eomma* (mum/mummy, endearment) as he does at home, but then, realising that there are other people within earshot on the bus, he switches to *eomeni* (mother, neutral). He does this in order to avoid appearing ludicrous to the passengers inside the bus. It is childlike behaviour, and can thus lead to a loss of face, that a middle-aged man

like him addresses his mother as *eomma* in public in Korea. While the expression *eomma* in (3) is used as an address term, not as a reference term, it does demonstrate our point well: the role of H in the new politeness strategy is analogous to the role of the Bystander in (3) and (4).

Also, in CD & NAKL (1996:225) we have a relevant report from a high school girl. The girl says that she was surprised when she saw her thirty-two-year-old teacher calling her mother (i.e., the teacher's mother) *eomma* (mum/ mummy, endearment). She was surprised because she expected an adult like her teacher to 'behave' differently from her.

- (4) ... One day I saw my teacher carrying lots of bags to her house after school. I helped her, carrying some of her bags. When we got to her house she shouted over the fence: "It's me **eomma** (mum/mummy). Can you open the door?" I was surprised. Of course I call my mum *eomma*, but I didn't think that my teacher would do the same. She is thirty-two years old! ...

While the teacher may not be as sensitive a person as the main character in the drama, we may say that she did not see the school girl as the same sort of Bystander that the man in the drama saw the people on the bus. In terms of the new politeness strategy, (4) would be an analogous situation to where S refers to a senior R for the benefit of the even more senior H whose relationship with S is not distant and formal, that is, where S does not have to exercise extreme care in the choice of the reference term.

The employment of this new politeness strategy is not confined to the family domain. Speakers show the same tendency of naming their senior by a more deferential reference term when speaking to an out-group H. However, although the choice of a more deferential reference term is to indicate to H that S is being polite to his/her senior in an expected manner, it has a side effect. S may also be seen to be attempting to put his senior 'higher' than the out-group H.

Speakers resolve this problem by qualifying the deferential reference term with the First person possessive pronoun, particularly with its humble form. There are four variant forms of the First person possessive pronoun in Korean: *nae* (my, neutral), *je* (my, humble), *uli* (our, neutral) and *jeohui* (our, humble). Among them, it is *jeohui* and *je* that are used for this purpose. We thus see that a 'complex reference term', consisting of the humble form of the First person possessive pronoun and the exalted variant form of a kinship term, is used when speaking to an out-group H. We may perhaps regard it as an instance of pragmatic embedding where 'exaltation' of an in-group senior is embedded in 'self-abasement'.

In the drama, the main character refers to his father as *jeohui buchin* (our[humble] father, exalted and formal) when speaking to a woman who was just introduced to him by his sister. Note that *buchin* is a Sino-Korean expression that has formal and exalted connotations. The purpose for this introduction is to get them to know each other and perhaps develop a further relationship. Hence, it is an awkward moment for the two, where they have to take extreme care in their language. Replying to her comment that the rent would be high (the main character's family owns a shop, but she assumes that the family is renting the shop), he says to her that his family owns the shop and continues:

- (5) *han sipo-nyeon-jeon-i-la geu-ttae-neun*
about fifteen-year-before-COP-because that-time-TOP
ssa-ss-eoss-jyo. **jeohui**
be.cheap-PAST-PAST-JUDGE-C'MOOD.AHON **our(HUMBLE)**
buchin-kkeseo *sa-si-n-geo-la*
father(exalted/formal)-NOM(HON) *buy-RHON-REL(PAST)-thing(PRO)-COP.because*
jeonghwakha-n aeksu-neun gieok mos ha-pnida-man, ...
be.accurate-REL(PAST) figure-TOP memory NEG CAN do-HDEF.DECL-but
 "It was about fifteen years ago (when we bought the shop), so it (the shop) wasn't that

expensive. I can't remember exactly how much it was because my father (Lit. **our father, exalted**) bought it. ...”

While lowering the status of his father by one level, as it were, by choosing the humble form of the possessive pronoun, this forty-year-old man makes an effort to appear that, as a middle-aged man, he knows how to be deferential to his father by employing the highly deferential variant form.

Later in the drama the family's second son arranges for his elder brother and his friend's elder sister to come together to Busan, where he and his fiance's family live. When they arrive he quickly asks the two to pretend to be a married couple in front of his future father-in-law, and then introduces the two to his future father-in-law:

- (6) **jeohui** **hyeong-nim** **naeoe-bun-i-si-pnida**
our(HUMBLE) elder.brother-HON spouse-CL(PERSON.HON)-COP-RHON-HDEF.DECL
 “These are my (Lit. our) elder brother and his wife.”

Here, *naeoe* means a ‘married couple’ (literally ‘inside and outside’) and *bun* is an exalted Classifier for human. Inside the Possessor construction, *jeohui hyeongnim* (our[humble] elder brother[exalted]), another Possessor and a Possessed are embedded, which are *jeohui* (our[humble]) and *hyeongnim* (elder brother[exalted]), respectively. Again, while lowering the status of his elder brother and his ‘wife’ by one level by choosing the humble form of the possessive pronoun, the family's second son makes an effort to appear that, as an adult, he knows how to be deferential to his elder brother and his wife.

The choice between the singular and the plural forms of the First person possessive pronoun also assumes more than just the semantic category of number, i.e., whether or not the Possessor is singular. A careful study uncovers that underlying the choice is a culture-specific assumption about junior–senior relationships in general. When the First person possessive pronoun is used in referring to a senior, it is the plural form, *uli* or *jeohui*, that is most likely to be used. This is so even when S is the only one who is in the particular kin relation with the senior R. For instance, the second son introduces his elder brother and his ‘wife’ as *jeohui hyeongnim naeoebun* (our elder brother's couple) to his future father-in-law in (6) above. He uses *jeohui* (our[humble]) even though he has no other brothers who would identify the main character as *hyeongnim*.

By contrast, when the First person possessive pronoun is used in referring to a junior, it is the singular form, *nae* or *je*, that is most likely to be used. In the drama, when the main character thanks his younger brother's future father-in-law for having been generous to his younger brother, he uses *je dongsaeng* (my[humble] younger brother), not *jeohui dongsaeng* (our[humble] younger brother), as in (7).

- (7) **je** **dongsaeng-eul** **jal dolbw-a** **ju-sy-eoseo**
my(HUMBLE) younger.brother-ACC well look.after-CONJ give-RHON-because
gamsaha-pnida ...
be.grateful-HDEF.DECL
 “Thank you very much for having been generous to (Lit.) my younger brother.”

Upon hearing the main character's saying (7), the second son's future father-in-law, in fact, replies that he does not want to be seen to be ‘snatching’ a son away from home. The main character then says:

- (9) **geuleom-yo.** **gwiha-n** **tta-nim-eul**
be.so-C'MOOD.AHON invaluable-REL(PAST) daughter-HON-ACC
ju-si-eoseo **jeohui** **bumo-nim-deul-kkeseo-do**
give-RHON-because our(HUMBLE) parent-HON-PL-NOM(HON)-also
gamsaha-gey saenggakha-go **gyesi-pnida**
be.grateful-CONJ think-CONJ EXISTV(RHON)-HDEF.DECL

“Of course not! My (Lit. our) parents are also grateful (to you) for allowing (them to have) your invaluable daughter (as their daughter-in-law).”

Our main character’s choice of *jeohui* here is not necessarily an indication that he now includes his brother into the discourse. Rather, it is part of the deference directed towards the referents who are senior to him, i.e., his parents.

Behind the use of the plural form of the First person possessive pronoun in referring to a senior R is a belief that the senior–junior relationship is a one-to-many relationship, not a one-to-one relationship. That is, when a junior S refers to his/her senior with a kinship term under this politeness strategy, he/she ‘says’ that he/she is not the only one ‘under’ the senior R in the same kin relationship. Hence, the junior S says *our elder brother* rather than *my elder brother* for instance. However, nothing hinders a senior S assuming that, when referring to his/her junior with a kinship term, he/she is the only one who is ‘above’ the junior R, hence *my younger brother* rather than *our younger brother*, as we witnessed above.

It should be added that the cultural belief that the senior–junior relationship is a one-to-many relationship does not always override the semantic category of number. On intuitive grounds, when a senior S expresses that he/she ‘shares’ the junior R with others, or when a junior S wants to emphasise that he/she is the only ‘Possessor’ of the senior R, S will certainly use *our younger brother*, i.e., *uli dongsaeng* or *jeohui dongsaeng*, and *my elder brother*, i.e., *nae hyeong* or *je hyeongnim*, respectively.

Abbreviations

ACC Accusative case	AHON Addressee honorific suffix
C'MOOD Common mood	CL Classifier
CONJ Conjunctive verb suffix	COP Copula
DECL Declarative ending	EXISTV Existential verb
FUT Future tense	HDEF Highly deferential speech style
HON Honorific	INTJ Interjection
JUDGE Judgemental modality	LOC1 Inner-locative case
NEG Negative Adverb (not)	NEGCAN Negative Adverb (cannot/could not)
NOM Nominative case	PAST Past tense
PL Plural	PRO Pronominal
REL Relative clause	RHON Referent honorific suffix
TOP Topic marker	TRANSIT Transitional modality
VOLITN Volitional modality	X.Y (X and Y are fused)
X-Y (X and Y are not fused)	

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