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A Discourse-pragmatic Approach to Advanced Korean¹

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The Korean project of CALPER considers advanced language proficiency from the point of view of grammar and pragmatics. This project takes a non-traditional position on “grammar” by referring to it not as a static set of prescriptive rules, but as dynamic sets of potential linguistic choices that speakers appeal to as vehicles for expressing *concepts, ideas, stances, and perspectives*. In this sense, grammar at advanced levels of language proficiency is inherently linked to and dependent upon both context and discourse.

The materials that we have developed and will be developing for CALPER are based on the belief that, at advanced levels of study, grammatical knowledge is not simply morphosyntactic knowledge—it also requires conceptual and pragmatic sensitivity. In this way, the notion of “grammatical rule” becomes much less straightforward than at beginning and intermediate levels.

That is, at lower levels of language learning and teaching, grammar tends to appear in the form of rule recitations, often with long lists of “how” and “why” forms are used in a language and often with equally long if not longer lists of *exceptions*. Grammatical rules typically target such morphosyntactic issues as subject-verb agreement; tense, aspect, and modality; nominal reference including definiteness and indefiniteness; personal and demonstrative pronouns; and deference marking. At beginning and intermediate levels, learners and teachers are oriented to the notions of “grammatical sentences” or “ungrammatical sentences” on the basis of whether or not these rules have been obeyed on the one hand or violated on the other. Grammar from this perspective is viewed as if only in black or white: An utterance is either right or wrong, grammatical or not—and students and teachers at lower levels of language education can articulate the precise reasons for each type of judgment by reciting the relevant conditions of the rule in question.

In contrast with beginning and intermediate students, advanced learners interact with the target language almost exclusively at the discourse level, where prescriptive rules tend to break down: The boundaries between grammaticality and ungrammaticality become “fuzzy” and exceptions to prescriptive rules abound in the discourse. At this level of language study, traditional approaches to grammar become increasingly less reliable since they cannot account for the types and range of ambiguity that pervade natural language. Traditional materials also are unable to explain finer-grained distinctions in language use—particularly in cases where different linguistic and grammatical forms have seemingly similar functions. Teachers typically have trouble explaining these issues, often resorting to such blanket answers as “they’re the same, don’t worry about it—even native speakers don’t know” or the cryptic catch-all “well, it depends.”

An approach to grammar that privileges *conceptual meaning* as opposed to traditional objectivist definitions enables students and teachers to understand grammar as a dynamic set of linguistic choices and to realize that linguistic structures, from the single morpheme to compound constructions, carry powerful elements of meaning potential. A conceptualization-based approach to grammar allows for a far more efficient and succinct articulation of this meaning potential than traditional approaches. Further, through this type of approach, students and teachers alike increase their sensitivity to language by discovering key patterns within larger spates of natural discourse.

To illustrate, consider the English excerpt in (1) adapted from a television commercial for the Tempur-Pedic Mattress System:

(1) ((voiceover – camera is on the bedding; the toll-free telephone number remains on the screen))

male voice: “*Here’s the top five reasons you should call the number on your screen and find out more about Tempur-Pedic*”

What is at issue here is the singular form of the copula ‘be’ used with a plural subject, ‘the top five reasons’—an ungrammatical sentence from a prescriptivist point of view.

A more correct version might look like the sentence in (1’):

(1') ***“Here are the top five reasons...”***

The utterances in (1) and (1') differ only from the point of view of *conceptual focus*. That is, the focus in (1) centers on the five reasons as *an integral list* of items constituting the rationale to seriously consider purchasing this product. In (1'), each reason constitutes a recognizably individuated member within the set of ‘top five reasons.’ From the point of view of grammatical usage, both sentences are actually “correct,” though only (1') follows the prescriptive rule (Reid 1991).

Illustrations from the CALPER Korean Project

The materials that we design for the Korean project of CALPER are structured to encourage users to discover similar types of conceptually-based linguistic patterns through excerpts from our discourse database that are carefully selected and strategically ordered to gradually reveal the underlying conceptual meaning of each target form—a core meaning for the target construction.

Honorific Speech Levels

A case in point involves the two-tiered system of honorific verbal endings in Korean, i.e. the polite form -요 and the deferential form -습니다. Both are honorific forms and contrast with a set of four other verb endings that are not honorific. In this sense, using the classic T-V framework (simplifying it for the purpose of this illustration), it could be said that Korean has *two* V-forms and *four* T-forms.

In Korean reference grammars and textbooks, the two V-type forms are essentially distinguished on the basis of social hierarchy, such that the deferential form is considered to express a greater degree of respect and formality and the polite form, a somewhat lesser degree, though still honorific in both form and function (Lee and Ramsey 2000; Martin 1964; Sohn 1994, 1999). Typically, then, when an adult speaker formally addresses another adult speaker of a significantly higher social status, the deferential form would be expected. However, in natural discourse, speakers frequently alternate between the polite and deferential forms even when addressing the identical interlocutor or group of interlocutors. So, clearly, social status alone cannot be a reliable predictor. Observe example (2), excerpted from a popular television talk show:

(2) ((An advice segment from a morning television program: The guest is a well-known sociologist, Professor Mina Lee, from a large university in Seoul who has read a letter from one of the viewers seeking advice about his marriage. The letter writer was then contacted by phone to speak directly with Professor Lee on the air))

1 Hostess: **이럴 땐 어떻게 해야 돼요** 이미나 교수님?

‘What should we do [POL] in this case, Professor Mina Lee?’

2 Professor Lee: 지금 말씀하신 거.: 하고 편지 내용을 가지고는.: 으.::

제가 지금 두 가지를 **생각하는데요**^

‘With what you (i.e., the caller) said and with the contents of the letter, I now **think** [POL] of two things.’

3 Professor Lee: 하나는 지금 칠 년 되셨다고 **그랬죠**?

‘One of them is-, Now you **said** you’ve been married for seven years, **right** [POL]?’

4 Caller: 네.

‘Yes’

5 Professor Lee: 그 서양에서도 칠 년의 위기라는 게 **있습니다**

‘In the West, too, **there is** [DEF] (a phenomenon) called “the seven year itch.”’

Here, the hostess, in her direct address to Professor Lee uses the polite form, not the deferential form—and this, in spite of the fact that Professor Lee occupies an unequivocally higher social status than the actress/hostess of the program. Professor Lee also uses the polite form in turns 2 and 3, however, she switches to the deferential form in turn 5, with no change of interlocutor. Moreover, the interaction in 1 - 5 sounds completely “natural” even though the traditional rules, in their literal application, appear to have been violated.

A new rule, one that is based on conceptualization patterns that underlie language use by native speakers, would take into account not only the static components of the communicative event, i.e., the relative status and rank of the interlocutors, but also a range of dynamic components—elements that change and shift as the discourse changes and shifts. For example, as we note in Professor Lee’s switch to the deferential form in turn 5, she also switches an element of her self-presentation—she now frames herself as an authoritative expert on the topic. Thus, the shift to the deferential form marks a dually relevant conceptual shift in a) Professor Lee’s stance vis à vis the information being imparted (as an objective fact) and b) her stance vis à vis her interlocutors’ sharing of this information. In other words, the shift in linguistic form signals a shift in the contextual and conceptual frame. That is, when adult speakers use the polite form of verbal endings, they are framing their interlocutors as sharing some aspect of common ground. In this sense, the polite ending functions as an index of *inclusion* whereby the speaker considers the interactants as sharing a common domain of knowledge and/or expertise. Conversely, the deferential form functions as an index of *exclusion* whereby the speaker frames him/herself as the authority or expert on a particular topic, circumscribing a conceptual barrier between him/herself and the interactants (Eun and Strauss 2004, Strauss and Eun 2005).

Thus, a conceptualization-based approach to advanced level grammar essentially does away with lists of rules and lists of exceptions through the articulation of a generalized meaning that captures the majority of discursive patterns in natural language use.

Markers of Newly Perceived Information

A second example involves two sentence-ending particles that Korean speakers use to indicate newly perceived information—typically as indicators of surprise or of a brand new realization. The two particles are -군 (‘kwun’) and -네 (‘ney’). Traditional accounts of Korean

typically state that -ㄴㄹ ('kwun') marks a new and immediate discovery on the part of the speaker. -네 ('ney') is said to be similar, but its meaning includes the added component of *counter-expectation*. In other words, according to traditional views, when speakers produce a -네 ('ney')-marked utterance, they are pragmatically implicating that the present discovery is actually *different* from what s/he had believed (H.S. Lee 1991, 1993; K. Lee 1993; Sohn 1994, 1999).

However, in analyzing our corpus of spoken discourse data, -네 ('ney') overwhelmingly occurs in contexts where the speaker is providing a compliment or expressing empathy toward his/her interlocutor, while -ㄴㄹ ('kwun') simply marks an instantaneous or immediate discovery triggered by the speaker's direct perception of something within the context. Further, while -ㄴㄹ ('kwun') indicates an immediate realization, -네 ('ney') signals that the speaker has actually pieced together some type of contextual evidence and *then* arrives at the realization. So, while both do indeed mark surprise and or immediate discovery, the -네 ('ney')-marked utterance pragmatically implicates that the speaker has just undergone *a process of reasoning* (and not simply a punctual discovery as indicated by -ㄴㄹ ('kwun')) which then leads him/her to utter the conclusion at hand (Strauss 2005, Strauss and Ahn 2007).

A typical use of -네 ('ney') is illustrated in (3). This is an excerpt from a popular morning television program in which relatives who have been separated from one another appear on the show in an attempt to locate their estranged family members.

(3) ((the guest (g) is looking for his siblings; the hostess (h) is helping him locate his surviving family members –she interviews him informally))

1 금희 (h): 그러면 양부모님께서는 지금 생존해계신가요?

So, are your step-parents alive now?

2 이쁜 (g): 아뇨 놀아가셨어요.

No, they passed away.

3 금희 (h): 아

Ah

4 금희 (h): 외롭게 지내시겠네요.

You must be lonely.—NEY ('since the step parents are no longer living')

Within this short exchange, the hostess and guest are reviewing the current details of the guest's life. When the hostess hears that the guest's step-parents are no longer alive, she produces a -네 ('ney')-marked utterance, pragmatically implicating her mental *process of having linked this information together and then arriving at the conclusion*. It is this type of thoughtful mental process that achieves such interactional characteristics as expressing empathy, demonstrating understanding, and providing compliments.

The *meaning* contrast between the two particles is illustrated in (3'), which is a variation of the same utterance, only this time marked with the sentence ender -군 ('kwun').

(3') –Alternate response with -군 ('kwun')

외롭게 지내시겠군 요.

You must be lonely.— KWUN (pragmatically expresses surprise at having just learned this fact)

As we can see, what is implicated through a -군 ('kwun')-marked utterance is the speaker's sheer surprise at an immediate discovery—an unlikely way for an interactant to express empathy, kindness, or understanding in the face of this current state of affairs.

Thus, by achieving an understanding of conceptual meaning as a generalized, generalizable, and unified meaning of the specific linguistic forms, advanced learners also come to grasp the subtle nuances of language that have not been documented in traditional reference

materials. Through this broad perspective of “grammatical element as carrier of meaning potential,” advanced language users come to understand precisely how grammatical choice can serve as means for expressing complex ideas, subjective reactions, and personal stances vis à vis events, situations, persons, outcomes, and so forth—without the bookish, stilted, or “textbook” type of language that so often emerges in non-neutral, spontaneous discourse by advanced learners. This approach to linguistic awareness also serves to help learners avoid sounding theatrical, scripted, or pragmatically inappropriate in subjectively and affectively influenced discursive environments.

CALPER Korean Project Pedagogical Resources

The discourse-pragmatic approach to grammar as presented here is especially well suited for advanced level learners and teachers of any language given its discourse-centeredness and the pragmatic sensitivity that it is able to both capture discourse analytically and explain in pedagogical contexts. It is an approach that lends itself well to grammatical analysis, applicable to virtually any type of genre and any discourse medium (i.e., oral, written, and computer-mediated). This discourse-pragmatic approach is detailed in the *Korean Grammar in Discourse and Interaction: Materials for Advanced/Heritage Korean* , available at <http://calper.la.psu.edu/korean.php> The materials consist of four units: 1) Completive Aspect Markers; 2) Honorific Speech Levels; 3) Markers of Newly Perceived Information; and 4) Getting from Here to There - Korean Route Directions. The explanations and exercises are designed to reflect actual patterns of the target forms within discourse. They are intended to guide users to both inductively and deductively focus on such patterns and to ultimately uncover the conceptual schemata that underlie each form. Once users succeed in pinpointing and articulating the conceptual schemata, they can then learn to disambiguate the target forms on the basis of their conceptual meaning and also to produce these forms in their own discourse in pragmatically appropriate ways.

As for language pedagogy at beginning and/or intermediate levels, a discourse-pragmatic approach could also work, complete with the potential of inspiring language students and teachers to view grammar as fun and exciting – especially given the powerful concept of *meaning potential* carried by each grammatical form, be it a particle, a verb ending, or an entire phrasal construction. In this type of approach, the “grammatical rule” ceases to be equated with

mechanical recitations of invented lists concerning “how” and “why” particular forms are used. Instead, the concept of “grammatical rule” becomes the articulation of a *core meaning* that can be generalized across most contexts of use for the target form. If this type of approach were actually implemented in earlier levels of foreign and second language study, one might also predict that “advanced language proficiency” as discussed here and elsewhere in our CALPER documents might be achieved more swiftly and more efficiently, since the approach essentially does away with the “rules of thumb” of prescriptive grammar and replaces them with an understanding of grammar as a meaning-based, dynamically driven choice of linguistic form.

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