Impoliteness phenomena in Korean applied to translation of English conflict talk*

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Jee-Won Hahn. 2016. Impoliteness phenomena in Korean applied to translation of English conflict talk. Language and Linguistics 71, 309-336. Studies on impoliteness recently began to receive attention from academics. This study investigates how impoliteness behavior is manifested in Korean by looking at translation. The study examines linguistic choices that translators make to create conflict talk. The scene as impoliteness phenomena was selected from the movie Chef (2014) which is composed of an argument between characters. For analysis, a set of impoliteness formula in Culpeper (2005) were employed since the framework provides a useful cross-cultural application. According to the results, verbal arguments in Korean is realized by personalized insults, unpalatable questions, and code-switching. Korean honorifics serve to generate impoliteness with respect to the choice of speech styles and their social factors. Particularly, sarcasm is found to be one of the major forms in attacking the other’s face. Sarcastic meaning was elicited by a new category like adverse statements as well as use of honorifics supporting previous findings. Language specific features contribute to develop some theoretical perspectives in relation with insults and some grammatical realizations.

Keywords : Impoliteness, Korean, Honorifics, Sarcasm, Translation, Insults

* This work was supported by the 2015 research funded by Pukyong National University.
1. Introduction

Politeness literature has been the center in pragmatics and discourse since Brown and Levinson (1987). Early approaches propose speaker’s intention to be polite or rude is delivered through the use of language. These studies examine whether linguistic expressions sound polite or impolite or appropriate. Under the discursive approaches (Terkourafi 2005), the notion of politeness has been reconceptualized into evaluations by members. (Im)polite behavior will be what is perceived to be appropriate or inappropriate to the ongoing social interaction. These scholars theorize that no word or phrase is inherently polite or impolite pointing out a difference between formal properties and its contextualized application. Even taboo words may not be interpreted as ‘impolite’ when they are used as a marker of harmony and in-group between intimates. Requests realized as in the form of interrogatives (e.g. Could you close the door?) may sound sarcastic when it is inappropriately used (e.g. speaking to a friend). Evaluations on politeness are not linked into speaker’s intention of a particular speech act. Instead, they are affected by dynamic factors such as social factors and cross-cultural differences.

A distinction between polite and impolite behavior emerges as two main perspectives. One view is to take impoliteness in a wider context of politeness (Watts 2003) and as a continuum of the same concept and the related concept not distinguishing the two phenomena. Polite behavior is defined as unmarked and goes unnoticed while impolite behavior is marked. According to Watts, polite or appropriate behavior is not easily noticed by ordinary language users because they satisfy social expectations. Thus, it is difficult to observe polite behavior. On the contrary, impolite or inappropriate behavior is treated as noticeable because social norms are broken.