Deconstruction of Speech Levels

Byung-Soo Park
Kyung Hee University

0. Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to formulate a new approach to the so-called "speech levels." This approach is an information-based one in the sense of Pollard and Sag (1987, 1992). While formulating the information-based approach, I propose a new orientation for the system of speech levels. I do not intend to concern myself with the on-going controversy over the nature of the speech level hierarchy. Instead, I maintain that we must turn our attention from the ontological question of speech level hierarchy to the linguistic questions: what kinds of contextual information may particular sentence type enders have? And how do the speakers utilize them when they talk? First, I discuss the problems revealed in the previous studies of speech levels, and then I present my version of an information-based approach as an alternative.

1. Power Hierarchy Hypothesis

It seems to me that too much emphasis has been put on one single question in the previous studies: which speech level is higher (or lower) than which. As an answer to the question, the grammarians, traditional or generative, have attempted to establish a hierarchy of speech levels, while they usually disagree with each other in doing so.

Korean sentences end with particular morphemes. They are determined by the two factors: sentence types and styles. Thus declarative sentences end with declarative sentence type enders, interrogative sentences with interrogative sentence type enders, imperative sentences with imperative sentence type enders, etc. Furthermore, there are several different forms for each sentence type ender, depending on what kind of power relation the speaker (or the writer) and the hearer are in. Using declarative sentences as examples, the speaker is required to use high speech level enders like '-supnita' or '-eyo' when he or she talks to his or her seniors such as his or her parents or teachers or boss. When one talks to one's younger brother or sister, one should use lower speech level enders. And the speaker will have to use different speech levels if he talks to his close friends. Korean traditional grammars usually list four levels: highest, high, low, and lowest. (Choe (1959)) Martin (1964) gives a six speech level system: plain, intimate, familiar, polite, authoritative, and deferential. Perhaps the most elaborate and complex system was proposed by Sung (1985), who distinguished between two social dialects with regard to the usage of speech levels: the older generation dialect (the upper level system, in his term) and the younger generation one (the lower level system), and claimed that each dialect had its own two-dimensional speech level system: in the case of older generation dialect, the first dimension comprises four levels and the second dimension two levels and in the case of younger generation dialect, the first dimension has two speech levels and the second two, and so there are altogether ten speech levels in this system as follows:

```
(1) A. Upper Level System

    1) Highest (-upnita) .... First Dimension
    2) Higher (-o) .......... First Dimension
         *) General High (-eyo) ... Second Dimension
    3) Lower (-key) ........ First Dimension
    4) Lowest (-nunta) ...... First Dimension
         *) General Low (-e) ...... Second Dimension
      (*indicates an extra-level speech level.)

    B. Lower Level System

    1) High (-hasipsiyo) .... First Dimension
         1) High (hayyo) .......... Second Dimension
    2) Low (-hayla) ........ First Dimension
         2) Low (hay) ............. Second Dimension
```

In this system, the first dimension speech levels are meant to be rather strict, and the second dimension levels, the so-called 'panmal' speech levels, are somewhat flexible in the sense that they may replace other first dimension speech levels under certain conditions. Not only in this system, but in all other systems presented so far, however, it is always a problem where the 'panmal' speech levels are located in the hierarchy, and it has never seemed to be settled.

I have introduced just the three different views on speech levels. A glance at any previous study on speech levels would lead us to abundantly different views on speech levels. However, all those conflicting views have one thing in common: they assume that there is a strict hierarchy among sentence type enders, as the term "speech level" implies. Let us call this a Power Hierarchy Hypothesis (PHH).

Apart from this hypothesis, Korean linguists are in disagreement. As mentioned above, they disagree with each other even on the two very primary questions: How many speech levels are there in Korean ? How are sentence type enders classified in terms of speech levels? According to Sung (1985, 1991), the number of speech levels in the different systems advocated so far ranges from the simplest two to the most complex ten. Among those proposals, they reveal differences concerning the relative heights of certain sentence enders. For instance, for some, the '-e' style (the so-called 'panmal' "half language") is higher than the '-ke' style, and for others, exactly the reverse is true. The '-yo' style is considered as a high speech level by some, while the same style is considered as a lower speech level by others. It is perhaps not exaggerating to say that different linguists propose different speech level systems.

This controversy is puzzling, however. Because all of the proposals are intended to analyze modern standard Korean, the different results should not be attributed to regional dialects. Then, why are there so many disparate proposals about speech levels in Korean? Many people have indicated that there is a sociolinguistic reason for this. The transition from a traditionally Confucian society to a more egalitarian society has brought about partial breakdown of the rigid speech level system, and this may be responsible for the confusing descriptions of speech levels. There may be some truth in this view, but I doubt that this is the real reason for the linguists' confusing descriptions.

I think the real reason lies in the methodology employed by the linguists who have dealt with speech levels. It seems to me that it is a wrong question to ask exactly how many speech levels

exist in Korean. For example, given the three sentence enders '-(s)upnita' , '-eyo', and '-e', it is a wrong question to ask which is higher than which in the speech level hierarchy. Such questions presuppose that each sentence ender is assigned an absolute value in the spectrum of speech level. This is exactly what is implied by the Power Hierarchy Hypothesis. But this approach cannot describe what is really going on in using sentence enders in a satisfactory way. We run into difficulty if we try to assign an absolute power value to any of the three enders. The same speaker could use any of the three in a conversation with the same hearer, quite appropriately depending upon the context of conversation. Suppose that a female adult speaker talks to her mother:

```
(2)  Swuni-ka  o-pnita. (With the so-called highest
                                  speech level)
     Suni-NOM  come-S(entence) E(nder)
     'Suni is coming.'
(3)  Swuni-ka  o-ayo. (With the relatively high level)
(4)  Swuni-ka  o-a. (With the 'panmal' level)
```

According to the traditional speech level hierarchy, (2) ends with a highest speech level, (3) with a slightly high speech level, and (4) with a low speech level (the so-called 'panmal'), and therefore, under the social convention that the mother is higher in power relation than the daughter, only (2) or (3) should be allowed. In actuality, however, not only (2) or (3) but (4) could be uttered by the same speaker to the same hearer. (2) is most appropriate where formality is required, (3) is possible when the daughter and the mother are in a friendly and relaxed mood, and (4) is also possible where they are more relaxed, not conscious of other people around or with their privacy well secured. How could one account for this flexibility, if the sentence enders were assigned absolute speech level values? A traditional approach assuming the Power Hierarchy Hypothesis could not account for the fact that the daughter may choose any of the three sentence enders in accordance with the conversational context.

It is sometimes observed even in one and the same discourse that speakers change their speech levels from time to time. Observe the following discourse:

```
(5)  kulen il-un iss-ul su eps-upnita. kuttay ku-nun
     keki eps-ess-eyo.  kuliko ku-ka selsa keki iss-ess-
     telato..., ku-ka kulel salam-i ani-lako. ku-nun
     celtay ku-len salam-i ani-ya.  aam, ani-ko mal-ko.
     ca, kuleni, kulen uisim-un kuman ha-si-yo.

     'Such a thing is unthinkable.  He was not there at
     that time. Even if he had been there,  he would
     not have done such a thing.  He is not such a man.
     No! He is not !  So please don't harbor such a
     doubt.'
```

This piece of discourse is composed of six declarative sentences, and the sentences end with different speech levels. In the beginning, the speaker uses a '(s)upnita" level, and then he switches to a '-eyo' level, then to a 'panmal' level and keeps going for a while, and finally back to a high '-yo' level. The speaker switches speech levels freely as his feelings or attitudes toward the hearer and the issue under discussion fluctuate while talking. This would be a serious problem for the Power Hierarchy Hypothesis.

Thus we see that all kinds of speech levels, rather than only certain particular kinds, may be at the speaker's disposal, not only when he speaks to different people on different occasions (as in (2-4)), but also when he speaks to one and the same person in one and the same situation or on different occasions (as in (5)). The flexibility shown in such a situation, which I think has never been discussed explicitly in the previous studies in spite of sporadic mention of them, should pose a serious difficulty for any approach assuming the Power Hierarchy Hypothesis, because it must always select one particular speech level corresponding to the relevant power relation between the speaker and the hearer, excluding all other possibilities. As we saw earlier, this does not adequately reflect the real usage of speech levels.

3. Power, Solidarity , and Formality and The Information-Based Approach

Power relation, which is defined by age, kinship relation, social status, or other ranks, is certainly one of the important factors for choosing the forms of sentence type enders, but it is not the only one. There are two more determining factors: solidarity and formality. The notion 'Solidarity' is introduced to indicate the degrees of friendliness, intimacy, or familiarity. Formality referes to the degree of formality of a given discourse context. The traditional grammarians' approach tended to rely on power relation, ignoring the other two, and recent studies like Seo (1984) or Sung (1985) introduced the formality factor. And Sohn (1983) examined the styles of Korean in terms of power and solidarity, the notions borrowed from Brown (1965). However, all the previous studies maintain either implicitly or explicitly that there is a strict hierarchy of speech levels, i.e., they follow the Power Hierarchy Hypothesis. Unless we are freed from this straight jacket, we are unable to describe the flexible variation in sentence type endings available to the speakers such as is exemplified in (1)-(3) and (4). Abandoning the PHH or at least relaxing it drastically (*), we can begin to formulate an information-based approach to speech levels in which the speaker is given the choice to appeal to any of the three factors, Power, Solidarity, and Formality: sometimes only one and other times a combination of any two or three. Under the information-based approach, each of the sentence type enders will be specified as to what information it contains on the three determining factors: Power, Solidarity, and Formality. (The notions "power" and "solidarity" are borrowed from Brown and Gilman (1960).) We will refer to these three attributes as "Speaker's Discourse Attitude Styles (SDAS)" since they essentially distinguish between different styles resulting from the speaker's different attitude(s) toward the hearer in discourse. The SDAS attribute has Power, Solidarity, and Formality as its values, and each value has its own attribute-value matrix, which Pollard and Sag (1992) refer to as "feature structure." Thus the Power attribute has the following values:

```
(6)    RELATION    honor
       HONOROR     SPEAKER
       HONORED     HEARER
       POLARITY    1
```

This feature structure is to be assigned as the value of the Power attribute of sentence enders like '-upnita, -o, -eyo, etc.' A feature structure which is identical with (6) except for the polarity value will be assigned to sentence enders like '-nunta, -e, -key, etc.' whose polarity value should be zero.

It is assumed that the Solidarity attribute has Intimate, Neutral or Unfamiliar as its value and that the Formality attribute has Formal, Neutral, or Informal as its value. Therefore, there may

be at most 18 different Speaker's Discourse Attribute Styles logically. For example, the sentence ending '-upnita' may be assigned the Speaker's Discourse Attitude Styles features in the following manner:

(7) '-upnita' Style

```
      Power   Solidarity   Formality

        1     Intimate     Formal
        1     Intimate     Neutral
        1     Neutral      Formal
        1     Neutral      Neutral
        1     Unfamiliar   Formal
        1     Unfamiliar   Neutral
```

What I intend to express by this table showing the distribution of the SDAS features is that the sentence ending '-upnita' may be used in six different contexts, which exclude the two features: [Power zero] and [Formality Informal). For example, if the ender is assigned [POWER 1], [SOLIDARITY intimate], and [FORMALITY formal], the speaker may choose it when he or she speaks to a person who is older or higher in family hierarchy than the speaker but who is friendly or intimate to the speaker in a formal occasion; sentence (2) is a good example for this case. For another example, if it is assigned [POWER 1], [SOLIDARITY unfamiliar], and [FORMALITY neutral], it may be used in a context where the hearer is higher in status than the speaker, the hearer is a stranger to the speaker, and the conversational occasion is not particularly formal or informal.

The low speech 'panmal' ('-e' style) can be seen as having the following SDAS attributes:

(8) '-e' Style

```
      Power      Solidarity      Formality

        0       Intimate         Neutral
        0       Intimate         Informal
        0       Neutral          Neutral
        0       Neutral          Informal
        0       Unfamiliar       Neutral
        0       Unfamiliar       Informal
        1       Intimate         Neutral
        1       Intimate         Informal
        1       Neutral          Neutral
        1       Neutral          Informal
        1       Unfamiliar       Neutral
        1       Unfamiliar       Informal
```

The speaker would be given the twelve options in using the '-e' style. Only the FORMAL attribute is excluded from consideration. The '-e' style is not allowed to be used when he speaks in a formal context, but it is allowed to be used when he speaks to anyone, regardless of power relationship or solidarity value.

By specifying the Speaker's Discourse Attitude Style features to each sentence type ending, we can account for the diversity of its use in various conversational contexts. Note that as many attribute-value pairs as is needed can be assigned cumulatively to a sentence type ender as long as the values specified are compatible with each other.

For example, the main verb with the sentence ender '-e' of sentence (4) should contain the following attribute-value matrix, when it is spoken by the daughter to her mother:

```
(9) [POWER 0]
    [SOLIDARITY intimate]
    [FORMALITY  informal]
```

On the other hand, the same verb should have different values when it is used in a different context. For example, in case it is used by the mother when she talks to her daughter, the verb should contain information represented by the following marix:

```
(10) [POWER 1]
     [SOLIDARITY intimate]
     [FORMALITY  informal]
```

What I want to emphasize is that the information-based approach to speech levels is an attempt to characterize contexts in which sentence type enders can be used by assigning each sentence ender necessary contextual information on the speaker's attitudes toward the hearer and their communicative environment. The speaker's attitudes have two aspects: whether the speaker is higher or lower than the hearer in social hierarchy (what I call Power Relation) and how intimate the speaker feels the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is (what I call Solidarity). By communicative environment, I mean the degrees of formality of the occasion in which the speaker and the hearer participate together, which I call Formality. Note in particular that the information-based approach does not attemp to establish a hierarchy of any sort. I argue that once a rigid hierarchy of speech levels is established, it can no longer cope with the flexibility observed in using speech levels in actual contexts. The flexibility comes from the very nature of sentence type enders: sentence type enders must be seen from three different perspectives: Power Relation, Solidarity, and Formality. Because of this three-face aspect of a sentence type ender, any kind of hierarchy defeined in terms of any one of the three attributes must fall short of describing the flexible usage of sentence type enders.   As I pointed out in the previous section, the Power Hierarchy Hypothesis, a hierarchy defined in terms of power relation, is unable to account for the fact that one and the same "speech level" can be used by the same speaker when (s)he speaks to different people who are in different hierarchy relation with the speaker. This fact is comparable with code switching: speakers change their styles as they face different discourse contexts. For this reason, I would suggest we use the term "speech style" abandoning the term "speech level."

I argue that, in examining the sentence type enders, it is more important to focus on describing contextual information each sentence ender may contain in different contexts than attempting to establish a strict hierarchy of speech levels to which everybody would agree. This is exactly what the information-based approach intends to achieve. In other words, arguing for the information-based approach to speech styles, I suggest that we should investigate how sentence type enders (and ultimately how sentences) are used in actual contexts.

4. Concluding Remarks

This paper offers a new orientation for what I call "speech styles," traditionally "speech levels." Many traditional approaches to them have one thing in common: they assume that there is a strict hierarchy, which I call Power Hierarchy Hypothesis. I have shown that this hypothesis does not adequately reflect the flexible usage of sentence type enders. I argue that the information-based approach, which makes it possible either to add information matrixes cumulatively to a given linguistic object or to subtract unnecessary ones from it, can cope with the flexibility of speech styles. The new information-based approach emphasizes the existence of the three attributes of speech styles: Power, Solidarity, and Formality. Depending on the combination of the different values of those attributes, speech styles may be used in a variety of contexts. Under the Power Hierarchy Hypothesis, only one attribute can be taken into consideration, with the other two being exluded from consideration. In contrast, on the information-based approach, all the three attributes are to be considered simultaneously and thereby the flexible contextual variations of sentence type enders, which I call speech styles, can be accounted for. Upon the information-based approach, we are interested in the usage of speech styles in actual utterances, seeking a way of "deconstructing" the hierarchies of speech levels.

The full examination of all the possible speech styles is yet to be done. This paper is intended to offer a theoretical basis for it.

NOTE

*A similar idea was suggested to me by Professor Seok Choong Song in an informal discussion on Korean syntax at the Center for the Study of Language and Information in the fall of 1991 when he visited Stanford. However, the actual proposal and the relevant data presented in this paper are purely my own and I am solely responsible for them.

REFERENCES

Brown, Roger and Albert Gilman (1960) "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity,"
    in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language*, MIT Press.
Choe, Hyun-Bae (1959) *Korean Grammar* (in Korean), Cheongeum-Sa, Seoul.
Martin, Samuel (1964) "Speech Levels in Japanese and Korean," in D. Hymes,
    ed., *Language in Culture and Society*.
Park, Byung-Soo (1991) "The Semantic and Pragmatic Nature of Honorific
    Agreement in Korean," ms., To appear in *Syntax and Semantics*,
    Academic Press.
Pollard, Carl and Ivan Sag (1987) *Information-Based Syntax and Semantics*,
    Vol. 1., CSLI, Stanford University.
Pollard, Carl and Ivan Sag (1992) *Information-Based Syntax and Semantics*,
    Vol. 2., ms.
Seo, Jung-Soo (1985) *A Study of Deference System*, Hanshin Press, Seoul.

Sung, Kychul (1991) "Speech Levels" (in Korean), in *The Progress of Korean Linguistics* (in Korean).

Sung, Kychul (1985) "Speech Levels and Formal/Informal Variations in Korean" (in Korean), *Linguistic Journal of Korea*, 10-1.