Stylization of gender in young women’s speech in Seoul, Korea
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Previous studies have examined how women use so-called “feminine” features or women’s language to create certain styles in specific contexts, such as a professional setting for Japanese women (Takano 2005), or a pseudo-romantic situation in a Korean “reality” TV show (Moon 2010). However, there is a need to look more closely at different types of femininity and how they become resources in constructing styles. In this study, I investigate how the variables that are linked to femininity have different social meanings, and how they work together in constructing various formations of styles.

The data come from the self-recorded speeches of three female call center employees in Seoul, Korea. To delve into the notion of style that is not restricted to formality-informality continuum, this study investigates various situational settings from the individuals’ speech, such as ‘hyper-polite’ talk with customers, intimate conversations with friends and family, and mother’s gentle talk to her unborn baby. Instead of looking at particular variables across the board, this study explores two variables – /o/ in particles (-ko, -lo, -to) and LHL% (rising-falling tone in IP final) – that occur in IP final position in Korean, the salient phonetic position in terms of encoded social meanings.

Raising of particle /o/ is a change-in-progress variable in Seoul Korean, favored by younger, female speakers and formal style of speech, where the effect of style was greater than other social factors (Chae 1995). Consistent with these findings, speakers raise significantly more in the casual conversations with friends than the conversations with customers or interviews ($p = .02$). Also, there is a significant effect of topic within the conversations with friends: speakers raised more when gossiping than talking about church activities ($p = .04$). These results seem to suggest that highly raised particle /o/ indexes a casual stance by those young women.

The frequency of LHL% shows a very different pattern. LHL%, which is related with the practice of aegyo – cute attitude commonly performed by young women – in pseudoromantic contexts (Moon 2010), is used more frequently in the conversations with customers than with friends ($p = .008$). Rather than a direct act of aegyo, the use of LHL% in this context seems to be related to their compliant stance toward the customers. With their lesser use of raised particle /o/ in the same context, this seems to suggest a “compliant but professional” persona that these call center employees try to present in workspaces.

The phonetic details of LHL% further unveil the meaning of the variable (Podesva 2007). LHL% with greater pitch excursion, longer duration, and sharper slope (each value normalized by the corresponding value of the IP) is used more frequently in conversations with one’s unborn baby or with one’s boyfriend than with customers ($p = .01$). That they do not use more “extreme” contours in the customer conversations seems to support the previous findings of Moon (2010) that those “extreme” contours index “childish aegyo” persona. These findings demonstrate importance of a more nuanced understanding of femininity or formality, and how they operate in various styles.