

The Effects of Social Relationships and Interactions on the Maintenance of the Korean Immigrant Students' Heritage Language and Cultural Identity in the Korean Immigrant Church

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effects of social relationships on the maintenance of the Korean immigrant students' heritage language and cultural identity in the Korean immigrant church within the multilingual and multicultural Montreal context. In this study, an ethnographic and qualitative approach was employed and data were elicited from a questionnaire and qualitative interviews with 19 Korean immigrant students in the teenage years, and participant observations of diverse Korean church-related activities within the Korean immigrant church in Montreal, Canada in 2008 over a four-month period. The results reveal that their use of the heritage language varies depending on the social context, the type of social relationship between interlocutors, and the honorific characteristics of the Korean language. The results indicate that the types of social relationship fostered in the Korean immigrant church context may affect the development and maintenance of the students' heritage language and cultural identity. This study suggests that Korean immigrant students would benefit from being more actively involved church-related activities for their heritage language and cultural identity maintenance, since this involvement is vital to make the Korean immigrant churches more active and successful ethnic religious community institutions in the development and maintenance of their heritage language and cultural identity.

Keywords: Korean immigrant church, Korean immigrant students, Heritage language maintenance, Multilingualism, cultural identity maintenance

INTRODUCTION

Several scholars have confirmed that Korean immigrant churches serve an important community function for Koreans abroad, beyond their original religious role (e.g., Hurh & Kim, 1990; Min, 1992; Chong, 1998; Shin, 2005; Park & Sarkar, 2007; Ley, 2008). This article, in particular, focuses on the effects of social relationships and interactions on the maintenance of the Korean immigrant students' heritage language (HL)ⁱ in the Korean immigrant churchⁱⁱ within the multilingual and multicultural Montreal context, where there are two majority languages (i.e., French and English) along with immigrants' diverse HLs (Bourhis, 2001; Park & Sarkar, 2007). HL maintenance in multilingual societies, in which different languages co-exist, has always been an issue and a source of debate in the field of sociolinguistics (Cavallaro, 2005). Therefore, Montreal is a typical site for such an inquiry because it is a multilingual and multicultural city relative to other regions in Quebec due to the large number of allophone immigrants "who have neither French nor English as a mother tongue" (Bourhis,

2001, p. 105). In this article, different social relationships and the sociolinguistic requirements to understand the honorific characteristics of the HL in social interactions are examined to determine how these factors affect the maintenance of the Korean immigrant students' HL and cultural identity in the Korean immigrant church context.

BACKGROUND

The social, cultural, and linguistic functions of Korean immigrant churches abroad

With regard to the role Korean immigrant churches abroad play, Hurh and Kim (1990) reviewed the previous studies on Korean immigrant churches and investigated Korean immigrants' religious practices in the United States. They provided several reasons why Korean immigrant churches were chosen by Korean immigrants. First, Korean immigrant churches served as a "reception center" (p. 30) by providing social, educational, and cultural services for new immigrants. Second, Korean immigrant churches have no specific requirements for membership compared to other Korean associations which have specific requirements such as Dongchanghoe (Alumni associations based on school ties) and Hyanguhoe (Associations based on one's native region in Korea) (Yoo, 1999). Thus Korean immigrant churches are accessible to any Korean immigrant. Third, Korean immigrant churches provide Korean immigrants with opportunities to meet each other often and regularly. Min (1992) also claimed that a vast majority of Korean immigrants to the United States who were not Christians prior to emigrating in Korea chose to become Christians after their immigration. This change in religious affiliation is due to the diverse social roles that Korean immigrant churches provide. Chong (1998) also emphasizes the transmission of Korean values along with the maintenance and support of "general aspects of culture (food, language, and customs)" (p. 270) within the church. Finally, only the Korean language is used for adult religious services, while some churches provide bilingual or English worship services for second generation church members.

With regard to the role of immigrant churches in Canada, Ley (2008) identified the immigrant church "as an urban service hub in which relations of trust and compatibility generate bonding social capital" (p. 2057). His study is unique in its focus on the Canadian context; most attention has been given to the role of immigrant churches in the United States. He claims that common language and ethnicity encourage Korean immigrants to gather in Korean immigrant churches, where religious services and practical social services including settlement service and language schools are provided.

The 2006 Canadian census indicates that there are 5,555 Koreans living in the province of Quebec, with 4,850 (87%) living in the Montreal area (Statistics Canada, 2008). As of 2010, Montreal has 13 Korean immigrant churches including one Catholic Church, all of which have regular gatherings every week. Because of the diverse and important roles that Korean immigrant churches for Korean immigrants, they are a most appropriate and rich site for this research inquiry studying the effects of social relationships and interactions on the maintenance of the Korean immigrant students' HL and cultural identity.

The honorific characteristics of the Korean language

The Korean language is an honorific language which does not provide a neutral choice linguistically. In addition, due to the concept of Confucianism in Korean culture, code choices cannot avoid reflecting this norm in interpersonal relations based on the type of social relationship between the interlocutors when speaking Korean (Yoon, 1992, 1996). She suggested that the type of social relationship might affect conversational participants' code choices (Yoon, 1992). In her case study with four Korean-English bilingual speakers, she also found out that the participants used Korean in order to "maintain social relationship with respect to the social context" (Yoon, 1996, p. 397).

Chung (2006) videotaped her family's (i.e., husband, 11-year-old daughter, and 4.5-year-old son) conversations in the house. The results of this study suggested that the two children could recognize their cultural values and identity by the use of the Korean language with their family members in the family, representing a "hierarchy of relationship according to sex, age, and status" (p. 304).

Wong Fillmore (1991) also points out the importance of the honorific characteristics of the Korean language. In a nationwide project based on interviews with more than 1,000 language minority families whose children attended preschool programs all over the United States, she takes one Korean family as an example to show the disastrous result caused by children's non-use of the honorific expressions. In her study, parents gave their child the physical punishment just only because the child did not use honorific expressions to his grandfather. They felt that the child did not respect them. This result clearly shows how the honorific characteristics of the Korean language work in Korean culture when speaking Korean.

Overall, the honorific characteristics of the Korean language may help Korean immigrant students acquire cultural values and reinforce linguistic knowledge in the HL, since relationships between speakers are linguistically and obligatorily encoded in the grammar when speaking Korean.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of the present research is to examine the effects of social relationships and interactions on the maintenance of the Korean immigrant students' HL and cultural identity in the Korean immigrant church within the multilingual and multicultural context. In particular, different social relationships and the sociolinguistic requirements to understand the honorific characteristics of the HL in social interactions are examined in order to determine how these factors affect the maintenance of the Korean immigrant students' HL and cultural identity in the Korean immigrant church context.

METHODS

Participants

The participant group (n=19 in total) in this study is composed of 15 Korean immigrant students who live in Montreal and attend Korean immigrant churches and 4 Korean immigrant students who are not enrolled in any Korean immigrant church in the teenage years (i.e., between the ages of 13 and 19). The participants' average age of immigration to Canada is 6 years old and their average residency length in Montreal is over 10 years. Most of them were born in Canada or immigrated before elementary school age. Fifteen church members were recruited from two Korean immigrant churches in Montreal. Four non-church members were introduced by the church member participants through their social networks in Montreal. The reason that I included the four non-church members was that I wanted to investigate what language they spoke in and outside the home, and in what context and with whom they spoke the Korean language. They provided bio-data and participated in interviews (see Appendix A for participants' profiles).

Data Collection

Interviews

Individual one-on-one interviews with a semi-structured format (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) were conducted with all the participants in 2008. Interviews lasted between 23 and 50 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in Korean except one interview which was conducted in English at the request of the participant. Along with the interview, a questionnaire was also used to seek participants' demographic information.

Observations

Observations were only conducted in one church where I served as a member over a four-month of period. Among the fifteen church member participants, eleven participants were recruited from this church. This church has a membership of approximately 100 people and is located in Montreal. The main reason that this church was chosen for observations is that all the participants are part of my own cultural and social circle to enable me to obtain firsthand data with insider perspectives (Merriam, 1998). In addition, given the average number of members attending Korean immigrant churchesⁱⁱⁱ and the similar structure of Korean immigrant churches in Montreal^{iv}, this church is not considered a unique Korean immigrant church. The main contexts of observation were Sunday worship services, Korean language classes, Bible study classes, and informal meetings and activities in the church (e.g., fellowship time after the service). All the services were observed regularly during the observation period and field notes were taken in full detail.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and completely transcribed. During the observation period, detailed field notes were taken along with my own reflections and feelings for analysis. Overall, the data of this study were analyzed through a nonmathematical analytical procedure which allowed inductive data analysis based on the meaning of participants' words and behaviours (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social structure of the Korean immigrant church in Montreal

The Korean immigrant church that I observed during the fieldwork has five main groups according to their age, place of schooling, and status in Canada and I refer to these throughout this article. They are as follows: 1) Group A is a group of first-generation Korean adult immigrants; 2) Group B is a group of young members who were born in Canada or immigrated before elementary school age; 3) Group C is a group of teens and young adults who experienced some of their schooling in Korea before they immigrated to Canada; 4) Group D is a group of Korean students who are elementary and secondary students and their parents; and 5) Group E is a group of Korean international college students and adults who are staying in Montreal as international students for their post secondary education, and those who are staying on a temporary basis (e.g., work permit holders). In this church, around 20% of the population is composed of non-immigrant Korean members from Group D along with a small number of members in Group E. The rest of the population is composed of immigrant Korean members (40% from Group A, 30% from Group B, and 10% from Group C).

Interactions within the Korean immigrant church

During the Sunday worship service I observed, there was no interaction between the pastor and the church members. The service was led by the pastor in Korean. Church members read the Bible and sang hymns in Korean. Neither English nor French was used during the service.

During the other activities in the church, only the Korean language was used. All the church-related activities were conducted in the Korean language with all the materials written in Korean. During informal meetings and fellowship time, most of the young members (Group B) used English or French among themselves. However, they used Korean terms in order to address church members even when they spoke English or French with each other. These young members used Nim, the nominal honorific marker, whenever they were referring to other adult members of the congregation. In most cases, they used only Korean when they spoke with adult members (Group A), recent immigrant students (Group C), and Korean students (Group D, E). In addition, all the Korean immigrant students bowed properly to adult members when they met adult members in the church before the service. When it came time to leave the church, the participants also bowed to adult members.

Social relationships and Korean immigrant students' HL and cultural identity maintenance in the Korean immigrant church

The results show that when in church, the student members use Korean to speak with other church members for the most part and that their use of the HL is affected by different social relationships. Two major factors that make the student participants use the HL in the Korean immigrant church that emerged from the findings are: (1) the diverse social structure of the Korean immigrant church; and (2) the steady influx of new Korean immigrants as well as international students to the Korean immigrant church.

First, the results indicate that the social structure of the Korean immigrant church, which consists of diverse Korean members, encourages the students' use of the HL. It is just this diverse social structure prevalent in the Korean immigrant church that makes the students speak Korean in lieu of English or French with the other Korean members.

People with a limited experience in the Korean language can learn how to interact in Korean properly and improve their level of fluency there through social interactions with diverse other members of the church. (S8v, February 16, 2008)

In particular, the students use only Korean when they speak with adult members. The students mentioned that they rarely spoke English or French with Korean adult church members. Compared to the students who are church members, the four students who are not members of any Korean immigrant churches responded that they rarely had a chance to speak with Korean adults outside the home. Although they have constant conversations with their parents in Korean at home, it may not be enough for them to improve their HL skills. One student responded that he could understand what they said in Korean for the most part. He mentioned that it was because they only used basic Korean language to him.

I mostly understand my parents when they speak to me in Korean. I understand them well when they speak to me in Korean, because they try to talk to me, like, language that I can understand. They usually try to use basic language. (S17, March 3, 2008)

In addition, the non-church members also responded that they had never participated in any Korean cultural and linguistic activities outside the home except one student who had been practicing Taekwondo, the Korean martial art, which was taught by Korean instructors. Overall, these results imply that they may not have enough opportunities to interact with a diverse group of Korean people, with Korean adults in particular, which limits their chances to acquire cultural values and to improve their linguistic knowledge in the HL.

I hang out with non-Korean friends from other countries. I seldom speak Korean except with my parents, since I do not meet other Koreans. (S19, April 1, 2008)

I play with my Korean friends after school or on weekends. I speak Korean with them. As for the Korean adults, I rarely get a chance to converse with them. (S18, April 1, 2008)

Second, the steady influx of new Korean immigrant and international students^{vi} to the Korean immigrant church may enhance the student participants' HL skills. In fact, the student participants' responses to interactions with Korean students who have recently arrived in Montreal as international students show that the presence of Korean international students greatly affects the development of the student participants' HL conversational skills.

I rarely have a chance to communicate in Korean outside my home. At church, however, I get plenty of opportunities to talk with a lot of people. My Korean naturally improves over time as I continue chatting up in it especially with my friends who have come from Korea at church. (S4, February 9, 2008)

In addition, the students' HL use with new Korean immigrants and Korean international students can also be interpreted based on the social distance between them. In her case study of fluent Korean-English bilingual speakers in the United States, Yoon (1996) found that "the social distance" between interlocutors may affect their code choices (p. 400). She claims that "the more distant the conversational partners are, the more they use Korean during conversation. Conversely, the closer the relationship they have, the more they use English" (pp. 405-406). She points out that the Korean language does not allow speakers to be neutral in regard to the social context, which makes them consider the relationship among interlocutors at all times. This characteristic of the Korean language makes it more comfortable for Korean-English bilinguals to use Korean with people they are not in close relationships with. This is done to respect their differences as a function of the social distance between them.

The results of my study agree with Yoon's finding and extend it in a different direction, since in this study there are two majority languages (i.e., English and French) along with the HL. The results of this study show that the student participants who have relatively close social relationships with each other because they have known each other from early childhood use either English or French among themselves. On the other hand, the students use the HL with new Korean immigrant and international students who have either recently immigrated to or are staying in Canada on a temporary basis. In this regard, this study indicates that social distance may affect the student participants' HL use and maintenance through interactions with new Korean immigrant and international students in the Korean immigrant church.

The sociolinguistic requirement to understand and use the honorific characteristics of the Korean language and the maintenance of the Korean immigrant students' HL and cultural identity in the Korean immigrant church

As I previously mentioned, the students use only Korean when they speak with adult members. As such, the student participants' use of the HL in the church should also be examined in terms of the honorific characteristics of the Korean language. One student responded that it was mainly because of the honorific system of the Korean language that he used only Korean with adult members in the church.

I always speak Korean with Korean adult members in the church. It is more comfortable speaking with the elder Koreans in the Korean language. I know how to use honorifics with

adults in the Korean language, but I don't know how to use honorifics in English or French. So I stick to Korean when I speak with Korean adults. (S15, January 26, 2008)

Korean does not provide a neutral choice linguistically. This is because Korean emphasizes the relationship hierarchy which, in accordance with Confucian values, is based on age and social status (Yoon, 1996; Chung, 2006). Since the students cannot avoid this Confucian rule in their conversations with adult members, they must use their HL in order to meet this sociolinguistic requirement. Findings from the present study indicate that there are three main factors that affect the student participants' use of honorifics when speaking Korean: 1) age; 2) social status; and 3) social closeness as can be seen in the following two excerpts.

I use honorifics with adult members who are married or over 30 years old and with people I have just met. (S9, February 15, 2008)

I use honorifics with people who are older than me, with new people, except for very young children, and with people who hold high positions, regardless of their age. (S7, February 13, 2008)

The results of the observations echo the same pattern for the student participants' use of honorifics in their conversations. In general, people are required to use honorific expressions in formal situations when they use Korean, regardless of age differences, social status, and/or social closeness. The results also show that honorifics are used in worship services and formal meetings in the Korean immigrant church. However, during informal interactions, the students' use of honorifics is determined in accordance with differences in age, social status, and social closeness of the person with whom they are speaking.

First, the students' mandatory use of honorifics with adult members is deeply rooted in Korean Confucian values that emphasize a clear hierarchy in status based on age. Thus, findings of this study indicate that the students' linguistic knowledge in the HL and their awareness of cultural values may be enhanced through their use of honorifics with adult members in the Korean immigrant church. However, the results also reveal that some of the students still maintain traditional Korean cultural values which are slightly outdated when compared with the contemporary cultural values of Korea. For example, three student participants defined an adult in accordance with the person's marital status as well as age. This is probably because Korean people used to be considered and accepted as adults only after they were married (Korean marriage customs, 2001). This way of defining an adult changed a while ago in Korea and currently marital status is not a defining factor for people to be considered adults (Korean marriage customs, 2001). So the result might be attributed to the fact that the students acquired an outdated idea about Korean culture from the old immigrant church members who arrived in Montreal a number of years ago.

Second, the results show that social status is another important factor for the student participants to use honorifics when they speak Korean in the Korean immigrant church. Social hierarchy defined in accordance with Confucian values still plays out in every aspect of Korean society as well as in the Korean immigrant community in Canada. In terms of the hierarchical situation that exist in the Korean immigrant church in Montreal, lay members who hold positions such as deacons and elders are perceived to be in a higher position than students or lay members who hold no significant positions. In this situation, the younger members are expected to use honorifics in order to show their respect to people with higher social status.

Third, the results indicate that the students use honorifics with new people, regardless of differences in age, except for very young children. In Korean culture, it is not unusual for people to use honorific

expressions with one another when they are not socially close enough to use casual expressions, even if they are of the same age. The findings imply that the student participants are very well aware of this factor (i.e., social closeness) when they use honorifics.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

This study focused on the effects of social relationships and interactions on the maintenance of the Korean immigrant students' HL and cultural identity in the Korean immigrant church context. In this regard, future studies need to include other Korean ethnic community institutions in Montreal (e.g., The Korean Community of Greater Montreal and the HL school outside the church), in partnership, to ensure fluent community trilingualism in the next generation of the Korean ethnic community in Montreal.

CONCLUSION

The results show that the active and obligatory use of Korean by the Korean immigrant students with other Korean church members in the church is positively related to the improvements the student participants make in their HL development. This result suggests that Korean immigrant students would benefit from being more actively involved church-related activities for their HL and cultural identity maintenance, since this involvement is vital to make the Korean immigrant churches more active and successful ethnic community institutions in the maintenance of their HL and cultural identity.

The results also reveal that their use of the HL varies depending on the social context, the type of social relationship between interlocutors, and the honorific characteristics of the Korean language. Overall, the student participants seem to have acquired a general understanding of the honorific characteristic of the HL and of cultural values associated with the HL from the use of honorifics with adult members, people who are in higher positions, and newcomers to the Korean immigrant church. However, the results also reveal that Korean immigrant students may acquire a false sense of hierarchy through the older generations who still maintain a somewhat outdated, more traditional Korean way of thinking. This result suggests that the Korean immigrant church should provide more formal and/or informal activities (e.g., regular open dialogue between first and second generation members and a Korean culture class) which foster active interactions between the students and adult members, so that Korean immigrant students may have more chances to learn the proper use of honorifics and cultural values. This would also benefit Korean immigrant students' cultural identity maintenance.

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APPENDIX A (PARTICIPANTS' PROFILES)

Code No	Age	Length of residence in Montreal	Length of Korean immigrant church attendance in Montreal	Gender	Church attendance
S1	18	3 years and 7 months	3 years	Female	YES
S2	15	3 years and 7 months	3 years	Male	YES
S3	13	5 years	5 years	Female	YES
S4	13	12 years	12 years	Female	YES
S5	19	14 years	9 years	Female	YES
S6	19	14 years	9 years	Female	YES
S7	18	13 years	13 years	Male	YES
S8	18	13 years	13 years	Male	YES
S9	17	13 years	13 years	Female	YES
S10	17	16 years	14 years	Female	YES
S11	15	15 years	14 years	Male	YES
S12	13	10 years	13 years	Male	YES
S13	16	10 years	10 years	Female	YES
S14	15	8 years	1 year	Female	YES
S15	13	10 years	9 years	Male	YES
S16	19	3 years	N/A	Male	NO
S17	18	18 years	N/A	Male	NO
S18	17	2 years	N/A	Male	NO
S19	18	14 years	N/A	Male	NO

NOTES

ⁱ A heritage language is defined as a language “other than one of the official languages of Canada that contributes to the linguistic heritage of Canada” (Canadian Legal Information Institute, 1991, ‘Definitions’) in this study.

ⁱⁱ Korean immigrant churches mean both Protestant and Catholic churches where Korean is used as a main language for the church members who are mostly Koreans in this study.

ⁱⁱⁱ The average number of members who attend Korean immigrant churches in Montreal (i.e. 12 Protestant churches) on a regular basis is around 130 on the basis of Korean church leaders’ personal estimates. However, the Korean Catholic church has 700 listed members, since there is only one Korean Catholic church in Montreal.

^{iv} Most of the members are Koreans and most of the church-related services and activities are provided in the Korean language.

^v Unique codes are used for all the participants.

^{vi} According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2010), the total population of Korean international students in Canada is 25,871 in 2009.