

## **A change in progress or age-grading?**

### **:A quantitative analysis of intensifier use in Seoul Korean**

The use of intensifiers (e.g. *very*, *really*, *so*, ...) provides an ideal site for research into linguistic change because of its unstable nature (Bolinger, 1972). The original denotational meanings of intensifiers usually dissipate as they increase in frequency and an existing intensifier is often replaced by a new one (Stoffel, 1901:2). For example, *very* has lost much of its original modal meaning of 'truly' or 'genuinely' as it occurs more frequently and has waned in frequency, giving way to other rising intensifiers such as *so*, *really*, etc. (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003). It has been revealed that intensification systems of a number of speech communities change rapidly (Macaulay, 2006; Rickford et al., 2007; Tagliamonte, 2008; Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005). Korean is no exception to having such dynamic nature of intensification system. However, virtually no attention has been given to the use of different intensifiers in spoken Korean.

This study presents a synchronic quantitative study of the use of intensifiers in Seoul Korean. Drawing from 40 sociolinguistic interviews with native Seoul Koreans from four age groups, a total 1912 of tokens were coded for two linguistic constraints (functional and semantic type of adjectival heads occurring with intensifiers) as well as two social factors (age and gender) and submitted to multivariate analyses through GoldVarb X. Our analyses answer three main research questions:

- (1) What effects do intralinguistic and extralinguistic factors have on the intensification system in Seoul Korean?
- (2) What are the noticeable patterns of synchronic variation that may reflect a change in progress of the intensification system in Seoul Korean?
- (3) If we assume the pattern suggests there is a change in progress, who is leading the change of the intensification system in Seoul Korean?

The results show that age is the most significant factor in the change of Seoul Korean intensification system. A close examination of two most robustly occurring intensifiers in the data, *nemu* and *toykey*, reveals that while *nemu* is gradually waning (Range of factor weight in Age: 34), holding its status as the most dominant intensifier in Seoul Korean, *toykey*, the runner-up, on the other hand, is rapidly rising (Range of factor weight in Age: 38). Our results corroborate Labov (2001) and Tagliamonte and D'Arcy's (2009) findings of an adolescent peak in that the frequency of *toykey* is highest among adolescents and decreases to the oldest generation. Contrary to the general pattern that women usually lead the diffusion of innovative forms, the use of *toykey* appears to be led by teenage boys.

We also consider a possibility of age-grading: *toykey* can be used most robustly among younger speakers because the use of *toykey* is associated with "being innovative" or "being cool" among teenagers. *Toykey* has been regarded as informal, vernacular or even slangy (Ahn, 2003). Therefore, this innovative variant can be used most vigorously in one's teenager years and abandoned across one's lifespan.

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