

Who is the writer? A reflection on ‘homogenising’ and ‘diversifying’ language ideologies and linguistic descriptive practice

Linguistic variation is an issue that becomes pertinent time and time again in our descriptive-linguistic work. One very general and notoriously controversial way is to describe linguistic variation with reference to languages and dialects (for example, Kloss’s 1978 influential concepts of *Ausbau* and *Abstand* varieties). Usually in our training as linguists, we are taught an ‘apolitical’ approach: whether or not we speak of dialects or languages has no bearing on the practice of linguistic description and grammar writing outcomes, since this distinction is ultimately regarded as a political issue irrelevant for linguistics (Hudson 1996: 36). Such an assumption is reiterated by scholars such as Bobaljik and Pensalfini (1996: 6), who state that the language-dialect distinction has ‘little basis in scientific fact’, yet ‘far reaching social and political implications.’ Arguably, if any language variety shared within a speech community consists of a systematic, autonomous and regular sign system of form-function mappings, then of course, the grammar of a ‘dialect’ should be no less complete, powerful, creative and independent than that of a ‘language.’ Hence, in theory, modern linguistics posits that any such linguistic system deserves a maximally rich and autonomous documentation and description, implying a radically humanist and beautifully egalitarian view of the linguistic world. But what if the ‘scientific facts’ above were moulded according to the linguistic and political ideologies of the creators of such facts in the first place?

In fact, in many East Asian countries, the arrival of Western, modernist-nationalist thinking gave birth to highly monolingualist language ideologies (Heinrich 2012) which crucially influenced linguistic descriptions. In South Korea, Standard Korean was constructed as the national language, and all other varieties as dialects (Song 2012, Yi 2003). In spite of the fact that due to numerous lexical-grammatical differences, some Koreanic languages such as Jejuan show very low mutual intelligibility with Standard Korean (O’Grady et al. 2014), grammars abound in statements where the language area is deemed to be ‘relatively homogeneous, with excellent mutual intelligibility among speakers from different areas’ (Sohn 1999: 12). Non-standard varieties serve as empirical pools to explore the diachrony of the standard language construct, whereas synchronic descriptions are often limited in scope, and look for commonalities with Standard Korean rather than differences. In other words, descriptive-linguistic work becomes a discursive tool to construct a sense of homogeneity and unity which is supposed to match ideologies of national and ethnic unity and belonging. This ideological legitimisation of Standard Korean only has fostered processes of linguistic marginalisation. Unsurprisingly, all Koreanic non-standard varieties are now undergoing language shift.

Against this backdrop, I will reflect on my own descriptive-linguistic work on Jeju Island, South Korea to ask whether conversely, approaching Jejuan as an independent Koreanic language and adopting a ‘diversifying language ideology’ (similar to other recent research efforts such as Yang et al. 2020) has impacted my linguistic descriptions and analyses. By pointing out various consequences for my own descriptive work such as the scope of the grammatical description, the methodological perspectives and the independence of data analysis, I conclude that for descriptive-linguistic work in some parts of the world, the language-ideological mapping between the social world and the world of language through concepts such as ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ is non-trivial, and that it must be actively reflected upon and aligned with the worldview and responsibilities of linguist writers. For a theory of grammar writing, then, I suggest to reframe grammar writing and linguistic description as a constructive act (similar to Lüpke & Storch 2012: 3), dynamically realised by authors and linguists who undeniably are socio-political actors, and who construct inherently political representations of language that are mediated by the writers’ ideological backgrounds.

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