

## Semantic inflation and pronoun avoidance\*

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**Yoon, Jae-Hak. 2021. Semantic inflation and pronoun avoidance.** *Linguistic Research* 38(3): 469-490. Word meanings tend to weaken over time with exposure to more listeners and lose some of their original power. This process of semantic inflation will be motivated in this paper as a major linguistic force that systematically triggers semantic change. Then, it will be illustrated that this process is widespread, being attested in various domains such as metaphor, superlatives, terms of address, and swear words. In particular, we will show how it is responsible for the phenomenon of pronoun avoidance, the fact that Korean and some other East and Southeast Asian languages do not possess a polite form of second person pronouns in their pronominal paradigm and have to rely on an honorific term of address in their places. (Kyung Hee University)

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### 1. Introduction

It has been frequently observed in the linguistic literature that “semantic change is highly irregular” and “extremely difficult to predict” (Hock 1991: 308). In this context, we would like to motivate the notion of semantic inflation as a major process that systematically triggers semantic change.

Then, it will be illustrated that this process is widespread and at work in various fields such as metaphor, superlatives, terms of address, and swear words. In particular, we will show how it is responsible for the phenomenon of pronoun avoidance, the fact that Korean and some other East and Southeast Asian languages do not possess a polite form of second person pronouns in their pronominal paradigm and have to rely on an honorific term of address in their places.

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## 2. Semantic inflation

Word meanings tend to weaken over time and lose some of their original power. This process has not gathered a serious attention from theoretical linguistics (cf. Hock 1991; Trask 1996; McMahon 1994). It has been ignored in later discussions of typology of semantic change (cf. Ullmann 1957; 1962, Blank 1999; Grzego and Schöner 2007), though briefly mentioned in Bloomfield (1933: 427):<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Hyperbole – from stronger to weaker meaning:  
*astonish* ‘to strike with thunder’ ⇒ ‘to surprise greatly’

Instead, the notion of semantic inflation is recognized by outsiders such as a dictionary blogger as in (2) (Carey 2012) and an SNS post by a translation expert as in (3) (Zóltan 2020):

- (2) “Is linguistic inflation insanely awesome?”  
 Inflation lies behind the popular use of such words as *genius*, *epic*, *awesome*, *totally*, and *incredible*. What they mean is often more modest than their traditional senses suggest: *genius* means *clever*, *epic* is *impressive*, *incredible* is *surprising*. Such is our need to imbue our words with force and significance that we use hyperbole to entice people to attention – and the hyperbolic terms gradually normalize.
- (3) Linguistic/semantic inflation is an “insanely awesome” and “epically annoying” phenomenon at the same time. I was just wondering if there is, indeed, a significant difference between the “inflation rates” of different languages/cultures.

When Americans say ...	It means ...
Awesome	Good
Fabulous	Good
Amazing	Good
Great	Fine
Fine	Bad

1 The term *hyperbole* used in Bloomfield (1933) is somewhat misleading as this is an example of semantic weakening over time. However, we are honoring the original terminology.

OK	Bad
Not so great	Really bad
Challenging	Driving me completely nuts
Hilarious	Unexpected
For sure	Probably
Forever	30 minutes
Let's get coffee sometime	Goodbye; I like you
Let's stay in touch	Goodbye; I don't like you that much
My friend	A person I know
My best friend	A person I know and also like

Admittedly the meaning comparisons on the SNS post are somewhat exaggerated and presented as a joke. But the point is, ordinary people have recognized what theoretical linguists have ignored for so long.

While he does not make it clear, it is obvious that Carey (2012) alludes to monetary inflation when he uses the term 'linguistic inflation'. We will use 'semantic inflation' that Zóltan (2020) and Junge and Postoutenko (2020) adopt.

A comparison between money and word is also found in the work of a philosopher when Postoutenko (2014: 3) attempts to apply Gresham's law of economics to verbal language and examines how good concepts are driven out by bad concepts:

- (4) Gresham's law:
  - a. Bad money drives out good money.
  - b. Bad concepts drive out good concepts.

Monetary inflation is defined as "an increase in the overall level of prices in the economy" (Mankiw 2008: 15) or "a pervasive rise in the general level of prices of all goods and services" (Long 1981: 274). As a result, it decreases the value of money. While there are roughly three different kinds of inflation, namely demand-pull inflation, cost-push inflation, and built-in inflation, "almost all cases of large and persistent inflation" is caused by "growth in the quantity of money" (Mankiw 2008: 15).

Figure 1 below is intended to show that the quantity of money is reversely proportional to the value of money. The x axis indicates the quantity of money being distributed in the economy whereas the y axis represents the value of money. The graph illustrates that as the quantity of money increases from 1 to 1.2, to 1.6, to 1.8, eventually to 2, the value of money decreases from 1 to 0.8, to 0.5, to 0.32, eventually to 0.2.



Figure 1. Quantity of money and value of money graph

Likewise, the semantic value of words decreases over time just as the value of money decreases in inflation. Therefore, it is hoped that the notion of semantic inflation can find its place in a linguistic discussion. However, before we use this notion in our discussion, we have to answer the following two interrelated questions.

First, we stated that the semantic value of words decreases ‘over time’. But the value of money does not necessarily fall ‘over time’. It is caused by “growth in the quantity of money.” They are not parallel thus not directly comparable.

Second, if we want to keep the analogy between word and money as close as possible, an ideal statement about the cause of semantic inflation would be something like “it is caused by ‘growth in the quantity of words.’” However, we know that words and dollar bills do not work in the same way. The value of two 50 dollar bills equals the value of one 100 dollar bill. The quantity of money in an economy can be calculated in one numerical figure by adding all its money. This is not possible in words. You can hardly find a case where the value of two words equals the value of one word. Also it is absurd to add the values of all words and come up with a total value. Each word has its identity and cannot be reduced to a number. Therefore we have to find a notion that can replace the notion of ‘growth in the quantity of words’.

It is observed that semantic inflation is not the function of time itself. Word meanings change over time. Time is not the root cause of change but is in a correlation with change. A more plausible explanation is that semantic inflation is triggered by uses/exposure/circulation of words. For example, a lawyer comes up with a metaphor “a

mountain of evidence’. It is very striking at first and has an immediate impact. Now people start to use it over and over. Finally it loses the original vividness and becomes a mundane metaphor, a case of semantic inflation. Thus, it is the use/exposure/circulation of words that causes semantic inflation.

Now that we have identified use/exposure/circulation of words as the cause of semantic inflation, there seems to be a way to link use/exposure/circulation to ‘growth in the quantity of words’. Let us go back to economics one more time.

In monetary inflation, the rate of circulation of money plays a major role. A faster circulation of money has the same effect as an increase in the quantity of money. As a result, a fast circulation of money causes inflation. Let’s introduce the notion of velocity of money and the quantity equation and see how this works. Velocity of money (the circulation rate of money) refers to “the rate at which money changes hands” (Mankiw 2009: 650). “In physics, the term velocity refers to the speed at which an object travels. In economics, the velocity of money refers to the speed at which the typical dollar bill travels around the economy from wallet to wallet”. The velocity of money is calculated by dividing the nominal value of output (nominal GDP) by the quantity of money. “If  $P$  is the price level,  $Y$  the quantity of output (real GDP), and  $M$  the quantity of money, then velocity is”:

$$(5) \quad V = (P \times Y) / M$$

An elementary algebraic rearrangement turns this equation into:

$$(6) \quad M \times V = P \times Y$$

This is called quantity equation as it shows a relation between the quantity of money ( $M$ ) and the nominal value of output ( $P \times Y$ ).

Now, we can use this equation to see how velocity of money affects the price level. If we fix  $M$  (the quantity of money) and  $Y$  (the quantity of output) and increase  $V$  (the velocity of money), then  $P$  (the price level) must go up. It shows that an increased  $V$  has the same effect as an increased  $M$ . In other words, a higher rate of circulation causes inflation. In this way, an increased use/exposure/circulation of words is tantamount to growth in the quantity of words in semantic inflation.

There is another factor involved here. Not every word undergoes semantic inflation

in the same way. For the same level of exposure, some expressions lose their value faster than others in the same speech community. Some expressions in a society may lose their value faster than similar expressions in another society. Namely, semantic inflation is culture-dependent and varied across semantic fields. This can be illustrated as in Figure 2 below:

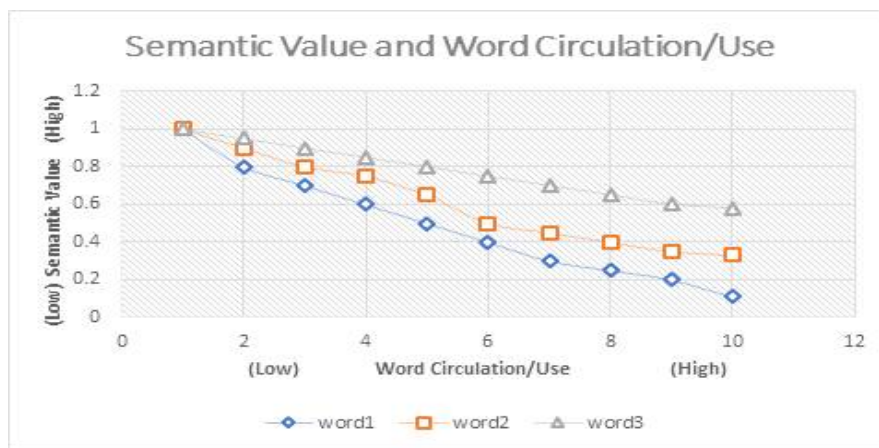


Figure 2. Semantic value and word circulation graph

Each of the three words undergoes a semantic inflation, losing some of their semantic value as the use/circulation of the words increases. The rate of semantic inflation in Word1 is higher than those in Word2 and Word3: while Word3 retains more than half of its value when the circulation increases ten times, Word1 loses 90% of its value at the same point.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, velocity of words is not as simple as velocity of money. When calculating velocity of words that travel across a speech community, several factors must be considered such as attentiveness and modes of conversation. Fifty cases of a face-to-face conversation between two friends cannot be treated the same as an on-line lecture conducted by a professor to a group of fifty students.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that a higher word circulation/use does not mean a higher rate in a point x. This is intended to read as an accumulation. Thus, a word circulation/use always increases to the x axis.

### 3. The process attested on different fields

Semantic force can be defined on many different domains: vividness in metaphor, emphatic effects in superlatives, deference in honorific terms of address, pejoration in swear words. But they are alike in undergoing semantic inflation, losing semantic force with each additional exposure.

#### 3.1 Hyperbolic expressions

Already introduced in the previous section are the following pairs:

- (7) a. *Genius means clever.*  
 b. *Epic is impressive.*  
 c. *Incredible is surprising.*  
 d. *Awesome means good.*

A quick *Wiktionary* search for *awesome* turns up the following entry:

- (8) The oldest meaning of *awesome* is of “something which inspires awe”, but the word is now also a common slang expression. It was originally so used in the United States, where it had featured strikingly in the 1970 film *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, as used by Japan's Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto to describe the "awesome" industrial potential of the United States. Consequently, as the word popularly became an expression for anything superb, in its original meaning it has tended to be replaced by the related word, *awe-inspiring*.

The cheapest room at Las Vegas Hilton at Resorts World is listed as ‘Deluxe’ while Wyndham Hotel uses ‘Premium’ for a basic room. Also, Chevy Malibu has five trims: L, LS, RS, LT, and Premier. The lowest trim L stands for ‘luxury’.

Commonly used fixed hyperbolic expressions include the following:

- (9) a. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.  
 b. She can hear a pin drop a mile away.

c. It made my blood boil.

In this way, the conveyed and transmitted meanings are detached considerably from the original senses and are almost always weaker. This is frequently a source of confusion for international students in the United States who rely on the literal word-to-word translations or dictionary definitions that commonly lag behind the times.

### 3.2 Terms of address

Terms of address are highly valued in Korean society. Just as an improper honorific level induces a resentment from the listener, an inappropriate use of terms frequently leads to a confrontation. It can be assured that the author has a handful of personal episodes of the sort, which as a matter of fact enticed my interest in this field. There seem to be several norms at work.

First, away from the school environments, first names are only used between close friends and family members. They are often avoided even among best friends and close family members. Instead, their places are taken by job titles and kinship terms with a child's name, such as *Pak Kyoswu* 'Professor Park' or *Sola Appa* 'Sola's dad'.

Second, among friends and acquaintances, job titles are commonly used for males and single females whereas terms referring to age groups or representing the positions of their husbands' are chosen for married females: *Mwun Kwacang* 'Manager Moon' or *Samonim* 'lady'. If a married female has a reputable position, her status is reflected in the address term in the same way as a single female. Interestingly, address terms such as *Mwun Kwacang* are commonly and preferably used among friends and acquaintances who are not their coworkers. When a man does not hold a position or a reputable position to mention, one is invented. In this case, *sacang* 'head of a company' is a popular choice. When one retires or steps down from a position, the title is happily maintained. Thus, a retired school principal is called *Kang Kyocang* 'Principal Kang' and a professor who finished her term as a dean is still called *Kim Hakcang* 'Dean Kim'. This last type of practice is found in American society too. A former president is called *President Carter* and a retired general, *General Colin Powell*. However, the practice is more extensive in Korea.

Third, among strangers who have no business of knowing each other's job title, terms



referring to job titles as well as age groups are still used. Males are called (in an ascending order of deference) *acessi* ‘uncle’, *sensayngnim* ‘teacher’/*sacangnim* ‘head of a company’, *tayphyonim* ‘CEO’. On the other hand, females are called (in an ascending order of deference) *acwumma* ‘aunt [short form]’, *acwumeni* ‘aunt [long form]’, *samonim* ‘lady’, *yesanim* ‘madame’. The elderly are classified likewise as *halapeci* ‘grandfather’/*halmeni* ‘grandmother’, *elusin* ‘elder’. As can be predicted, the address terms that originated from kinship terms refer to the general public of an appropriate age. Thus, *acessi* refers to an adult male; *acwumma* and *acwumeni* refer to adult females; *halapeci* and *halmeni* refer to an old man and an old woman, respectively.

Finally, terms referring to the general public by age are low in preference. Namely, *acessi*, *acwumma*, *acwumeni*, *halapeci*, and *halmeni* are the least favored terms and take the left-most positions in the preference hierarchy.

Though male terms have faced some semantic inflation, female terms of address have undergone semantic inflation in the most dramatic way in the last forty years. *Acwumma* did not have negative connotations fifty years ago. Now it is so insulting that using it runs a risk of confrontation. Its place was first taken by *acwumeni*, then by *samonim*, and finally *yesanim*. *Yesanim*, which has been and is still used for the first lady or the wife of a high social status, now refers to a middle-aged female worker who does manual labor.

### 3.3 Advances of politically correct terms

Words referring to minority ethnic groups are well known for their high turnover ratio. While *white* maintains a relatively long history of use, *black*, which replaced the infamous n-word, did not enjoy a long life and was subsequently replaced by *African American*.

A similar path can be found in the words for social minorities such as the disabled and the people in manual labor forces.

- (10) a. *cripple* ⇒ *person with a disability*  
 b. *blind* ⇒ *visually impaired*  
 c. *deaf* ⇒ *hearing impaired*  
 d. *maid* ⇒ *house keeper*

This tendency is widespread across languages and consistent with the fact that the address term for a maid in Korea has changed from *acwumma* to *acwumeni* to *samonim*, finally to *yesanim* in the last 40 years.<sup>3</sup>

Social minorities do not seem to be limited to people or jobs. They also apply to one's dwellings. *Wikipedia* states "a villa is a type of house that was originally an ancient Roman upper-class country house." The term as a loan word was first used for low-rise upper-middle class condominiums in the new city of Bundang in 1990s. Now it refers to the least favored type of housing in Korea, the type that the main characters of the movie *Parasite* live in.

These can be all considered cases of semantic inflation in the sense that original terms lost some of their value, added negativity, and then were replaced.

### 3.4 Swear words

There are quotes of people complaining about modern times and the young, attributed to the Rosetta Stone, a king of Mesopotamia, and Socrates. While the veracity of the quotes may be dubious, it is undeniable that there is a long history of such complaints.

- (11) a. "They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it."  
*Rhetoric* Part 12 *On Youthful Character*, Aristotle (4th Century BC)
- b. "The beardless youth... does not foresee what is useful, squandering his money."  
*The Art of Poetry: an Epistle to the Pisos*, Horace (1st Century BC)
- c. "Youth were never more sawcie, yea never more savagely saucie ... the ancient are scorned, the honourable are contemned, the magistrate is not dreaded."  
*The Wise-man's Forecasts Against the Evil Time* (1624 AD)

A similar sentiment in use of swear words is documented in Mohr (2013: 15):

- (12) Whenever English is spoken, many people believe that we are

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3 Several newspapers including *Money Today* and *Yunhap News* in Korea have reported recently that temporary workers at school restaurants do not want to be called *yesanim* any more and they favor the title *sensayngnim* 'teacher' instead.

experiencing an unprecedented epidemic of swearing today. The *Times of India* recently reported on the worrying trend of increased swearing in books for teens; the *Daily Mail* of Britain has declared in a headline that “This Culture of Swearing Curses Us All”; and the *New York Times* has published on “the growing frequency of public figures using vulgarity.” In 1972, George Carlin famously listed the seven words you couldn’t mention on TV – *shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits*. Now you can say all but three, depending on when you are talking and how you use the words.

We do not have a corpus-based study at this point to verify the supposed trend but there are many episodic cases of taboo words that have been included in the repertoire of an ordinary speaker.

Mohr (2013: 232) illustrates the recentness of the change in attitudes toward the word *damn*, relating a story about the movie *Gone with the Wind*. At the final scene, Rhett Butler walks out on Scarlett O’Hara, saying “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” It is told that the producer David Selznick barely avoided a \$5,000 fine because the film production code for *damn* had changed shortly before the movie’s release.

For instance in Korean, many parents were appalled to hear their teenage daughters start to use the word *conna* about 20 years ago. It was derived from *coc* ‘the male sex organ’ + *na* ‘to come out’ and had been used as an intensifier mainly among soldiers and gangsters. Now it is more widespread and does not induce the same consternation any more.

Increased circulations and exposures reduce the force of a taboo word. It could be claimed that society as a whole is more open now than before and as a result more lenient to swearing. While it may be true in its own right, it is still consistent with the fact that an increased exposure makes old taboo words lose their sting and be ready to be replaced by a more graphic expression in the long run.

#### 4. Pronoun avoidance

In this section, we will show how the concept of semantic inflation can account for the phenomenon of pronoun avoidance, or a paradigm gap in the second person pronouns

in Korean and other East and Southeast Asian languages.

#### 4.1 The T/V distinctions

A number of European languages are known to have the so-called T/V distinction, a contrast between two types of pronouns to represent varying degrees of politeness. In French, for instance as in (13) below, roughly the same semantic content can be conveyed either by *tu* or by *vous*:

- (13) a. Tu admire le professeur.  
           you admire the teacher  
           ‘You admire the teacher.’ (informal)
- b. Vous admirez le professeur.  
           you admire the teacher  
           ‘You admire the teacher.’ (formal)

The difference between (13a) and (13b) is the level of formality and politeness: (13b) is more formal and polite than (13a). The same kind of contrast is reported in German, Spanish, Swedish, Russian, and many others and some of the contrasts for the second person singular pronouns are listed in (14).

(14) T/V distinctions

	Second person singular informal	Second person singular formal
Albanian	<i>ti</i>	<i>ju</i>
Bosnian	<i>ti</i>	<i>vi</i>
French	<i>tu</i>	<i>vous</i>
German	<i>du</i>	<i>Sie</i>
Spanish	<i>tú</i>	<i>usted</i>
Swedish	<i>du</i>	<i>ni</i>

It is reported that English used to have this type of distinction between *thou* and *you* in the Middle English period as early as the late thirteenth century but the informal variety *thou* subsequently started to disappear in the seventeenth century (cf. Algeo and Pyles 2004). In a corpus-based study of the years between 1560 and 1760, Walker (2007)

shows that in the middle of the eighteenth century *you* became dominant and *thou* was all but obsolete. Howe (1996: 171) attempts to identify the cause of the change, claiming that the informal form *thou* ceased to be used probably because “the frequent use of *thou* as a form of insult may have contributed to its loss as a form of address both in the family and also to servants.”

On the other hand, Korean exhibits yet another pattern where there is only an informal, non-polite form *ne*. With no polite form of the second person pronoun in the language, a polite term of address is used in its place as in (15a), or no pronoun is used at all as (15b) when there is a need to be polite (Hwang 1975; Lukoff 1982; Koo 1992; Park 1997; Chae 2009).

- (15) a. Hoycangnim pyopgyetyoey engkyongipnita.  
 Chairman to meet honor-is  
 ‘It is an honor to meet you, Chairman.’  
 b. Pyopgyetyoey engkyongipnita.  
 to meet honor-is  
 ‘It is an honor to meet you.’

The three different types of pronoun pattern observed between French, English and Korean can be summarized as in (16):

(16) Patterns of second person pronouns

Language	Impolite/informal	Polite/formal
French	<i>tu</i>	<i>vous</i>
English	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>
Korean	<i>ne</i>	

Namely, in the first type such as French, the impolite and polite forms of pronouns are separated whereas the second type such as English does not distinguish between them. Meanwhile the third type has a gap in the paradigm and does not have a polite form of pronoun.



status. *Caki* became a second person pronoun in the late twentieth century and used mainly between loving couples and in some cases, between close women.

The pronoun *tangsin* needs a special attention. Originally an honorific third person pronoun, it acquired another use as a second person pronoun in the late eighteenth century and began to be used honorifically, referring to a person in a socially higher position (Kim 1990; Kim 2006; Yang 2006). However, it did not last and now it has no higher status than *ne* or *caney* in a face-to-face conversation, though it still maintains the formality in poetry and songs.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the second person pronouns in Korean indicates one persistent fact: they eventually settle down into a non-honorific status. Thus, it appears less likely that the paradigm gap is a result of an accidental twist of history. Note, however, that this paradigm gap is found only in the second person pronouns, as the first person pronouns show a T/V contrast shown in (20):

(20) First person pronouns in Korean (singular)

Impolite/Informal	Polite/Formal
<i>na</i>	<i>ce</i>

Note that the phenomenon of pronoun avoidance is not isolated in Korean. Helmbrecht (2013) surveys 207 languages in the world and identifies seven languages of pronoun avoidance that have no polite form of second person pronouns:

- (21) The peculiarity of the languages of (south)east Asia, however, is that personal pronouns are not used in polite address at all – instead, status and kinship terms, titles and other complex nominal expressions are employed. The effect of this strategy on the shape of pronominal paradigms in these languages is that there are rarely polite pronouns of address. If there are second-person pronouns, they are used to address social equals and inferiors. Polite forms of address, e.g. for the address of superiors, mostly do not belong to the class of personal pronouns in these languages.

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4 A recent newspaper article reports that a stepfather is said to kill a teenage stepson because he was addressed as *tangsin* rather than the preferred *apeci* 'father'.

Those seven languages are Burmese, Indonesian, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese. They are mostly not related linguistically. However, the fact that they are languages of a particular region, East and Southeast Asia, and people in the region have a similar cultural background hints that it is a socially driven phenomenon rather than a linguistically motivated one.

### 4.3 The paradigm gap explained

It is hypothesized that the paradigm gap is a combined product of the following three facts. In the discussion, Korean is intended to represent the seven languages of pronoun avoidance.

#### 4.3.1 A society sensitive to terms of address

Deference and politeness are highly valued in the Korean society. In particular, titles and terms of address are immensely important. In fact, they seem to be more carefully watched by the listener than the honorific level of speech. For example as in (22a), a non-honorific speech is frequently tolerated in an informal conversation as long as it is accompanied with a proper honorific term of address, but not vice versa as in (22b).

- (22) a. Hyeng, way an wasse? [to an older addressee]  
 older brother why not came.plain  
 ‘Why did you not come, Older Brother?’
- b. #Kim-ssi, way an wosyesseyo? [to an older addressee]  
 Mr. Kim why not came.honorific  
 ‘Why did you not come, Mr. Kim?’

When available, the highest term of address possible is selected. As pointed out previously, it is so valued that when one does not hold a reputable title, a title such as *sacangnim* ‘head of a company’ is commonly provided in order to save the listener's face.



### 4.3.2 Pronouns are semantically deficient

It was pointed out that people do not favor terms of address that have a general reference. For example, the least favored terms are *acwumma* and *acessi*, which refer to adult females and adult males, respectively. More favored terms such as *woncangnim* 'director' and *paksanim* 'PhD' are those that contain more semantic content and as a result have a smaller reference set.

By definition, pronouns are semantically deficient. Deictic expressions are those which "take some element of their meaning directly from the immediate situation of the utterance ... makes language a much more portable instrument than it would otherwise be: we can use the same words on different occasions" (Hurford et al 2007: 77). They do not hold much semantic content because their versatility relies on the context of conversations. For example, the pronoun *it*, with a minimal semantic content, has a set of possible referents significantly bigger than the common noun *rabbit*.

On the other hand, to be polite, a lexical item must contain a semantic content saliently polite enough to the listener. This inevitably leads to a conflict when it comes to a polite form of a second person pronoun: one needs to honor the listener with a polite form but a pronoun is not well equipped to contain semantic content sufficiently enough to satisfy the honorific need.

### 4.3.3 Semantic inflation

The semantic field of address terms in Korean appears to have the highest turnover ratio, experiencing a high degree of semantic inflation. A frequent use of a polite form suffers an attrition of value. As a result, a form which was once polite becomes non-polite.

This process applies to pronouns as well. On a rare occasion that an honorific second person pronoun emerges, the semantic deficiency and deictic nature make it unstable and very susceptible to semantic inflation. We speculate that this is exactly what happened to *dangsin*, contrary to Kim (1990: 70)'s conjecture that *tangsin*'s demise may be due to its internal semantic meaning of *tang* 'to face'.

Any polite terms of address or second person pronouns are destined to suffer semantic inflation and eventually end up non-polite forms. The difference between polite

terms of address and honorific second person pronouns is that pronouns are a closed category. Thus, whereas outdated terms of address can be replaced by new ones, a new pronoun does not emerge easily, resulting in a paradigm gap. As a result, a second person pronoun is avoided in an honorific setting.

First person pronouns do not have this dilemma because speakers lower themselves in order to be polite. Lowering is easy; raising is hard. Semantic inflation works only in one direction to a weakening value.

The fact that *dangsin* still maintains the function of an honorific third person pronoun is consistent with our hypothesis in that a third person is not directly addressed but referred. Therefore, the level of deference required in a third person is lower than that of a direct address. In a similar manner, our speculation is that the seven languages of pronoun avoidance have a threshold of deference in pronoun higher than the rest.

## 5. How semantic inflation works?

If we assume that semantic inflation is a natural process, asking why it occurs is not a proper question to ask. It will be an empirical fact of language that does not have a purpose like a law of physics. Rather, we would like to know how it combines with other motivational forces to create a semantic change or a paradigm gap.

Blank (1999) proposes the following six motivations or conditions for a speaker to trigger a semantic change:

- (23) a. New concepts
- b. Abstract concepts
- c. Sociocultural change
- d. Close conceptual or factual relation
- e. Complexity and irregularity in the lexicon
- f. Emotionally marked concepts

Drawing on Blank (1999), Grzega and Schöner (2007) come up with twenty “forces triggering off lexical change,” of which some are listed below for our discussion:

- (24) a. Flattery  
 b. Insult  
 c. Excessive length of words  
 d. Morphological misinterpretation (“folk-etymology”, creation of transparency by changes within a word)  
 e. Changes in the referents (i.e. changes in the world)

Examining Blank (1999: 82)’s use of the word “motivations”, it does not mean a speaker’s motivations to trigger a change. Rather, they are social and linguistic conditions which may contribute to a change when they are combined with the speaker’s goals and strategies of conversation.

On the other hand, Grzegza and Schöner (2007)’s “forces” are vague between people’s motivations (e.g. flattery, insult), linguistic conditions (e.g. excessive length of words), linguistic processes (e.g. morphological misinterpretation), and social conditions (e.g. changes in the referents). In fact, Grzegza and Schöner (2007: 23) state that “lexical change is mostly caused by a combination” of these forces.

If we want to adopt Grzegza and Schöner (2007)’s forces, we have to add semantic inflation as an additional force/condition. Then, a combination of flattery and semantic inflation can account for the high turnover ratio exhibited in the terms of address: if a term of address loses its high honorific value, one has to find a better option to make the listener feel good. Likewise, the combination can also account for some of the hyperbolic expressions such as L (Luxury) trim for the basic model and Villa for the unfavored type of housing, as they are intended to make the owner and the dweller feel better.

Meanwhile, a combination of insult and semantic inflation can explain why swear words are becoming more widespread and blatant. An increased exposure of taboo words and swear words results in a reduced force of the swear, which in turn makes those words more acceptable and leads some speakers to invent more forceful replacements in order to have the same effect as before.

However, some hyperbolic expressions such as *awesome* ‘good’, *genius* ‘clever’, *I could eat a horse* ‘I am very hungry’, and *It made my blood boil* ‘It made me very angry’ are not explained by the list of the revised forces yet. While they have undergone semantic inflation, the motivation behind the choice of the hyperbolic words is not flattery or insult. Rather, it appears that we have to introduce a conversational strategy

akin to Leech (1983: 145-146)'s Interest Principle: "Say what is unpredictable, and hence interesting." This principle can be adopted in the Grzega and Schöner (2007)'s list as a motivational force such as 'wish for attention.'

## 6. Conclusions

In this contribution, we hope to have made the following two points clearly. First, the notion of semantic inflation must be recognized as a force to trigger semantic change. Then, it is shown that semantic inflation is responsible for the phenomenon of pronoun avoidance in Korean and other East and Southeast Asian languages. In addition, we argue that Grzega and Schöner (2007)'s list of lexical change needs to be extended to include Leech (1983)'s Interest Principle as well as semantic inflation.

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