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“I’m not angry!”: language ideologies, misunderstanding, and marginalization among North Korean refugees in rural South Korea

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines the language attitudes and language use of two North Korean refugees living in the Gyeongsang provincial region of South Korea and actively trying to assimilate into mainstream Korean society. In interviews, the participants expressed a hierarchical view of three varieties of Korean (their North Korean Hamgyong dialect, the South Korean Gyeongsang dialect, and standard South Korean). They discussed how their North Korean accents exacerbated their marginalization, described the Gyeongsang dialect as “ignorant” and “rude,” and explained how and why they were trying to acquire standard South Korean. They also described how their North Korean accent continued to affect their communication with local South Korean speakers, who often perceived them as sounding angry and commanding. The participants had developed diverse communicative strategies in response to these language-related challenges, including smiling so as to not appear aggressive, remaining silent to avoid being outed by their speech, speaking carefully to appear more South Korean and avoid potential misunderstandings, and proactively revealing their North Korean background and seeking their interlocutors’ understanding in advance. Based on the findings, the study offers practical implications for language-support programs designed for North Korean refugees.

Keywords: language ideology; language use; North Korean refugee; linguistic discrimination; accent

1 Introduction

Since the late 1990s, approximately 33,800 North Koreans have moved to South Korea to avoid economic hardship and social and political suppression (Ministry of

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Unification 2022). According to the Ministry of Unification in South Korea, the majority of North Korean refugees (approximately 59%) are from North Hamgyong Province, near the borders with both China and Russia, and 72% are female. Despite their shared Korean ethnicity and language, North Korean refugees in the South are stigmatized and Othered. Many of these North Korean refugees are settled in Seoul and other large metropolitan cities, drawn by better access to refugee services and education and employment opportunities. However, in more recent times, the South Korean government has encouraged North Koreans to settle in provincial regions, such as Gyeongsang Province, where regional dialects are spoken, and provides financial incentives to do so, partially due to a lack of housing in the metropolitan Seoul area.

One key marker of difference between North Korean refugees and their South Korean neighbors is language use. Although the North and South varieties of Korean are mutually intelligible, with the majority of grammar and vocabulary being shared, 70 years of separation following the Korean war has resulted in noticeable differences, especially in pronunciation and vocabulary (Lee 2016). Given these differences, the South Korean government provides North Korean refugees with initial language training as part of a mandatory three-month-long refugee resettlement program run by Hanawon, a South Korean government-operated resettlement education facility. This language training covers differences in the northern and southern varieties of Korean, South Korean standard pronunciation, loanwords, and basic English.

North Korean has been influenced by political ideologies concerning linguistic purity, and its vocabulary is consequently made up almost entirely of “pure” Korean; hence, the popularity and widespread incorporation of English loanwords and Sino-Korean words in South Korean poses a particular challenge for North Koreans’ integration into South Korean society (Lee 2016; Lee and Ahn 2016; Lee et al. 2016). North Korean accents are also easily distinguishable from those of South Koreans and largely stigmatized, further marking North Korean speakers as “Other” (Lee et al. 2016; Salo and Dufva 2018).

In a bid to avoid (linguistic) discrimination, North Korean refugees often make efforts to hide their origins, through trying to eliminate their North Korean accent (Kim and Hocking 2018) or strategically adopting false identities to account for their non-standard speech (Park 2022). For example, when South Koreans notice their accent and ask about their background, some North Koreans say they grew up in a rural region in South Korea (e.g., Gangwon or Gyeongsang Provinces; Park 2022). A recent news article claimed that some North Koreans in Seoul, where standard (Seoul-based) South Korean is widely used, go even further, strengthening such narratives by investing in learning particular regional dialects (The JoongAng 2020). A teacher at an alternative school in Seoul designed for North Korean refugees was
quoted as saying, “A number of North Korean refugee students purposefully learn a South Korean regional dialect [because] they want to hide their North Korean accent.”

This phenomenon suggests the need to explore the lived experiences of North Korean refugees in rural South Korea. The linguistic situation of refugees in a provincial region can be more complex, as they must become familiar with the local dialect to participate in everyday life activities, in addition to learning the standard South Korean typical of Seoul, which is widely used in the media and formal settings throughout the country, such as schools and workplaces. However, little is actually known about the language attitudes and language use of North Korean refugees in provincial regions where a regional dialect is spoken on a daily basis. Prior research on the language use of North Korean refugees in South Korea has mainly focused on issues surrounding multilingual practices (e.g., Lee et al. 2016; Salo and Dufva 2018), identity construction (e.g., Lee and Ahn 2016), and English language learning (e.g., Kim 2016; Park 2022; Park and Lee 2022; Shin and Park 2019).

Thus, this study examines the lived experiences of two North Korean refugees living in Gyeongsang Province, a rural province in South Korea, in order to gain better understanding of North Korean refugees’ language use and the challenges they face during their (re)settlement. The study addresses the following research questions:
1. What are the two North Korean refugees’ language attitudes about different varieties of Korean?
2. What language-related challenges have they encountered while engaging in everyday social interactions?
3. How have they responded to those challenges and what efforts have they made to overcome them?

2 Language ideologies, accent, and linguistic discrimination

McGroarty (2010) emphasizes the social and complex nature of language ideologies, defining language ideologies as “abstract (and often implicit) belief systems related to language and linguistic behavior that affect speakers’ choices and interpretations of communicative interaction” (3). These beliefs encompass ideas about the perceived status of particular languages and the (in)appropriateness of expressions in certain situations (Song 2010). Since language ideologies are developed based on the speakers’ sociocultural experiences (Kroskrity 2004), language ideologies are not static but diverse and changing.
Language ideologies are manifested in the social practices of everyday life and interactions between members of different social groups. Members of a group may exclude, marginalize, or problematize members of other groups based on their accent or language (Blommaert 1999). People’s beliefs about language are often related to their beliefs about speakers and also often reflect racialized stereotypes of social groups (May 2023). The indexical meaning of linguistic forms thus derives “from language ideologies, at the intersection of speakers’ beliefs about a particular linguistic form and their perception of a particular social group” (Song 2010: 27).

A monoglot ideology stresses the singular, unified image of a standardized, denotationally defined ‘language’ (Silverstein 1996). This ideology regards one language with a standard accent as legitimate, interpreting other languages and dialects as illegitimate. Blommaert (1999) argues that as the “backbone of language practices,” the monoglot ideology serves as “the neutral point used to measure and evaluate events and phenomena that are congruent or deviant” (19). In the United States, for example, English is often constructed as the “mark of Americanness, of good citizenship, of a will to integrate into U.S. society,” whereas Hispanics’ limited English proficiency is “quickly interpreted as an unwillingness to adapt to the dominant values” (Blommaert 1999: 20). In addition, nonstandard accents are usually stigmatized and associated with a lower social class. Based on their study on identity construction among migrants in Beijing, China, Dong and Blommaert (2009) observed a monoglot ideology where Putonghua was promoted as a single standard language, and migrants’ accents, when speaking Putonghua, were seen as a barrier to their full integration in school and society. A similar case was reported in Gu’s (2011, 2014) studies where mainland Chinese students in a secondary school and university in Hong Kong were silenced or marginalized due to their accented Cantonese in the host context. North Koreans, the focus of the present study, likewise tend to experience discrimination based on their accent, and their socioeconomic status and country of origin.

Distinguishing linguistic discrimination from other more established forms of discrimination, such as those based on skin color, national or ethnic origin, and religion, Dovchin (2020) defined it as discrimination “based on an individual’s use of language, accent, dialect, repertoire and speech,” as manifested in “ideologies and practices that are utilised to conform, normalise and reformulate an unequal and uneven linguistic power between language users” (774; see also May 2023). According to a survey carried out by South Korea’s National Institute of Korean Language in 2016 (N = 305), over 40 % of the North Korean refugee respondents reported experiencing discrimination because of their accent (National Institute of Korean Language 2016). South Korea, like many other countries, has a state-implemented
standard language, which suggests a state mono-dialectism and monolingualism

despite its largely bidialectal and multilingual population. Standard Korean is
defined as the modern speech of Seoul, generally used by well-cultivated and well-
educated people. The high status and instrumental value of standard Korean has thus
become widely internalized, and the use of regional varieties of Korean has been
relegated to private domains and speaker solidarity. Within these established lin-
guistic “hierarchies of prestige” (Liddicoat 2013), North Koreans’ linguistic reper-
toires are often depicted as deficient, deviant from the norm, and in need of
remediation. This linguistically constructed “problem” is exacerbated by the ra-
cialized stereotype that North Koreans are less capable in certain areas of life due to a
perceived lack of education and experience. Some North Koreans, having also
internalized these messages, enroll in speech training to try to get rid of their accent
and sound like South Koreans (Park 2022).

3 Language-related experiences and language
ideologies of refugees in different contexts

Research into refugees’ language ideologies and identities is limited. Previous
research has focused on adult refugees’ English-language-learning experiences in
English-dominant countries, highlighting their identity construction as ESL learners
in their host society (e.g., De Costa 2010; Duran 2016; Metro 2022; Ricento 2013; Shapiro
and MacDonald 2017). Ricento (2013) discussed a highly educated refugee’s ‘dimin-
ished’ or ‘erased’ identities when his receiving society, Canada, recognized only
certain linguistic skills and educational credentials. Metro (2022) reported on cul-
tural frictions and conflicting perceptions about schooling between Burmese refugee
families and school personnel in the United States. Others looked at refugees’ agency
and empowerment by demonstrating development of participation, curricular, and
institutional competence in the context of a community ESL program (De Costa 2010),
the role of multilingual competence in constructing transnational identities (Duran
2016), and asset identity construction of refugees in their written and oral narratives
(Shapiro and MacDonald 2017).

A limited yet growing body of research has looked at the experiences of refugees
outside North America, including North Korean refugees in South Korea. Studies on
North Korean refugees have shown the complexity of North Korean refugees’ relation-
ship with South Koreans as related to language practices, as well as language
ideologies towards the different varieties of Korean. For example, Lee and Ahn (2016)
explained how North Korean university students interacted with their South Korean
peers and constructed their language ideologies and identities accordingly. Their
data, taken from audio-recordings of student meetings, showed the North Koreans agreed with their South Korean peers most of the time, avoided speaking with a North Korean accent, and tried not to discuss topics related to North Korea. These language patterns suggest that North Koreans inhabit a peripheral and subordinate position in South Korean society, with the authors concluding that they tended to “marginalize themselves by devaluing their own language, knowledge [and], most of all, their own selves” (51). In Lee et al.’s (2016) study of North Korean university students’ multilingual practices, the students appeared to use standard (Seoul-based) South Korean as a base form of communication to be accepted by their host society. They treated North Korean as an inner-circle language, consistently switching to their South Korean variety if even one South Korean person was present in a group. Park’s (2022) study, on the other hand, reported that while North Korean refugees sometimes strategically tried to conceal their identities to protect themselves from discrimination, they nevertheless constructed positive linguistic identities by using bidialectal and bicultural skills, thereby differentiating themselves positively from South Koreans, particularly in relation to the potential future reunification of North and South Korea. Salo and Dufva (2018) investigated two North Korean refugees’ language practices and the emotions associated with each of their languages. Although the two participants both considered standard South Korean to be a more prestigious language variety, they expressed different attitudes towards North Korean. One participant embraced the two varieties of Korean equally, whereas the other strove to rid herself of her North Korean accent.

Although many studies have explored the role of language in North Korean refugees’ adaptation, none has closely investigated interactions between North Koreans and local South Koreans in provincial areas with their own regional dialects, the particular focus of this study. The present study contributes to the field in this regard by focusing on the actual everyday language practices and attitudes of two North Korean refugees in Gyeongsang Province (where a regional variety of Korean is spoken) who were actively trying to assimilate into mainstream South Korean culture, including accessing the standard (Seoul) South Korean language variety.

4 The study

4.1 The participants

This study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2019 with two North Korean refugees living in Gyeongsang Province. Both participants, Eunjoo and Mina (pseudonyms), were born and raised in North Hamgyong Province, North Korea’s northernmost province. They are from low socioeconomic backgrounds and
received a high school education in North Korea. The participants were recruited through an acquaintance of the researcher. With many North Korean refugees reluctant to reveal their background, it would have been very challenging to recruit research participants by other means; common recruitment techniques, such as advertisements and flyers, are generally ineffective.

Eunjoo had moved to South Korea 10 years before the study, via China and Thailand. According to her, she did not originally plan to defect to South Korea. While selling food and goods in an open market in Hoeryong, a city in North Hamgyong Province on the Chinese border, she often heard that people in China were affluent and that there were good opportunities to make quick cash there. Out of curiosity, and having experienced financial difficulties in North Korea, she crossed the river into China to check out the opportunities there. Although she had hoped to return to North Korea, she felt it was too risky and lived in China for a couple of years in constant fear of being arrested and deported back to North Korea. Then, hoping to reach South Korea, she moved to Thailand, where she was jailed for eight months. Despite its distance, Thailand is one of the closest reachable nations where North Koreans can reasonably expect that the government will take them to South Korean officials rather than deporting them to North Korea. This is what occurred and after completing her three-month education at Hanawon, she chose to settle in Gyeongsang Province due to the lower cost of living and the greater availability of housing. Soon after that, through the help of a broker, her daughter and mother escaped North Korea to re-unite and live with her in South Korea. She got re-married to a South Korean man from Gyeongsang Province and had two more children. At the time of the study, she was working as a waitress at a local restaurant. Prior to this job, she worked whatever part-time manual-labor jobs she could find, from assembling phones to cooking and dishwashing at different local restaurants.

Mina had moved to South Korea five years before the study. Having experienced economic hardship in North Korea, she escaped over the northern border into China in search of a better life. Like Eunjoo, Mina did not initially intend to settle in South Korea. She lived in China, where she remained in hiding for 10 years, until she eventually gained Chinese citizenship through marrying an ethnically Korean Chinese citizen. Mina’s husband often visited South Korea for work and, although she felt more comfortable living in China once she had obtained citizenship there, he persuaded her to move by saying that there were many North Koreans in South Korea and she would be able to use the refugee welfare system that provides comprehensive support for resettlement, including housing subsidies. Like Eunjoo, Mina was unable to find desirable employment. She worked for two years manning highway toll booths, during which she had few meaningful interactions with South Koreans. She later found a job as an insurance agent, selling insurance to individuals and businesses.
4.2 Data collection and analysis

Two separate interviews were conducted with each participant at a quiet cafe, each lasting approximately 2 h. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed in Korean, and translated into English by the author. Prior to the interviews, I discussed my research interest in studying the lived experiences of migrants in South Korea and how my own life trajectory as a migrant, my upbringing in Gyeongsang Province, and exposure to different dialects and languages motivated me to research language use among North Korean refugees who settled in Gyeongsang Province. I also mentioned that meeting North Korean university students outside South Korea, attending their presentations, and conversing with them about their life in South Korea inspired me to better understand their experiences.

I believe this dialogue helped me and the interviewees find common ground and created shared experiences, which eventually enabled me to develop rapport with the participants. During the interviews, the participants discussed their language practices, attitudes towards different varieties of Korean, language training at Hanawon, strategies to learn South Korean, difficulties adjusting to the new linguistic and cultural environment, efforts they had made to overcome these difficulties, self- and other-ascribed identities, social networks, and future goals. I asked open-ended questions to encourage the participants to talk about any thoughts and feelings related to their language use and identity. Depending on the participants’ responses, I asked follow-ups as needed for clarification, further information, or elaboration.

A thematic approach was adopted to analyze the interview data based on the guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step involved going through the interview transcripts and familiarizing myself with each participant’s life story. After this initial stage, codes were developed by locating parts of the data related to the research topic (language use and language attitudes). These codes were then sorted and collated into potential themes, and relevant data excerpts that illustrate and exemplify the themes were selected for inclusion in this paper. The themes that emerged from this process include (1) language attitudes towards different varieties of Korean, (2) strategies to learn standard South Korean, and (3) accent as a source of misunderstandings. The themes and a summary of the analysis were reviewed with the participants to ensure their lived experiences were represented accurately. In the following sections, each theme is discussed, along with supporting quotations.
5 Findings

5.1 Hierarchical views of the three varieties of Korean

Eunjoo and Mina became aware of the differences between North and South Korean ways of speaking soon after arriving in South Korea. At the Hanawon resettlement education facility, their instructors emphasized differences between North and South Korean, including pronunciation and intonation, and the inclusion of Sino-Korean words and English loanwords, with which they were unfamiliar. Upon leaving Hanawon, they noticed the reactions of South Koreans to how they spoke and quickly learned that their ways of speaking drew unwanted attention and made them stand out. North Korean varieties are easily distinguishable from South Korean ones, especially in stress and intonation patterns (Lee et al. 2016). According to Yeon (2000), stronger stress and higher pitch are used in North Korean, which gives South Koreans the impression that North Korean sounds “aggressive and militant,” whereas such phonological features may be interpreted in the North as “high-spirited, courageous and revolutionarily refined” (152). In particular, the participants described Hamgyong intonation as “very strong” and “coarse,” and they contrasted it to the “smooth” and “feminine” intonation of standard South Korean.

The two participants’ contrastive evaluations of the two varieties and preference for South Korean over their native variant suggest that they had internalized South Korean language ideologies. Mina reported her perception that North Korean is devalued by South Korean speakers: “We get discriminated against. At first, people don’t notice where we are from, but as soon as we speak, they always ask, ‘Where are you from?’ Our way of speaking is annoying. They look down on us because we’re from North Korea.” The idea of North Koreans as linguistically deficient is related to the perceived image of North Koreans as poor, incompetent, and backward compared to modern, cosmopolitan South Koreans (Sung 2010). The social stigma and discrimination Mina experienced led her to feel that it was necessary to avoid North Korean ways of speaking and linguistically conform. For example, Mina stated, “in order for me to adjust to South Korean society, I must follow the rules here … I need to improve my language.” Having internalized her subordinate status as a North Korean, similar to Lee and Ahn’s (2016) participants, she seemed to view the acquisition and use of standard South Korean as a necessary step for her to acculturate into South Korean society.

In the case of Mina, the ideology of ethnic superiority (joseonminjok jeiljuui, 조선 민족 제일주의) that she acquired in North Korea affected her views towards the South Korean language. According to this ideology, all Koreans are part of one ethnic
group, sharing the same language and origin (Kang 2011). Mina stressed that, as an ethnic Korean, she did not view herself as a foreigner in South Korea:

We aren’t a multicultural family (tamwunhwa kaceng, 다문화 가정). We’re proud of being Korean because we belong to the same ethnic group. Although we’re a little inferior to South Koreans, we share the same blood, and I feel this is our land too. That’s why I have more desire to live here and work harder on my language.

“Multicultural families” refers to families with one Korean parent and another who is ethnically non-Korean (Park 2019, 2020). Mina differentiated herself and others like her from these non-Korean migrants on the basis of “blood.” Nevertheless, Mina reported a feeling of inferiority in South Korean society, as the participants in Lee and Ahn’s (2016) study also experienced. Her strong sense of ethnic unity based on her belief in shared blood and ancestry, together with her sense of inadequacy and insecurity, motivated her to work harder to improve her understanding and use of the standard South Korean language.

Both Mina and Eunjoo reported that, although Gyeongsang dialect is the variety of South Korean they were exposed to daily, they tried hard not to acquire it because they thought that speaking the dialect with their North Korean accent could exacerbate negative evaluations of their speech and potentially lead to more discrimination. When asked whether living in a rural city had eased their resettlement, given the perceived similarities between the Gyeongsang dialect and North Korean, they both said that Gyeongsang dialect speakers noticed their accent immediately and they experienced discrimination in day-to-day interactions with local South Koreans because of it.

Describing the Gyeongsang dialect as “rough,” Mina and Eunjoo described their own Hamgyong dialect as “more rough,” and even “rude” and “vulgar”, making their speech easily distinguishable even from rural Southern varieties. Mina said, “When we speak, South Korean people would think we’re arguing. South Koreans wouldn’t think they’re arguing when Gyeongsang dialect speakers talk.” Eunjoo shared similar views on the dialects’ differences:

I realized that accent and intonation are very important. Here in South Korea, I’ve only lived in Gyeongsang Province. People say Gyeongsang dialect is rough, but our accent is more rough. Gyeongsang dialect is a regional dialect of South Korea. No matter how strong it is, South Koreans will be understanding. However, ours is not a regional dialect. North Korean accent is generally strong.

According to common language ideologies, both South Korean regional dialects and North Korean dialects sound outdated and unsophisticated. However, the association of North Korean dialects with the nation of North Korea sets them apart. The type of North Korean speech that South Koreans are most likely to hear is an extremely
exaggerated style of speaking employed by North Korean political leaders and
female news anchors in clips from North Korean TV played on South Korean TV or
social media. Moreover, North Korean accents are sometimes emulated and mocked
by South Korean comedians, which contributes to the negative image of North
Korean speech (Lee and Ahn 2016). Thus, while Gyeongsang dialect is a language of
solidarity among Gyeongsang dialect speakers (Park 2020), and the speech of female
Gyeongsang dialect speakers is often considered feminine and cute to South Korean
ears (Brown and Park 2020), North Korean dialects are associated with a sense of
hostility, ridicule, and annoyance in South Korea.

Mina and Eunjoo pointed out differences in social status between Gyeongsang
dialect and standard Korean, considering the value of different speech varieties
for social advancement. Mina said, “People perceive standard Korean and regional
dialects differently. If you speak [the standard] Seoul dialect, you look smart and
feminine. I want to learn Seoul speech because I want to be considered feminine and
intelligent. But what I hear is Gyeongsang dialect.” Eunjoo described Gyeongsang
dialect, especially the speech of older local residents, as “ignorant”, “vulgar”,
“incomprehensible”, and “non feminine” and expressed her desire to acquire stan-
dard Korean rather than the Gyeongsang dialect that her husband and his family
members spoke on a daily basis. When asked whether learning a regional dialect is
helpful, Eunjoo said, “No, that’s why I’m not learning it. I need to be selective about
which variety I acquire. If you imitate regional dialect speakers, that’s not helpful.”

5.2 Investment in learning standard South Korean

Eunjoo and Mina viewed standard South Korean as a prerequisite for successful
adaptation. Their North Korean accents marked them as being from neither
Gyeongsang Province nor the Seoul metropolitan area where the standard language
is used, but explicitly as North Korean. They were conscious of linguistic “hierarchies
of prestige” (Liddicoat 2013), and they considered both the Hamgyong dialect and
Gyeongsang dialect to be socially stigmatized varieties. They both identified standard
South Korean as their language variety of choice. However, their attempts to speak
standard South Korean were not successful, and they were often mistaken for
joseonjok (ethnic Koreans with Chinese nationality) or still identified as North
Korean, similar to North Korean participants in other studies (e.g., Lee et al. 2016;
Park 2022). According to previous research (e.g., Park 2022), many North Koreans
who do not wish to reveal their country of origin tend to claim to be from a regional
province in South Korea where the regional dialect bears similarities to their own.
However, this strategy was not possible for these participants based in Gyeongsang
Province, where they found local speakers of the regional dialect to have a keen
awareness of differences between standard and regional Korean language varieties, and between regional varieties.

Wishing to pass as a native of South Korea, specifically Seoul, and avoid the negative consequences of revealing her origin, it was important to Mina to modify her accent. Mina stated that the basic 3-month-long education she received at Hanawon was not of much help in her linguistic adaptation, stressing the need to receive additional specialized language training. Therefore, she had made painstaking efforts to learn standard South Korean. She said:

I search for programs on my phone. There are many accent modification lectures on YouTube. I also watch South Korean dramas because they're helpful for correcting my pronunciation and accent. There are many words that I don't understand so I look them up on the Internet and online dictionary. There's so much I don't know.

Lacking standard South Korean speakers around her, she relied on media that offered explicit instruction on pronunciation and gave her language models and more exposure to the standard language. Moreover, although she reported feeling isolated among South Koreans and having only a few South Korean friends, she stated that she “tended not to socialize with other North Koreans” because she thought that continuing to be exposed to North Korean would delay her progress in learning standard South Korean. This finding indicates an important difference between Mina’s experience and the experiences of the student participants in Lee et al.’s (2016) study who continued to use North Korean as an inner-circle language.

Eunjoo tried her best to adopt South Korean ways of speaking through seeking opportunities to interact with standard South Korean speakers:

There's no one I can get explicit training from. I just listen carefully and think about, “Oh, people speak like that. I should speak like that.” I go to different places and try to be exposed to people whom I haven't met before. And I try to adapt my accent to speak like them. I pay attention to the accent and intonation of each speaker in the hope that I can imitate their way of speaking.

The efforts both participants made to avoid being identified as North Korean and their construction of imagined ideal future selves as standard South Korean speakers reveal their perceptions and evaluations of the different social statuses of different language varieties and their speakers. Their attitudes align with Lee’s (2016) description of the linguistic challenges of North Korean refugees as “not only language issues but identity issues … that could determine the success or failure of their life in South Korea” (750).

Eunjoo also pointed out that learning to speak like a South Korean would require her to change not only her accent but the way she speaks:
When we speak, we sound like we’re giving commands. South Koreans say, “Could you bring them to me?” I say, “Bring them.” I know I shouldn’t speak like that. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Otherwise you will be hated. I try to speak softly. This is not how I would usually speak. I’m very direct. I’m not being my real self. I can’t express my emotions. I get irritated, and I suffer from mental distress.

In order to blend into the mainstream society and avoid negative fallout resulting from using more direct North Korean speech forms instead of the indirect forms preferred in standard South Korean, Eunjoo tried to adjust her speech “by phrasing commands or requests as questions.” However, making such changes was not only difficult to achieve but also detrimental to her psychological well-being.

Despite their stated preference for standard South Korean, following South Korean linguistic norms proved difficult both pragmatically and ideologically. Both Eunjoo and Mina reported feeling uncomfortable with loanwords, not just because the words were unfamiliar but because they did not feel it was right to use them. Eunjoo described her negative view of South Koreans’ frequent use of English loanwords:

They use too many loanwords. I tell people to use pure Korean and ask them why they need to use loanwords. A lot of North Korean refugees use English words because they learned them in South Korea. I tell them to use North Korea’s pure Korean words because I can’t understand them and pure Korean words are better than foreign words.

North Korea is known for its emphasis on linguistic purification and abhorrence of loanwords, which contributes significantly to North-South differences in vocabulary and language. English loanwords are pervasive in standard South Korean (Lawrence 2010) and form a part of every South Korean’s linguistic repertoire (Rüdiger 2018). In North Korea, on the other hand, the majority of loanwords from English, Japanese, and Russian have been translated into “pure” Korean (Song 2015). Having been educated in North Korea with its closed, “self-reliant” style of language, Eunjoo still believed that words of native Korean origin were better than foreign-derived loanwords and was resistant to fellow North Koreans’ acceptance of such latter usages.

5.3 Accent as a source of misunderstandings

Eunjoo and Mina’s interactions with South Koreans resulted in regular misunderstandings due to linguistic differences. Intonation in Hamgyong Korean tends to drop sharply at the end of a sentence, and speakers of standard South Korean consider this linguistic feature to be “commanding”. This contributes to the development of an image of North Korean speakers as “blunt, brusque and angry” (Shin et al. 2013: 172–175). Such differences in intonation increase the risk of
misunderstanding between North Korean and South Korean speakers. Eunjoo, who worked as a waitress, stated:

Customers came to buy *kimbab* ‘Korean rice rolls’ and they got frightened by my accent. They said I look feminine but my accent is so strong. All I said was how many *kimbab* would they like. Immediately, they asked if I was angry, and I needed to explain that I wasn’t. The situation gets worse when I take orders on the phone. I speak softly but they ask why I’m getting mad at them.

According to Eunjoo, South Korean speakers perceived her to be aggressive based on how she spoke, and her customers and co-workers often interpreted her Hamgyong intonation patterns as “angry.” They also often mistakenly thought that she was *joseonjok* (ethnic Korean from China). Passively accepting this other-ascribed false identity as a member of a different diasporic group, she purposefully did not correct their perception. Although *joseonjok* also face discrimination in South Korea, she chose not to reveal her background for fear of greater discrimination.

Eunjoo claimed that even while communicating with her own children, there have been misunderstandings due to her accent.

My children often say, “Why are you always angry at us?” I say, “I’m not angry.” But they say, “No, you’re angry.” I often tell them, “I’m just talking to you. Do you think I’m angry? I’m not. My voice got a little louder.” But my daughter says I’ve gotten more courteous and quieter than before. I’m trying hard because my kids are young and I need to communicate with them.

Such experiences led both Eunjoo and Mina to develop new strategies to interact with South Korean people, including smiling and speaking carefully, proactively revealing their North Korean background and seeking South Korean interlocutors’ understanding prior to starting a conversation, or even remaining silent.

Mina, who worked as an insurance agent, stated that even a simple greeting can result in misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication, which result in offended clients, colleagues, or bosses. According to Mina:

North Koreans speak in a high, strong tone. The same words delivered in a North Korean accent can offend [South Korean] people easily. Even saying hello, we may sound arrogant. People misunderstand because of our accent. I speak very carefully when I go meet my clients. I try to smile and stay quiet. If I speak without being conscious, my strong accent comes out and people ask me whether I am dissatisfied with something. No matter how careful I am, my accent will come out.

In an environment where she had to interact with South Koreans, she actively exercised control over how she spoke, adapting her linguistic strategies. However, while Mina tried to control the tone of her voice, she could not help but speak in a North Korean accent when she became enthusiastic:
While explaining about insurance, my tone of voice goes up. Because I try to do my best. My clients used to ask me if I was upset. I told them I wasn’t. [The first time this happened] I was completely floored! These days, when I introduce myself to my new clients, I first tell them I’m from North Korea and please understand me. Then they understand why my accent and way of talking are different.

When she was excited and enthusiastic, Mina’s voice was less controlled and her native accent was more pronounced, which led to misunderstandings. In a business and sales context, where it is imperative to be clearly understood and come across as having the right attitude, with zero room for confusion or misinterpretation, Mina proactively revealed her background to mitigate confusion, provide an explanation of any perceived differences, and seek her clients’ understanding in advance.

Eunjoo used the opposite strategy. When she worked at a car factory, prior to working at the restaurant, she initially remained silent in order to avoid discrimination:

If South Koreans find out where I’m from, the conversation will stop there. In order not to reveal my roots, I had to remain silent. I was successful in not speaking a word at work for over a month until I unintentionally answered my cell phone. When I said hello, everyone stood still. A co-worker asked, “You can speak?”

6 Discussion and conclusion

This study has discussed complex and highly contextualized language ideologies by examining the interview discourses of two North Korean refugees residing in rural South Korea, an understudied group in language ideology research. The participants’ narratives highlighted how their North Korean accents exacerbated their communication difficulties and marginalization in rural South Korea, leading them to reshape their language ideologies.

This study contributes to the field of language and refugee studies by unpacking the role of language use in North Korean refugees’ struggles in interacting with South Koreans in the context of the power relationships in South Korean society, along with the strategies they adopt in these struggles. Research on refugees has to date focused primarily on English as a Second Language (ESL) adult refugees’ identities in English-dominant countries, highlighting their marginalization and agency in their host society (e.g., De Costa 2010; Duran 2016; Metro 2022; Ricento 2013; Shapiro and MacDonald 2017). The key difference between these ESL refugee learners and North Korean refugees is that the latter continue to use the same language in South Korea, albeit with North Korean dialectal features. They are thus atypical in terms of language and status as defectors who have fled from North Korea to South Korea for
political and economic reasons. Yet, the findings of the study have shown that they still face the usual processes of linguistic discrimination experienced by refugees worldwide. While it is often believed that North Korean refugees, having a shared language and ethnicity, should be reasonably well-positioned to adjust to South Korean society, their daily interactions with South Koreans directly challenged this belief, with linguistic differences often resulting in misunderstanding and discrimination.

The current study's participants' narratives also demonstrated their hierarchical views of the three varieties of Korean (North Korean and Gyeongsang dialects and standard (Seoul-based) South Korean) and their strong desire to assimilate to standard South Korean norms. This is different from previous studies that showed some North Korean refugees who eventually developed flexible language ideologies, coming to accept or even be proud of their North Korean dialect and to resist its perceived lower social status (e.g., Park 2022; Salo and Dufva 2018). The participants in the current study tended to privilege standard Korean over both their North Korean dialect and the Gyeongsang dialect, what Liddicoat (2013) has described as linguistic “hierarchies of prestige” (5). Meanwhile, they described the Gyeongsang and North Korean dialects as the language of uneducated, rude people, and irrelevant or even unconducive to their socialization and integration into the mainstream South Korean community, further observing that the North Korean dialect in particular led South Koreans to misunderstand them and attribute negative qualities to them. Viewing themselves as inferior to South Koreans (see also Lee and Ahn 2016), they devalued their own North Korean dialect, along with the Gyeongsang dialect and strove to acquire a standard South Korean accent to hide their North Korean identity, thus reinforcing the dominant status of standard South Korean. Their tendency to essentialize different Korean varieties as both possessing and granting different social statuses restricted their language choices and the development of a more pluralistic and flexible language ideology.

The participants' language ideologies have thus necessarily been shaped by sociopolitical contexts and constructed by their sociocultural experience (Kroskrity 2004). Their experiences since settling in South Korea had led them to elevate standard South Korean over the Hamgyong dialect of North Korean and the Gyeongsang regional dialect of South Korean. First, the Hanawon language-support program offered by the South Korean government as part of the mandatory refugee resettlement program perpetuates and reinforces the ideology of South Korean language and culture as superior (Lee 2016). The participants in this study even argued that the South Korean government should provide more specialized and continued pronunciation training to help them speak like South Koreans. Furthermore, the daily discrimination the participants experienced gave them a strong message that their North Korean accent was both improper and deficient, and
therefore in need of remediation (Park 2022). Having internalized a sense of inferiority about their North Korean dialect, they also resisted the use of the local Gyeongsang dialect, pointing out differences in social status between it and standard South Korean. Although the Gyeongsang dialect is used as a language of solidarity and the main medium of communication in the rural province where they live (Park 2020), the participants felt dissatisfied with their current social positions and considered standard Korean linguistic capital necessary to help them achieve membership in mainstream South Korean society.

The participants’ narratives indicate that their language ideologies influenced their language practices and their goals and investment in language learning. Conscious of the prestige value of standard Korean, they, like other marginalized migrants in rural South Korea (e.g., Park 2020), made significant efforts to assimilate into mainstream culture and acquire its linguistic hallmarks, such as standard South Korean pronunciation (see also Lee 2016). For example, the participants would carefully listen to and emulate standard South Korean speakers and seek out media and other resources offering explicit phonetic instruction. However, learning to speak like South Koreans required the participants to change not only their accent but almost every aspect of how they spoke, such as modifying their sentence-level intonation and increasing their use of indirect speech acts by phrasing requests as questions rather than commands.

This study thus contributes to our understanding of North Korean refugees’ communicative strategies in response to language-related challenges. It goes beyond the previous research that focuses on North Korean refugees’ efforts to hide their backgrounds (e.g., Lee 2016; Lee and Ahn 2016; Park 2022) by describing a diverse array of specific strategies the participants use to interact with South Korean people, including smiling so as to not appear aggressive, remaining silent to avoid being ousted by their speech, and speaking carefully and deliberately to appear more South Korean and avoid potential misunderstandings. Furthermore, when these types of avoidance strategies failed or were not possible, the participants might proactively reveal their North Korean background in advance and ask for their interlocutors’ understanding and empathy.

These findings also offer practical implications. As shown in this and other studies, North Korean refugees often face discrimination in South Korea for the way they speak, leading to emotional dissonance, psychological distress, anxiety, and insecurity (e.g., Lee 2016; Park 2022). Despite their compulsory language training at the Hanawon resettlement program, North Koreans find it very challenging to overcome their North Korean accents, which inhibits their assimilation and acceptance in South Korean society. It is therefore important for teachers and administrators at Hanawon to understand North Korean refugees’ communication difficulties and linguistic needs fully as well as the complexities of their identities and
their experiences with South Koreans. As Lee (2016) has argued, and as this study’s participants also asserted, the current language-support program is insufficient for meeting refugees’ needs. Hanawon should develop more sophisticated and intensive language-support programs and provide continuing support to North Korean refugees who want to modify their accent and pronunciation. In addition, language-support programs for refugees should go beyond developing linguistic skills, with teachers serving as cultural mediators by providing learners with strategies for handling challenging interactions and linguistic discrimination so that they can achieve effective communication. Explicit instruction in responding to negative stereotypes could help them improve their communication skills and empower them to participate more confidently in intercultural interactions.

Furthermore, if language-support programs took a multidialectal and multilingual approach to refugee education, they could support refugees’ identities and development as full, legitimate citizens of South Korea. Currently, the programs designed for North Koreans emphasize linguistic and cultural differences and the refugees’ (unidirectional) need to adapt to South Korean language and culture. This exclusive focus on assimilation, neglecting refugees’ distinct linguistic and cultural identities, does not address the difficulties in communication illustrated in this study. Due to an overwhelming fear of being discriminated against, the participants often resorted to extreme communicative strategies, such as staying completely silent at work, in order to hide their background. Hanawon’s programs could thus usefully incorporate critical language awareness (Fairclough 1992) into their instruction to help students become aware of issues of language and power and the privileging of certain dialects over others, and educate them in how different dialects and languages can be viewed positively as resources. Teacher education and cultural awareness training workshops should be available to teachers and administrators at Hanawon to help them learn to recognize and appreciate more fully the backgrounds, rich language resources, and multiple identities of migrants and refugees.

Last but not least, North Korean refugees are now financially incentivized by the South Korean government to settle in provincial regions rather than in Seoul. These regions have their own dialects and cultures that are distinct from those of the mainstream society, as typified by the standard South Korean of Seoul, which is widely used in the media and formal settings such as schools and workplaces, as well as being the target dialect at Hanawon. The South Korean government thus has a duty to not only offer refugees financial incentives for settling in provincial regions, but to educate them regarding the differences in language and culture within South Korea, the local dialects, the specific and complex linguistic and cultural landscapes they are entering, and how the sociolinguistic environment of their new homes will likely affect their everyday lives.
Finally, the findings suggest directions for future research. As this study focused on the lived experiences of two North Korean refugees living in a rural province in South Korea, more research is needed on different North Korean refugees from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including newly arrived refugees, to explore their language use, attitudes, and challenges. Moreover, it would be meaningful to explore the perspectives of other involved parties, including administrators and teachers at Hanawon, for example. Better understanding of the support provided and their perspectives would be useful to facilitate acculturation among North Korean refugees in South Korea.

References


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