The pragmatics of creative language use in East Asian languages: an introduction

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1. Creativity as theory

Creative language use has been one of the foundational issues for much of modern linguistics. For example, Chomsky’s (1957, 1965) generative programme rests crucially on the notion of the creative aspect of language use (along with the notion of the alleged poverty of stimulus, McGilvray, 2001) as he defines them. Thus, Chomsky (1965, p. 6) articulates the theoretical interest of generative grammar in terms of an underlying grammatical device for diverse ranges and novel situations of language production and comprehension, in the realm of performance:

(A)n essential property of language is that it provides the means for expressing indefinitely many thoughts and for reacting appropriately in an indefinite range of new situations. The grammar of a particular language, then, is to be supplemented by a universal grammar that accommodates the creative aspect of language use and expresses the deep-seated regularities which, being universal, are omitted from the grammar itself.

For Chomsky, then, there are abstract rules transcending all instances of actual use in a grammar, and such a grammar is to be supplemented by the innate capacity of the human species to acquire and develop language systems, which he calls universal grammar, and which is supposed to be part of the linguistic faculty responsible for linguistic competence.

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Functional linguists, on the other hand, hold opposing points of view on multiple fronts – chief among them are the emphasis on the prefabricated and formulaic nature of language and the challenge to the notion of a static underlying grammar. There exists an extensive literature on both points, and this is perhaps best illustrated by Hopper’s notion of Emergent Grammar. Hopper (1987, 1998, 2012, *inter alia*), citing Bakhtin (1986), Becker (1988), Haiman (1991), among others, argues that grammar is best viewed as a dynamic system whereby prior text and existing communicative practices become routinised and subject to constant change, collectively and individually, and such a process and its provisional result (namely grammar) are ever evolving and never settled.

It should be noted that, although Emergent Grammar and its allied usage-based functional linguistic models put a premium on formulaicity (e.g. Wray, 2008), templates/exemplars (Bybee, 2007, 2010), repetition (e.g. Tannen, 1987), dialogic resonance (Du Bois, 2014) and so forth, as a major source and force of language (re)organisation, there is unmistakable attention paid to the creative aspect of language use in all of this tradition. Thus, Hopper (1998, p. 164) states:

> In EG (Emergent Grammar), the forms of language are seen as material entities that are passed from speaker to speaker in the form of actual utterance that are *picked up, remembered, and often changed* [emphasis added] in direct dialogic ways.

Such a process, of materials being picked up, remembered and changed, is echoed in Goodwin’s (2013, 2018, *inter alia*) formulation of co-operative, transformative organisation of human action and knowledge, which is based on micro-analyses of recorded interactional episodes. With examples such as the following,

Tony: Why don’t you get out my yard.

Chopper: Why don’t you *make* me get out the yard.

Goodwin (2013, p. 8) notes that “human action is intensely, perhaps uniquely, co-operative. Individual actions are constructed by assembling diverse materials, including language structure, prosody, and visible embodied displays.” In his view, construction of social action by assembling materials available in both the psychical and textual environments manifests simultaneously as picking and transforming (i.e. modifying) in a multimodal fashion.

Similarly, Du Bois’ proposal of dialogic syntax and resonance also implies both convergence and divergence from the prior speaker to the next. As Du Bois (2014, p. 360) states:

> The most visible reflex of dialogic syntax occurs when one speaker constructs an utterance based on the immediately co-present utterance of a dialogic partner. Words, structures, and other linguistic resources invoked
by the first speaker are selectively reproduced by the second. This strategy can be applied whether the second speaker’s meaning is parallel, opposed, or even orthogonal to that of the first.

In other words, selective reproduction and modification are two sides of the integrated dialogic operation in everyday interaction (Su, 2016).

In short, while formal approaches to language as represented in Chomsky’s generative programme treat novelty as the exclusive feature of language use, functional linguistics emphasises both intertextuality (and by extension, formulaicity) and innovation as two inextricably intertwined sides of the same operation.

2. Toward a gradient notion of creativity

As can be seen from the preceding brief overview of both the formal and functional camps, which hold radically different views of what language is and how to approach actual language use, creativity, however defined or understood, clearly plays a central role in both approaches. To consolidate the divergent views of creativity, we propose that it be treated as a gradient construct, ranging from merely saying something in a new speech event to saying something highly remarkable in terms of form or meaning or both. This continuum is illustrated in the scale below.

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\text{Low creativity} < \text{Production of remarkable text} > \text{High creativity}
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Saying something in a new speech event

According to this conception, utterances can be considered new or creative even by virtue of repeating the same utterance by the prior speaker. This is because there is a temporal dimension involved. As the Greek saying goes, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man” (Heraclitus, 6th century BCE). Obviously, merely saying the same as the prior speaker without modification lacks the formal trappings of creativity as typically understood and can thus be considered the lowest level of creativity.

High-level creativity, on the other hand, involves remarkable performances that may manifest in an infinite number of ways: coining novel expressions (or neologisms), making creative use of fixed sayings, applying hyperboles and exaggerations, providing witty characterisations of the state of affairs under discussion, rendering interesting prosodic features, displaying notable embodied and other visual/spatial configurations, or doing combinations of some of the aforementioned activities.

Obviously, as Hopper (1998, p. 163) notes, speakers are not equal, and they differ in their ability in mastering language skills and adapting prior text to new
situations, hence the individualised, unstable character of emergent grammar. We have every reason to believe that speakers cannot be assumed to possess the same skill levels in producing highly remarkable language output as defined here, hence the ever present variability and diversity in creative language use.

This special issue focuses on higher level creative activities in situated East Asian language use.

3. Creative language use in East Asian languages

That speakers create special, notable forms of language in both the spoken and written discourse modes is well-documented by researchers and often noticed by participants themselves. However, less well understood is the pragmatics of creative language use by East Asian language speakers in diverse environments, from everyday conversation to emerging media use.

While existing studies in the language and social interaction tradition, which we take as the foundation of our collective approach, have touched on a wide range of phenomena such as figures of speech (Drew & Holt, 1998), idiomatic expressions (Drew & Holt, 1988), exaggerations (Drew, 2003), hyperbole (McCarthy & Carter, 2004; Norrick, 2004), irony (Clift, 1999), most of these studies are based on English data, and rarely do we find studies with an East Asian focus. Among the few studies on East Asian languages, Takanashi (2016, 2020), applying the notion of “bonding” through interactional dialogic engagements, describes how playful neologism emerges as a product of the intersubjective act of play framing and playful stancetaking in Japanese conversations. Suzuki (2020), in her analysis of novel expressions in Japanese interaction, points out that many such expressions occur as predicates in emotional remarks or assessments and that, though the expressions are novel, they are often created based on triggering expressions or familiar templates in the prior discourse. Hsiao and Su (2010) investigate hyperbole and metaphor in Mandarin conversation, showing how speakers express exaggerative interpretations of events, which increases what they call “speakers’ intersubjectification to indicate their stance for interactive purposes”. Li (2020), focusing particularly on physical contact (“touch”), provides a multimodal account of conversational joking in Mandarin everyday interaction, noting especially the conversation sequential environments in which such activities occur. Tao (2020) describes how multiple follow-up NPs can be produced by respondents in Mandarin conversation to elaborate on an other-produced referent and serve to help co-construct an affiliative stance, where the added NP(s) often display a creative, playful quality. Finally, Qiu et al. (2021) explore the use of jocular flattery in Chinese multi-party instant messaging, an increasingly important genre of everyday communication.
For this special issue, we have included six contributions on East Asian languages, two each from Chinese, Japanese and Korean, in the area of high-level creative use of language through conversational joint actions and social media exchanges. All contributions are based on naturally occurring talk-in-interaction in private and public spheres and/or in social media settings. Although the communicative settings that these articles deal with vary, the collective body of work addresses different extents the following converging issues:

1. What forms and features of high-level creative language use are common in natural conversation and social media? How can speakers make use of the prior speaker’s materials and/or respond creatively?
2. What multimodal features, in both spoken and social media format, such as prosodic patterns and visual behaviours and symbols, are commonly seen to work together with lexico-grammar?
3. What social actions are implemented or accomplished by deploying creative language (along with the associated multimodal features)?
4. How can theoretical notions such as agency, bonding, framing, involvement, stance negotiation, identity, alignment/affiliation, resonance, distributed cognition and intersubjectivity, among others, be brought to bear on patterns of creative language use in various social settings?
5. What methodological issues are involved in dealing with different modes of language use, especially with multimodal and new media data?
6. Finally, are there typological patterns that can be delineated from comparisons among East Asian languages and/or with other languages such as English?

4. The articles

The six articles can be categorised into two broad groups based on the type of data they analyse: four articles dealing with everyday talk and two dealing with public and/or social media data.

**Kyu-hyun Kim**’s article, titled “Syllabically-matched resonance in sound and category: An excursion into the poetics of ordinary talk in Korean”, describes how “creative” formulation of resonance is realised through dialogic engagement in Korean conversation. What is especially significant is that it shows that dialogic resonance can be performed at the syllable level, in the form of syllabic matching, and yields “poetic” qualities in resonant sound-sequences and with implications for the organisation of conversational sequence and topic.

**Ryoko Suzuki** deals with “Creativity in compliment responses in Japanese everyday talk”. Taking negative responses that start with *iyaiya* “no no” as her focus, she shows that although responses to compliments in Japanese are understood to
have a well-established format that contains a relatively high degree of fixedness and social and temporal restrictions, recipients of compliments in Japanese may add creative comments and/or perform embodied actions to partially accept the compliment or shift the perspective of the compliment. This article thus adds creative and interactional dimensions to an extensively researched pragmatic issue in Japanese.

Continuing her long-standing work on playful Japanese conversation, Hiroko Takanashi addresses the notion of agency in her article on “Language reproduction and coordinated agency through resonant play”. Her main thesis is that creativity is jointly achieved, and that playful utterances can create priming effects. Specifically, playful framing in prior text is shown to have the effect of prepatterning the subsequent language reproduction in resonance, and the ensuing engagement with the prior utterances within the co-constructed play framing activity can, among other effects, enhance shared pleasure.

Analysing both Mandarin Chinese and American English (with additional excerpts from a radio talk show), Hongyin Tao deals with “Multimodal amusement resonance as a conversation interactional device”. He starts by highlighting the fact that resonance can manifest in multiple modalities, including morphosyntax, prosody and embodied actions, often simultaneously. In showing that resonance is often performed in the service of creating an amusing effect, or conversational humour, he suggests that, as an uplifting device in conversation, multimodal resonance with amusing effects requires both skills and effort in conversational interaction.

The remaining two articles pursue creative use related issues in public media production. Mary Shin Kim, on “Creative multimodal and multilingual puns as and through joint actions in Korean media interviews”, introduces additional dimensions in creative language use. Notably, through a close examination of the sequential and other contextual information, she reveals that conversational puns often emerge as a way to deal with socially or interactionally delicate or difficult situations. Puns, for example, can help transform the focus and frame of the troublesome ongoing interaction, as well as manage participant identities and roles in the interaction. In addition, Kim shows that puns can be created with resources from both Korean and English, resulting in multilingual puns.

Chi-hua Hsiao’s article on “Celebritification and viewer interaction in microcelebrities’ product promotion videos” presents data from an emerging field of multimodal discourse analysis. Adopting the methods of what she calls virtual ethnography and discourse analysis, she investigates how language along with other semiotic resources is deployed in the creation of promotion videos by microcelebrities based in Taiwan. Her analysis covers both the production of videos as well as the viewers’ interaction with the microcelebrities through online
comments and follow-up exchanges. The article concludes that celebrification through product promotion videos constitutes a creative means of communication for microcelebrities to craft a “self” according to product features.

In short, this special issue showcases the latest research on higher level creative language use in both everyday situations and public arenas. Collectively, the articles address important issues in form, function, interactional structure and research methodology, and examine critical discourse interactional notions that play a key role in describing and understanding the multitude of practices in actual language use. We hope that through the lens of the East Asian languages in diverse settings examined here and with occasional comparisons with English, this special issue will encourage more systematic investigations of East Asian languages and beyond, for such inquiries will not only better our understanding of the pragmatics of (higher level) creative use of East Asian languages, but also raise important theoretical questions about what creative language is, how speakers construct social action in and through such practices, and what all this means for the very nature of language.

References


