Accent as gendered identity marker: Linguistic insecurity among young, female North Koreans in South Korea

There are approximately 30,000 North Koreans living in South Korea today, the majority of whom have arrived since famine in the North in the mid-1990s. Moreover, women have outnumbered men since 2002 and have consistently constituted more than 70 percent of North Koreans arriving to the South since 2006, partly because high demand for North Korean common-law wives in China offered a means of escaping the North (Korea Hana Foundation 2016). This paper considers the concerns of young female North Koreans living in and around Seoul regarding their distinctive accents, focusing on the question of why many felt pressure to hide their native accents and adopt South Korean ways of speaking, and the consequences of such behaviour. Many of the North Koreans I met identified their voices and particular ways of speaking as problematic. Politicised divergences in Korean language since national division meant their ways of speaking immediately marked them out as different and had the potential to attract unwanted attention at a time when they often wanted to avoid scrutiny (Yeon 2006; Song 2015). Furthermore, the prestige of the Seoul standard placed considerable social pressure on Korean speakers from outside the capital to give up their regional dialects, as is common in urban environments where linguistic and social hierarchies often correspond (Silverstein 1996; Milroy & Milroy 1999).

While historical linguistic divergence contributed to feelings of insecurity among the North Koreans I met, I argue that their concerns focused not on comprehensibility but on reducing social distance and ‘fitting in’ with South Koreans. Moreover, for North Korean women, a further pressure motivating them to hide their North Korean accents was to avoid the stigma which accompanied negative portrayals of them in the media. The perception that many had entered into common-law marriages with Chinese men, with a proportion reportedly trafficked into the Chinese sex trade, meant North Korean women sometimes felt automatically tarnished by the image, particularly given the conservative nature of South Korean society and the high moral value placed on female chastity. In attempting to fit in by adopting South Korean ways of speaking, their behaviour was in line with the cross-cultural tendency for women to adhere more closely to publicly legitimised norms than men (Eckert 1989; Cameron 1995). There were multiple consequences of such sustained focus on their ways of speaking. Many North Koreans had internalised the idea of them as inferior, which was demonstrated in how they spoke about themselves and frequently dismissed all things
North Korean as ‘worthless.’ On the other hand, a handful of women described how focusing on the differences in their ways of speaking ultimately reinforced the feeling that they were distanced from South Koreans. Consequently, they said, the longer they spent in South Korea, the more North Korean they felt.

This research is based on 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork with young North Koreans living in and around Seoul, primarily involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

References


