Pragmatic Uses of the Korean Sentence Ender -\(Na\)/(u)Nka

Traditionally, the Korean sentence ender (SE) -\(Na\)/(u)Nka has been understood as an interrogative suffix of the familiar speech level, i.e., as a grammatical device that is employed for interrogative sentences used when an older adult asks a younger adult a question (e.g., (1)) (Sohn, 1999). However, this understanding of -\(Na\)/(u)Nka, which focuses on its sentence type and social-relationship-marking functions, has limitations in explaining other various pragmatic functions utterances with -\(Na\)/(u)Nka can have in actuality as well as the fact that -\(Na\)/(u)Nka commonly co-occur with SEs that belong to other speech levels.

Moving beyond the traditional approach to -\(Na\)/(u)Nka as a sentence-type and speech-level marker, this study seeks to illuminate the diverse pragmatic uses of -\(Na\)/(u)Nka as an epistemic marker of uncertainty (Lee, 2003) and the mechanism of how it comes to serve various pragmatic functions by examining 50 naturally occurring telephone conversations among friends and acquaintances drawn from the Linguistic Data Consortium spoken corpus. In total, 173 instances of the SE -\(Na\)/(u)Nka were found and analyzed in terms of their pragmatic functions within the framework of interactional linguistics (Kern & Selting, 2013), which is greatly interested in describing the relationship between language and its pragmatic functions/actions.

The findings of this study show that speakers employ the uncertainty marker -\(Na\)/(u)Nka to (a) ask other-addressed questions (45.7%), (b) tentatively assert 2018 factual information (24.3%), (c) allude to disagreements (18.5%), (d) express thoughts and feelings in the form of rhetorical questions (7.5%), and (e) ask self-addressed questions (4%) (e.g., (2)-(6)). It has also been shown that in addition to the uncertainty embodied in -\(Na\)/(u)Nka, the epistemic status between the speaker and the hearer regarding the matter at hand, the linguistic design, and the sequential context of its occurrence are also involved in building its diverse pragmatic functions. To be more specific, the speakers constructed utterances that functioned as other-addressed questions by marking the speaker’s uncertainty with -\(Na\)/(u)Nka regarding the information or the state of affairs that mainly fell into the domain of the hearers. By contrast, the speakers formed utterances that asserted uncertain factual information by marking their uncertainty with -\(Na\)/(u)Nka regarding information or a state of affairs that mainly fell into the domain of the speakers themselves. Furthermore, these utterances tended to appear in the position of an answer to a question or in the midst of the speakers’ telling sequence. When the speakers used -\(Na\)/(u)Nka to mark uncertainty towards the immediately preceding utterances of the prior speakers by attaching -\(Na\)/(u)Nka to a particular bit of the previous talk or to the anaphoric expression kule as in kule-nka ‘Is that so?’, the-\(Na\)/(u)Nka-ending utterances functioned to allude to the speakers’ disagreement with the prior speakers’ talk. When -\(Na\)/(u)Nka-ending utterances concerned the state of affairs well known to the speakers, they functioned as an expression of the speakers’ thoughts and feelings in the form of rhetorical questions. Lastly, when -\(Na\)/(u)Nka-ending utterances dealt with knowledge that the speakers had access to but was not immediately available at the moment of interaction, they functioned as a self-addressed question that verbalized the speakers’ thought process of finding information or wondering about the truth of the state of affairs.

The findings thus contribute to broadening our understanding of how a Korean epistemic marker of uncertainty can be deployed for diverse pragmatic uses, which is indispensable for comparative studies of a modality marker of uncertainty across different languages, and provide insight into how a pragmatic function/action of an utterance is constituted, an issue which has long absorbed philosophers of language, interactional linguists, and conversation analysts.
Examples
(1) A male adult addressing his son-in-law:
   caney pap mek-ess-na?
you meal eat-PST-NA
   Have you had a meal?

(2) Asking Other-Addressed Questions
(After hearing from the interlocutor that she has to go to the post office to get a letter)
01 ➔ A: wuchewuk-i- cipcip-mata ilehkey wucheythong-i eps-[na?]
   post office-NM house-every like this mail box-NM do not exist-NA
   The post office- are there not any mailboxes in front of each house?

(3) Tentatively Asserting Factual Information
(In explaining to the interlocutor when A started learning how to play the piano)
01 ➔ A: nay-ka: (0.2) yel twu sal ttay-nka:, yelhan sal ttay-nka.
   I-NM twelve age time-NKA eleven age time-NKA
   (It) was maybe when I was twelve or eleven.

(4) Alluding to Disagreements
(After hearing from the interlocutor that B’s relative Cengmi is going to the military tomorrow)
01 ➔ B: [nayil-i-nka?]
   tomorrow-be-NKA
   Is (it) tomorrow?

(5) Expressing Thoughts and Feelings in the Form of Rhetorical Questions
(After hearing from the interlocutor that his daughter hit him because he was jiggling his legs)
   child father-NM become have-and leg-AC jiggle-NA
   (You’)re a dad, but (you) jiggle (your) legs?

(6) Asking Self-Addressed Questions
(A is engaging in a name search)
01 ➔ A: um km ((throat clear)) a-nun salam-i nwu(h)ka [iss]-na=
   uhm know-RL person-NM who be-NA
   Uhm km who else would (you) know?

References
   Chapelle (Ed.), The encyclopedia of applied linguistics (pp 1-5). Chichester, West
