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L2 Pragmatic Development in Constructing and Negotiating Contextual Meanings

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The way in which L2 learners construct pragmatic and social meanings, including stances and identities, is emerging as an important research concern. In this study, we explore how L2 learners develop the ability to construct and negotiate pragmatic and social meanings, with a focus on meanings manifested in specific contexts, namely, contextual meanings. Specifically, we trace the development made by a group of 30 L2 Korean learners in their understanding of the contextual meanings of Korean first-person pronouns over the provision of L1- and L2-generated input and an awareness raising activity. Our findings reveal that provision of input of the underlying stereotypical meanings facilitated learners' (re-)construction and negotiation of contextual meanings. The learners developed from oversimplistic form-meaning connections to more context-based and internally logical interpretations of contextual meanings, constructed new contextual meanings from the input, and agentively negotiated between the input and their existing indexical systems. The findings raise important pedagogical implications, including reconsideration of the assessment of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence.

Introduction

In recent years applied linguistics has seen increasing interest in how L2 learners use language forms in specific contexts to create pragmatic and social meanings. Examples include construction of identities (Kington and Farrell 2004) and stances (Hoshi 2021), evaluations of politeness (Brown 2011) and appropriateness (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016), interpretations of gender (Solon and Kanwit 2022), and understandings of more context-specific meanings, such as intelligence, niceness, confidence, humility, sincerity, and formality (Van Compernelle 2019; Chappell and Kanwit 2022). Questions remain, however, about how L2 learners develop the ability to construct and negotiate pragmatic and social meanings.

This study fills this gap by investigating the development made by L2 learners in understanding contextual meanings. By 'contextual meanings', we refer to indexical meanings (both pragmatic and social meanings) as manifested in specific contexts. Contextual meanings contrast with conventionalized or stereotypical indexical meanings, which are decontextualized to some

extent (Okamoto 2011; Chen and Lee 2021; see Background section). For example, whereas a conventional meaning of *please* might be politeness, when used in a jocular context towards a friend and juxtaposed with swear words, *please* might mark sarcasm. By focusing on these fluid contextual meanings, we can trace changes and/or non-changes in the indexical systems of L2 learners over a series of learning activities.

Specifically, this study explores how English-speaking learners of Korean develop knowledge of contextual meanings of Korean first-person pronouns via input from both L1 and L2 speakers and an awareness-raising activity. Korean features two first-person pronouns: honorific *ce* and non-honorific *na*. *Ce* is prototypically used when interacting with elders, superiors, non-acquaintance, and group audiences as well as in institutional contexts (Chen and Brown 2022). In contrast, *na* is used with intimates, younger interactants, and status subordinates in informal contexts (Yeon and Brown 2019: 74). To gain insight into contextual use of these pronouns, we provided learners with a speech made by the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un at the inter-Korea summit in 2018, where he mixed both first-person pronouns, evoking a variety of contextual meanings, such as building solidarity with the South Korean audience and creating a positive self-image (see Chen and Lee 2021). Kim Jong Un's speech was chosen because it contains rich and clear examples of contextual meanings, which indeed were widely reported in South Korean news. In addition, the materials were well suited to our learners, who came from a Korean programme offering a politics-informed course about the divided Korean peninsula.

Through analysing L2 Korean learners' interpretations of the contextual meanings of Kim Jong Un's pronominal choice, we explore the following questions:

- 1) How do L2 Korean learners understand contextual meanings of *ce* in Kim Jong Un's speech?
- 2) How does their understanding develop with the provision of L1- and L2-generated input and an awareness-raising activity?

We start in the next section by introducing stereotypical and contextual meanings, reviewing previous studies of their L2 development, and locating the current study within our sequence of research on Korean pronouns. We then provide details of the methodology, and present the findings, focussing on learner development over the course of input and awareness-raising activities. We discuss the findings and provide pedagogical implications in the section following, and conclude with suggestions for future research in the last section.

Background

Stereotypical meanings and contextual meanings

'Stereotypical meanings' and 'contextual meanings' refer to two different types of social or pragmatic meanings, or what are also known as 'indexical meanings' (Silverstein 2003). These layers of meaning, communicated in addition to referential meanings, convey information about the context in which speech takes place, as well as the identity, intentions, and affective states of the speaker (see Blommaert 2005: 11–12).

Stereotypical meanings refer to speakers' conventional understandings of the default interpretations of pragmatic forms used in normative contexts (Okamoto 2011: 3675). Examples might include *please* communicating 'politeness' when used in a request, or *dude* marking 'cool solidarity' when used between young men (Kiesling 2004). The term 'stereotypical meaning' reflects the conventional nature of these meanings that are enregistered through repeated interactive experience (Agha 2005) and are interpreted without engagement of immediate context. It also allows us to associate these meanings with individual stereotypes, which may or may not be shared with other speakers.

Contextual meanings are context-specific interpretations of pragmatic forms, which are constructed and negotiated agentively by the speaker (Chen and Lee 2021). They are 'situated' (Cook 2011) and often 'strategic' (Brown 2010), and are particularly salient when a pragmatic form is

used outside of its normative context. For example, Miyazaki (2004) looked at how rebellious Japanese schoolgirls intentionally adopted the conventionally masculine first-person pronoun *ore*, indexing their 'vulgar' sub-culture and disruption of gendered hierarchies. However, subtle contextual meanings also emerge in more prototypical contexts, which tend to be more direct enrichments of stereotypical meanings.

Contextual meanings are constructed in relation to stereotypical meanings and require knowledge of them. Returning to the example of *ore*, understanding that the use of this form by female students indexes resistance to gendered norms depends on knowledge that the form stereotypically marks masculine meanings. The way that stereotypical meanings generate contextual meanings is captured in Silverstein's (2003) model of the indexical order, whereby first-order indexical meanings (similar to 'stereotypical meanings' in our model) consist of underlying social stances, which are then enriched into more-specific second-order indexical meanings ('contextual meanings' in our model) when used in context. The ordered relationship between indexical meanings is similarly captured in Ochs' (1988) distinction between direct and indirect indexical relations, with the former referring to underlying affective and epistemological dispositions and the latter to context-specific indirect indexes, such as social identities.

L1 speakers develop 'habitual and instinctive knowledge' of stereotypical meanings (Gumperz 1982: 162) during language socialization from a young age (Ochs 1988). They also develop the ability to construct contextual meanings by making connections to established stereotypical meanings (Chen and Lee 2021). What is unclear, however, is how these abilities develop for L2 learners, who already possess indexical systems from other languages, and who may have to rely on formal instruction rather than contextualized linguistic interaction to develop their knowledge.

L2 development of stereotypical and contextual meanings

Several previous studies have touched upon the L2 development of stereotypical and contextual meanings in their investigations of pragmatic or sociolinguistic aspects of L2 acquisition. Indeed, van Compernelle et al. (2016) emphasized that L2 pragmatics should be defined in terms of learning the ways of communicating meanings by using language in context.

Previous studies show that learners improve their knowledge of various social and indexical meanings via instruction and as their linguistic proficiency increases. Van Compernelle and his colleagues (2014, 2016) found that learners' awareness of pronoun distinctions in French and Spanish can be augmented by explicitly teaching them social concepts such as social distance, self-presentation and power. One notable finding across their studies was that L2 learners in general developed more agency in making pronominal choices and relating the choices to their intended meanings. For example, one of their participants departed from the 'rules of thumb' that bound the pronouns to formality and informality and intentionally narrowed the social distance with the hearer by choosing an intimate pronoun (2016: 350–351). Chappell and Kanwit (2022) and Solon and Kanwit (2022) also found that L2 Spanish learners develop better understanding of the associations between /s/ inclusion with region and social status and /d/ deletion with gender, respectively, as their proficiency levels increased. Learners seem to develop one-to-one form-meaning relationships before developing the ability to assign multiplex meanings to the same form (Andersen 1984, 1988; Bardovi-Harlig 2017; Chappell and Kanwit 2022 p. 201).

Despite the advances made in these previous studies, they tended to focus primarily on stereotypical meanings. Also, L2 learners' understandings of indexical meanings are often tested against those established by L1 speakers (see McConachy 2019: 173). For example, in a task reported by Cook (2001), the author claimed that L2 Japanese learners 'failed to notice the pragmatic meaning' when they did not follow Japanese native speakers in eliminating a job candidate who used incorrect honorifics. This approach conflicts with studies showing that learners resist (Chen 2022) and/or reinterpret L1 norms (Davydova et al. 2017; Moody 2018).

A small number of studies have started to pay attention to the agentive process by which learners create their own form-meaning connections. Notably, Hoshi (2021) provided L2 Japanese

learners with pragmatics-focused instructions, awareness-raising tasks, and opportunities to interact with L1 speakers, to examine learners' development of stances expressed by the sentence ending *-yo*. Interestingly, whereas the instruction taught three types of stances, the learners developed two additional stances that were not explicitly taught. One of these stances was consistent with previous observations of L1 usage, whereas the other was specific to the learners themselves. Hoshi regarded this new stance as 'the emergence of learner voice' (Bakhtin 1981, cf. Hoshi 2021: 720), although how this learner voice emerged was not discussed.

Whereas Hoshi (2021) speaks to the effectiveness of input from L1 speakers, Cheng (2016) provided ESL learners with conversation transcripts of L2 speakers as input and used peer discussion as an awareness-raising activity. Her participants actively evaluated the input in the peer discussion and associated its linguistic properties with a variety of contextual meanings, such as the emotions and identities that were expressed in the conversations. Cheng also found that these activities afforded learning opportunities for autonomous learning. In the current study, we follow Hoshi (2021) and Cheng (2016) by combining L1- and L2-mediated input with peer discussion for awareness-raising. Going beyond these previous studies, we look specifically at how learners develop understanding of contextual meanings over the provision of these activities, thus gaining deeper perspectives on the development of indexical knowledge.

Previous research sequence for investigating indexical meanings of Korean first-person pronouns

The current paper is the third in a series of studies investigating the interpretations of both stereotypical meanings and contextual meanings of Korean first-person pronouns *ce* and *na* in L1 and L2 contexts. Besides this research sequence (and Kim 2018, who also observed the use of *ce* and *na* in presidential speeches), no previous studies to the best of our knowledge have focussed in detail on the indexical meanings of these forms (but see Lee 2022 for analysis of the meanings of pronoun inclusion versus omission, and Lee and Ramsey 2000: 228–229 and Yeon and Brown 2019: 74–75 for general overviews of *ce* and *na*).

Our previous studies use the same speech delivered by Kim Jong Un at the Inter-Korean summit in 2018 for the investigation of contextual meanings. The speech contains six first-person single pronouns: three instances of honorific *ce* and three of non-honorific *na*. All three instances of *ce* occurred when Kim Jong Un referred to himself and South Korean counterpart Moon Jae In together (i.e. 'President Moon Jae In and I'). Although the use of *ce* by Kim might seem to conflict with his high social status and his identity as an authoritarian leader, *ce* is frequently used by high-ranking figures in public speeches. Indeed, former South Korean president Moon also frequently used *ce*, establishing an identity as a loyal president serving his people (as previously claimed in Kim 2018).

The first study in our series, Chen and Lee (2021), used metapragmatic interviews to examine how L1 Korean speakers' understandings of contextual meanings are built on knowledge of stereotypical meanings. L1 Korean speakers primarily viewed the stereotypical meaning of *ce* as 'lowering oneself' while 'elevating others'. By 'lowering himself', South Koreans believed Kim Jong Un's use of *ce* indexed contextual meanings including 'image management' and 'political intent'. Specifically, he created a softer and more amicable image designed to be more attractive to the South Korean audience.

The second study, Chen and Brown (2022), used metapragmatic interview data from English-speaking learners of L2 Korean to explore their understanding of the stereotypical meanings of *ce*, and compared this understanding to the L1 speakers from the first study. L2 learners differed markedly from L1 speakers in the stereotypical meanings they assigned to *ce*, namely 'formal', 'polite', and 'respectful'. Notably, these interpretations did not feature 'lowering oneself'. These differences existed even though L2 learners had similar understandings to L1 speakers regarding the contexts in which *ce* is normatively used.

Now, in this third study, we use data collected from the same learners as in the second study, but we turn our focus to L2 understandings of contextual meanings (Chen and Brown 2022 looked

only at stereotypical meanings). Moreover, we look at how these understandings develop across a series of pedagogical interventions.

Methodology

Participants

We recruited 30 L2 learners from a Korean-language program at a UK university. They were aged 20–29, with 24 females, three males, and three non-binary participants. This gender imbalance reflected the actual student composition of the Korean program, where female students far outnumbered other genders. All participants had completed a minimum of two years of formal study, and the average total experience learning Korean was 3 years and 10 months. Roughly half of them (14) had spent a year abroad in South Korea. However, when self-reporting their Korean proficiency against the criteria of the official Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), almost all of them (28) located themselves to the intermediate levels (Levels 3 and 4). Only two participants reported having advanced levels (Levels 5 and 6). 24 of the participants had English as their first language, two had Hungarian, and one each spoke Bulgarian, Croatian, Portuguese, and Romanian. These European L1 participants all spoke advanced English, while four English L1 participants had advanced ability in another European language. We refer to the participants with pseudonyms. Consent has been obtained for using their data.

Instructional activities and data collection

A three-step process took place over a period of four weeks. First, in Week 1, a teacher-led instruction session familiarized L2 learners with Kim Jong Un's speech. Then, in Week 2, individual sessions investigated learners' understanding of stereotypical and contextual meanings of Kim's pronominal use, with these sessions taking place without any pedagogical intervention. Finally, in Weeks 3 and 4, we conducted group sessions, which included two types of interventions: L1- and L2-generated input, and peer discussion as an awareness-raising activity. This combination of activities was similar to, but went beyond, previous studies, which provided only L1 or L2 input with awareness-raising tasks (e.g. Cheng 2016; Hoshi 2021). As the individual sessions were completed on different days, participants had a 3–10 day interval between the individual and the group sessions. Due to technical and personal issues, 28 out of the 30 participants completed the individual sessions and 26 completed the group sessions.

Instructed learning of Kim Jong Un's speech

This two-hour group class was built into the normal teaching schedule of Korean language and culture classes that the students attended. It focused on introducing Kim Jong Un's speech and the background of the Inter-Korea summit. The class was led by the first author, who used both English and Korean to help the students understand the speech accurately. The session was titled 'learning diplomatic speech', without revealing the purpose of this study.

The class started by showing a picture of Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae In shaking hands to elicit learner knowledge about inter-Korea relations and the inter-Korea summit. The students were then provided with the English version of the Panmunjom Declaration, the background for Kim Jong Un's speech, before watching the speech itself. Korean transcripts of the speech were provided, and students were asked to highlight any unfamiliar items. The teacher went through each highlighted part to ensure comprehension. None of the learners highlighted *ce* and *na*, most likely because these two pronouns are basic vocabulary that were taught in the first year, although the textbook used does not provide any detailed description of the forms. Lastly, the students were asked to provide an oral summary of each paragraph in English to check comprehension, before receiving a full English translation.

Overall, the instructed learning focused on providing contextual information for Kim Jong Un's speech and ensuring that later investigations were not biased by lack of contextual or linguistic understanding. Since the instructed sessions did not feature discussions of *ce* and *na*, they were not recorded, and direct analysis of these sessions does not feature in this paper.

Individual session

One week later, the learners attended individual sessions of 20–30 minutes in duration. These sessions were formatted as metapragmatic interviews, i.e. interviews that probed how language users understand linguistic choices (in this case, the choice between *ce* and *na*) and the implications of such choices in terms of indexical meanings (see [Li and Gao 2017](#); [Cutting 2019](#); [Liddicoat and McConachy 2019](#) for recent papers that have used interviews and/or questionnaires to probe the metapragmatic awareness of L2 learners). They took place on Microsoft Teams and were recorded, with English being the working language and Korean also allowed. Participants were not informed of the research purpose.

In the opening 5–10 minutes, participants were asked to give their decontextualized understandings of the stereotypical meanings of *ce* and *na*. The results were reported in our second paper, [Chen and Brown \(2022\)](#) (see Previous research sequence in Background section). We then provided them with the transcript of Kim's speech with *ce* and *na* highlighted and an English translation for reference. After reading the speech, learners were asked for their explanations of why Kim Jong Un used *ce* (in addition to *na*), starting with general questions, such as 'what do you think about the use of *ce* in the speech?' and 'what are the reasons you think *ce* is used here?'. Follow-up questions were then used to elicit more detailed responses. For example, if a learner reported that *ce* marked respect in the context of the speech, the interviewer might prompt the participant to specify the target of the respect.

The interviewers were two research assistants (RAs), trained by the first author. The first author also sat as a moderator during each interview and monitored the RAs' work. The RAs were female Korean language learners in their 20s. One was an L1 English speaker and the other an L1 Romanian speaker with fluent English. They were peers of the participants and had taken classes with 12 of them. We used peers as the interviewers to encourage more open and detailed answers, given that the identity of the interviewer is known to affect interview responses (e.g. [Mori 2012](#)).

Group session

A few days after the individual sessions, participants were invited to group sessions, which also took place and were recorded on Microsoft Teams. There were eight group sessions, each consisting of 3–5 learners, with the first author as the moderator. In general, participants were grouped with peers who were in the same class in order to promote more comfortable and open conversation, and so that students with similar learning experiences (e.g. students who had studied abroad) were grouped together. The group sessions were also carried out mostly in English but allowed for Korean. Students were not informed in advance of the content of the group sessions or of the nature of the intervention that would take place. However, since the group sessions followed on the back of the individual sessions, we assume that participants would have developed an expectation that the learning target would be *ce* and *na*. These sessions, which lasted 45–60 minutes, featured the input of L1- and L2-generated meaning interpretations, as well as peer discussion.

Input of L1 and L2 meaning interpretations

We provided learners with L1-generated and L2-generated interpretations of the stereotypical meanings of *ce* and *na*. For the L2-generated interpretations, participants shared their own understandings of the stereotypical meanings, and the researcher worked with the learners to formulate a list of stereotypical meanings on which all their group participants agreed. For the L1-generated interpretations, learners were provided with the data previously published in [Chen and Lee \(2021\)](#), but only the data for stereotypical meanings. L1 interpretations and L2 learner interpretations were juxtaposed to highlight any differences.

Peer discussion

The provision of input was followed by peer discussion, which featured two stages. First, the learners were prompted to compare their own stereotypical meanings to those of L1 speakers and provide reasons for any differences. Next, the discussion shifted to contextual meanings. Learners discussed

whether they had changed their interpretations of Kim Jong Un's use of *ce*. This led to lively debate, with the researcher acting as a lubricant in this process, encouraging the learners with simple prompts such as 'any other ideas?' and ensuring that all group members had fairly equal opportunities to contribute to the discussion. The discussion was designed to encourage learners to reflect on their understandings of the pronouns, learn from other students who might have different perspectives and experiences and, ultimately, to develop more nuanced and critical indexical knowledge.

It should be emphasized that we only provided learners with L1-generated *stereotypical* meanings from Chen and Lee (2021) during the intervention. Whereas Chen and Lee (2021) also analysed L1 understandings of contextual meanings in Kim Jong Un's speech, these were not shared with the students. This was to allow for investigation of how L2 learners develop understanding of contextual meanings based on their knowledge of *stereotypical* meanings, since the latter scaffold the former (see Background section). Moreover, being able to create contextual meanings off the back of *stereotypical* meanings is an important ability to develop. The provision of *stereotypical* meanings and the request to compare L1- and L2-generated *stereotypical* meanings can be understood as a type of implicit instruction featuring awareness raising, which facilitated the learners to reflect critically on the L1- and L2-generated input. In the meanwhile, contextual meanings were not instructed at all. Due to their context-specificity, contextual meanings of a pragmatic form are often highly varied and unstable to learn individually. Besides, since contextual meanings rely on individual speaker understanding of context, directly teaching L1 speakers' contextual meanings risks imposing L1 speakers' ways of constructing meaning onto L2 learners.

Data analysis

The recordings of individual and group sessions were transcribed and then analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The analysis focussed on identifying the contextual meanings that learners assigned to *ce*, and investigating how these meanings changed from the individual sessions to the group sessions over the provision of L1- and L2-generated input, and peer discussion.

For the quantitative analysis, we employed NVivo to code the contextual meanings that participants evoked. Adopting the same inductive approach used in Chen and Lee (2021) and Chen and Brown (2022), we first identified recurring explanations that learners used, and scrutinized the data iteratively for any remaining explanations. We then grouped similar explanations and formulated themes that accounted for the learners' metapragmatic descriptions. We preserved as much as possible the original terms that the participants used. For instance, if participants mentioned both 'lowering himself' and 'humbling', we treated them as two concepts, rather than one. The coding was developed by the first author and then carried out by three RAs who worked as independent coders. Discrepancies were then inspected by the first author.

We calculated the frequencies of each contextual meaning and eliminated those which occurred three times or fewer. For data from individual sessions, we calculated the percentages based on the number of participants (i.e. what percentage of participants mentioned each meaning), in order to identify patterns shared between different participants. For the group sessions, contextual meanings were often co-constructed by several participants and consequently, their occurrences cannot be calculated in the same way. Therefore, percentages were calculated against the total number of mentions of all contextual meanings. Comparisons of the proportional differences provide an overview of the developments that participants made.

The qualitative analysis then examined the details of how participants developed their understandings of contextual meanings over the duration of the activities. For this paper, we present analyses of three groups (G1, G4, G8), and their participants' individual sessions to offer a fine-grained analysis of the specific changes resulting from the input and group discussions. G1, G4, and G8 were selected because they were representative of the overall changes that occurred.

Findings

We provide a quantitative overview of the meanings the learners ascribed to *ce* at different stages of the process first. Then, we look qualitatively at how their understanding of *ce* evolved.

Quantitative overview of L2 pragmatic development

To explore developments in L2 learners' interpretations of contextual meanings, we compared the contextual meanings that the learners ascribed to Kim Jong Un's use of *ce* during the individual sessions and the group sessions, in other words, before and after the intervention. We also included the learner's understanding of the stereotypical meanings of *ce* that they provided at the start of the individual sessions, and which were reported in [Chen and Brown \(2022\)](#). Finally, we made a comparison between L2 learners' contextual meanings and those of L1 speakers identified in [Chen and Lee \(2021\)](#).

[Figure 1](#) shows how learners' understandings of *ce* progress across three phases: (i) their reports of stereotypical meanings at the start of the individual sessions, (ii) their subsequent interpretations of the contextual meanings of *ce* in Kim Jong Un's speech during the individual sessions, and (iii) their modified interpretations of the contextual meanings after the intervention. Although contextual meanings are more varied than stereotypical meanings, in some cases, they are the same. In particular, 'respect' remains the most frequent contextual meaning across the individual and group sessions. Formality decreases dramatically from the most frequent stereotypical meaning and the second most frequent contextual meaning in the individual sessions to the third lowest in the groups. The same decrease is also observed in 'politeness'. In contrast, 'humility', 'image', 'lowering oneself' and 'elevating others', which were peripheral in the individual sessions, increase dramatically and occupy the top 2 to 5 places in the group sessions.

Meanings are listed in order of percentages. Bold lines highlight the meanings that feature across all three phases.

We see clear evidence of participants incorporating the L1 input in the group sessions (i.e. after the intervention). Most strikingly, 'lowering oneself' (which was presented to the learners as the leading L1 interpretation of the stereotypical meanings of *ce*—see Previous research sequence in Background section), is directly adopted by the learners as a contextual meaning and becomes the second most frequently mentioned term. The associated concepts of 'humility' and 'elevating others' also become more frequent.

L2 learners also appear to develop contextual meanings that are similar to L1 speakers, even though these contextual meanings were not directly provided in the L1 input (which consisted only of stereotypical meanings). Notably, 'political intent' appears as a newly identified contextual meaning in the group sessions, mirroring the findings for L1 speakers in [Chen and Lee \(2021: 123\)](#). Participants also added 'insincerity' as a new contextual meaning, while abandoning

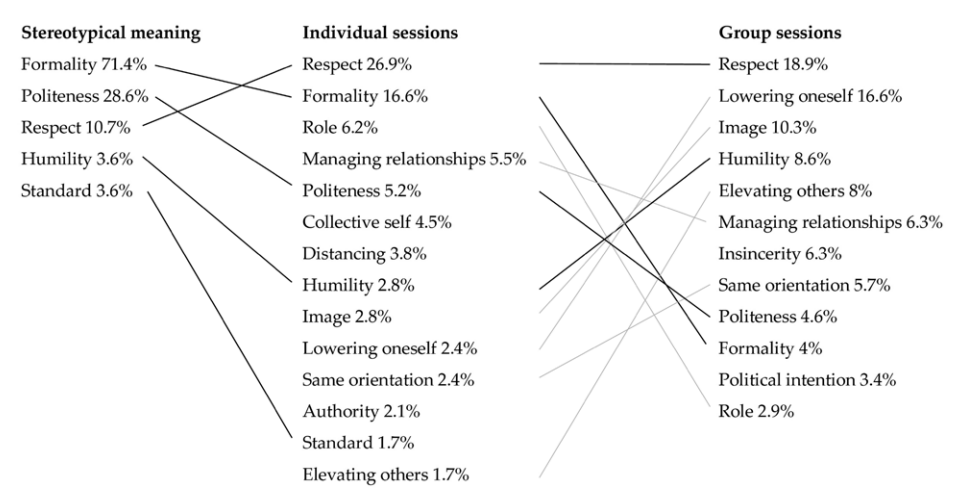


Figure 1: Frequency of meanings ascribed to *ce*

‘distancing’, ‘collective self’, ‘standard’ and ‘authority’. The results suggest that L2 learners develop the potential to understand L1 speakers’ contextual meanings, and the ability to adjust their own understandings.

Qualitative investigation of development in understanding contextual meanings

Qualitative findings are divided into two parts: first, how learners constructed and reconstructed their understanding of contextual meanings, and second, how learners negotiated between their existing linguistic knowledge and the input.

Construction and re-construction of contextual meanings

In this section, we zoom in on participants from one of the groups (G4) to investigate in detail how the members of this group reconstructed their knowledge of contextual meanings. G4 contained four participants, two males (Daniel and James) and two females (Ella and Lily), all final year students who knew each other.

In the individual sessions, these participants interpreted the contextual meanings of *ce* in abstract terms, often very similar to those they used for the stereotypical meanings. All four participants associated Kim Jong Un’s contextualized use of *ce* to formality and respect, which were also commonly cited stereotypical meanings for this form. But as shown in the following excerpt, their explanations of what Kim was achieving through being formal and respectful seem to be quite different from typical understandings of these metalexemes. Rather than being formal simply to index the official setting or being respectful to show reverence to his South Korean counterpart, the participants believed that Kim is being formal and respectful to enhance his own status or image. In Excerpt 1, Daniel says that Kim is ‘trying to elevate himself above Moon Jae In’ (line 154), ‘trying to show off’ (164) and ‘mak[ing] himself sound more important’ (line 169).

Excerpt 1 (individual session, Daniel, 9:59)

154	I said possibly he could be like trying to elevate himself above Moon Jae In in status.
[...]	
164	They’re just trying to show off.
165	In the same spirit like he could just be using <i>ce</i> because that’s-
166	Like in, like Korean as well when you use <i>ce</i> normally you’re being respectful to the people you’re talking to.
167	But it also like- like shows some various respect upon like-
168	Just more formal.
169	And it just seems like he could be using it in that sense, to be, like, to make himself sound more important.

Daniel is notably vague in terms of specifying exactly how respect and formality are connected to enhancing one’s status or image in his individual session. Moreover, the view that Kim uses *ce* to ‘elevate himself above Moon Jae In’ is in stark contrast to the ways that L1 speakers understood the stereotypical meaning of *ce* as ‘lowering oneself’.

However, when it comes to the group sessions, learners changed their interpretations of *ce* following the provision of input and were able to articulate their explanations with more coherence. Notably, participants adopted the L1-generated concepts of ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’ and used the L1 speakers’ stereotypical meanings to explain the contextual meanings of Kim Jong Un’s pronominal choice. In Excerpt 3, Lily, who previously claimed

that *ce* places Kim on the same level as his South Korean counterpart via links to formality, now interprets it as elevating Moon Jae In (line 419). After adopting the concept of ‘lowering/ elevating’, she now understands that Kim was respecting Moon rather than promoting his own self-image (lines 420–423). The excerpt shows clear evidence of Lily reflecting and reconstructing her previous assumptions about Kim’s use of *ce*, with her references to what she ‘originally thought’ (line 417) or ‘assumed’ (line 420) contrasted with what she understands ‘now’ (line 419) and ‘from today’ (line 421):

Excerpt 2 (Group session 4, Lily 30:03)

417	I originally thought he used <i>ce</i> when he spoke about himself and Moon Jae In.
418	Because I thought he wanted to kind of put himself on the same level as Moon Jae In.
419	But now maybe I kind of see it as he wanted to elevate Moon Jae In rather than himself by using <i>ce</i> .
420	Um, yeah, I guess when I first read through on Wednesday, I kind of assumed he- or it would be like a respect thing for Kim Jong Un rather than towards Moon Jae In.
421	But from today I’m kind of getting the idea it might be the other way around.
422	He was showing respect to Moon Jae In.

Lily’s change of perspectives was echoed by another participant, James. He reported that he previously associated *ce* with formality (Excerpt 3, line 439) and Kim Jong Un elevating himself (line 440). His use of ‘because’ and ‘so’ (lines 440–441) clearly exhibits the causal relationship between formality and Kim Jung Un’s self-positioning in his previous understanding. He contrasts this prior interpretation with what he now understands to ‘actually’ be happening (line 440): Kim is using *ce* used to ‘lower himself and elevate Moon Jae In’ (line 441).

Excerpt 3 (Group session 4, James, 31:27)

438	Yeah, I feel the same, like-
439	I saw the two different pronouns in Kim Jong Un’s speech and it was pretty confusing because in my head I see <i>ce</i> as like the formal version.
440	And so, I automatically think that as him like, um, elevating himself, but it’s like, actually this is him lowering himself, when he’s put himself next to Moon Jae In.
441	So, the idea is, by saying <i>ce</i> and Moon Jae In, he’s lowering himself and elevating Moon Jae In.

Although these excerpts show L2 learners ‘copying’ L1 speakers’ stereotypical meanings and ‘pasting’ them into their own understanding of contextual meanings in a fairly straightforward way, the process helps the learners to realize that ‘formality’ is not a useful meta-concept for understanding *ce*, resulting in formality dropping from the second most popular in the individual sessions to the third least popular in the group sessions. We should emphasize that the learners’ reduction of ‘formality’ was autonomous and demonstrates how they exercised their agency in reconstructing their understanding of indexical meanings.

As mentioned above in the Quantitative overview section, the group sessions also saw L2 learners constructing the contextual meaning of ‘political intent’. This meaning was not directly provided in the L1 input (which focussed on stereotypical meanings), but was nonetheless consistent with L1 speakers’ understandings of contextual meanings. In other words, learners were able to successfully develop an understanding of this meaning by using the L1 speakers’ stereotypical meanings. In Excerpt 4, Ella uses ‘lowering oneself’ as a springboard to infer Kim Jong Un’s political intent. Specifically, she notes that Kim might be lowering himself (line 526) as a way of fostering better cooperation with South Korea (line 527), in a way that is implicit (line 529) and

required Moon and the audience to ‘read between the lines’ (line 525). Her comment resonates with James who deemed ‘lowering himself’ to be ‘a sacrifice’ in front of the world (line 539) for political progress.

Excerpt 4 (Group session 4, 37:01)

Ella	
524	He's obviously trying to make like a statement.
525	Um, sort of like, he wants everyone to maybe pa- he wants Moon to read between the lines. Like he's not gonna say outright.
526	Maybe- um, like I'm ready to lower myself first.
527	So we can- so our two nations can maybe cooperate a bit better from now on.
528	So maybe he's not- he doesn't want to say that out loud. But it's sort of symbolic that he- he's chosen to use <i>ce</i> , because international relations I think-
529	It's quite a lot of symbolism throughout speeches and actions, but quite a lot of things and never explicitly said.
[...]	
James	
536	For using <i>ce</i> , I mean this was a significant meeting between North and South Korea.
537	Um, cause it was going- it was like what the first proper meeting since like the armistice agreement.
538	So, um, like he wants to make progress and show that he's willing to make these compromises.
539	Sort of sacrificing maybe a bit of- lowering himself is seen as a bit of a sacrifice.
540	And with the whole eyes of the world watching by using <i>ce</i> with Moon Jae In, um, he's sort of willing to lower himself and elevate Moon Jae In.
541	Because- well, one, they're working together for, like, making agreement, making progress.
542	And, two, because everyone is watching.

Notably, input of L1-generated meanings has helped the learners to develop understanding of contextual meanings that are more context-rich and coherent. They made multiple references to the specific context, such as ‘a significant meeting’ (line 541), ‘the first proper meeting’ (line 542), ‘with the whole eyes of the world watching’ (line 544), indicating their increasing awareness of how contextual meanings relate to context itself. Overall, we see in these examples that the L2 learners were able to utilize the L1-generated stereotypical meanings to critically evaluate their previous interpretations of Kim’s speech and to create new explanations that featured clearer internal logic, and which reached deeper into the complex contextual meanings of *ce*, including political intent, which was also one of the contextual meanings that L1 speakers emphasized (Chen and Lee 2021).

It should be reiterated that the L2 participants were able to provide strong interpretations of the contextual meanings of *ce* in Kim’s speech at the group session stage despite the fact that we only provided them with the L1-generated stereotypical meanings, with no direct link to Kim’s speech. In other words, participants agentively constructed their own contextual meanings off the back of L1-generated stereotypical meanings. However, the integration between lowering/elevating and the use of *ce* was not always a straightforward process, as we demonstrate in the next section.

Negotiation of contextual meanings

Although the L2 learners were able to use L1-generated data to reposition their understandings of *ce*, this process did not happen uncritically. Rather, the participants actively negotiated and redesigned the L1-generated meanings in relation to their own existing meaning systems.

When exposed to L1-generated meanings such as ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’, some participants attempted to accommodate these new meanings with their previous understandings, in particular, with the idea that *ce* indexes ‘respect’. In the following example from G1, a group which included four female students all in their final year and well acquainted with each other, Alice rejects the uncritical application of ‘lowering oneself’ onto Kim’s speech, since this would position him as a subordinate (line 295, Excerpt 6), contradicting his position as a ‘supreme leader’ (line 298). As the turn passes to Luna in line 299, she signals dis-alignment with a turn-initial ‘but’. Luna argues that lowering oneself does not mean ‘I’m lesser than you’ (line 303). Instead, she aligns the lowering and elevating practices to the concept of respect (line 302), which Kim Jong Un should pay as ‘the visiting president’ (line 303).

Excerpt 6 (Group session 1, 29:19)

Alice	
295	I don't think he's necessarily being subordinate though.
296	Like he's not lowering himself.
297	Like he did have to be careful with making sure he doesn't.
298	Because he's the supreme leader still.
Luna	
299	But like using <i>ce</i> in conjunction with <i>na</i> because he uses both in the speech.
300	I feel like when he's using <i>ce</i> he's like, he's elevating himself- he's elevating Moon Jae In, because he- he only uses it when he's referring to himself and Moon Jae In.
301	But when he's referring to himself he uses <i>na</i> , which I think he is slightly lowering himself because he is the visiting president.
302	And he's sort of still showing respect in that way.
303	It's not sort of lowering himself to the point where, oh I think I'm lesser than you.
304	It's more the fact that he's aware that this isn't his country.
305	But he still wants to show respect I think

Luna’s connection between self-lowering and paying respect appears to be internally logical, and similar cases of participants aligning to respect can be found across the data. The L2 learners agentively use ‘respect’, a pre-existing part of their meaning systems but not a term that appeared frequently in the L1 data, as a site for incorporating the new meanings of lowering/elevating’ into their indexical knowledge. This explains why ‘respect’ remained the most dominant contextual meaning evoked by the learners, even after the provision of ‘lowering/elevating’, in contrast to the sharp drop in ‘formality’. This example also captures how peer discussion allows for learners to form these perspectives, thus co-constructing more developed understandings of indexical forms.

‘Respect’ is not the only site that learners utilize to incorporate ‘lowering/elevating’ into their meaning systems: humbling, image management, and other contextual meanings provide similar venues. In G8, a group of female second-year students, Jessica first explains how Kim’s practice of lowering himself (‘does not want to seem like...higher up’, line 466 ‘puts [himself] lower’, line 472) creates a persona of being ‘humble’, ‘down to earth’, ‘a good guy’, and ‘respectful’ (lines 463 to 468). These contextual meanings are further developed by Grace, who adds ‘friendly’ and

'approachable'. Olivia shows strong alignment with both Jessica and Grace ('I definitely agree...', line 481), attributing their interpretations to Kim Jong Un's image in the South Korean media (line 485) and his intention to appear 'humble and nice' by using *ce* (line 487). This excerpt again shows how students learn from each other's' contributions during the peer discussions.

Excerpt 7 (Group session 8, 31:58)

Jessica

- 463 But it also to me feels like he wants to be like humble in a way.
- 464 I don't know if that's really true.
- 465 But like he wants to seem like this humble man.
- 466 He doesn't want to seem like, you know, like he wants to be higher up and like use
na in that kind of sense, whenever he mentions President Moon
- 467 So, I feel like just to seem more humble, down to earth maybe.
- 468 More like a good guy (laugh).
- [...]
- Grace
- 475 For- I was just gonna say I feel like he's trying to make himself seem more friendly.
- 476 Like, um, and like close.
- 477 Then um- I just feel like he's trying to make himself more approachable.
- 478 And more like, um, a normal person (laugh).
- 479 And lower his status down more to seem more approachable.
- 480 That's what I think.
- Olivia
- 481 Yeah, I definitely agree with all the things that's been said already.
- 482 Um, I'd say that also it's hard for me to believe that presidents write their speeches
all by themselves.
- 483 And especially Kim Jong Un.
- 484 So, I'm thinking maybe there was a group that also thought these things.
- 485 And maybe were also aware of the media image that Kim Jong Un has.
- 486 And maybe thought let's write the speech in a good way.
- 487 To make Kim Jong Un look humble and nice.
- 488 And then we can, you know, show the world that he's not a bad guy.

These re-interpretations of 'lowering oneself' explain the increase of 'humbling' and 'image management' from the individual sessions to the group sessions. L2 learners not only adopted L1 speakers' meaning interpretations but also agentively adapted them into their existing meaning systems. Interestingly, in this case, the outcome of such adaption shows some similarities to the L1 speakers' interpretations of contextual meanings since 'image management' is also one of the most important contextual meanings interpreted by the L1 group (Chen and Lee 2021). Importantly, the L2 learners' understanding of the 'image' that Kim was presenting had changed. Whereas during the individual sessions, they described this image as 'important' and superior, they now interpreted his image as 'nice', 'humble', and 'approachable', seemingly as a result of the input and peer discussions.

Discussion and pedagogical implication

This study traced how learners construct, re-construct, and negotiate contextual meanings with the provision of L1- and L2-generated input and peer discussions. The intervention facilitated learners' development of knowledge of contextual meanings through changing their landscape of stereotypical meanings, supporting in general Silverstein's (2003) and Ochs' (1988) arguments of indexical order. More specifically, learners developed from oversimplistic connections between *ce* and formality or respect to context-based and internally logical interpretations. Notably, they adopted the L1 stereotypical meaning of 'lowering oneself' to their contextual understanding of *ce*, and also extended it to arrive at deeper contextual understandings of how Kim was using *ce* for political intent, and to develop a 'humble and nice' persona. While they abandoned 'formality' as a frame for understanding *ce*, they used their pre-existing concepts of 'respect' and 'humbling' as sites for incorporating new L1-generated concepts into their pre-existing meaning systems.

In terms of L2 pragmatic development, what the findings draw attention to is that the L2 speakers frequently evoke stereotypical meanings directly as contextual meanings, in contrast to L1 speakers who used them as the basis for constructing different contextual meanings (Chen and Lee 2021). Before the intervention, L2 learners stuck closely to pre-existing stereotypical meanings when attempting to explain contextual meanings (e.g. 'formality'). After the intervention, they incorporated L1-generated stereotypical meanings directly into their inventory of contextual meanings (e.g. 'lowering oneself').

This finding suggests, on one level, that learners may possess a simplified understanding of indexical meanings. To some extent, they assume a rather direct or one-to-one correspondence between pragmatic forms and contextual meanings, quite likely influenced by the way that pragmatics is taught, namely, instructing L2 learners with a normative (often L1 speaker-defined norms) system of language forms, contexts, and pragmatic functions (McConachy 2019: 168). It also seems to reflect a common developmental pattern in L2 pragmatics whereby learners develop one-to-one form-meaning relationships before gaining the ability to assign multiplex indexical meanings to one form (Andersen 1984, 1988; Bardovi-Harlig 2017; Chappell and Kanwit 2022: 201).

It should be emphasized that the learners' leverage of stereotypical meanings does not necessarily indicate a failure to interpret indexical meanings. Rather, our results have revealed an agentive learning process where the learners enrich these stereotypical meanings into new form-meaning connections and more coherent accounts of contextual usage. Learner agency, defined as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001: 112), is reflected in how our participants autonomously lessened the association between *ce* and formality, without any explicit instruction to do so. Agency is also manifested in strategic choice-making processes (van Lier 2007; Gao 2010; Duff 2012), as demonstrated in participants' active negotiation between the input and their existing knowledge. These findings are reminiscent of Hoshi's (2021) observation that learners use instructed indexical resources to create their own 'voice' (p. 720). We find that learner voice does not only emerge, but also and, more importantly, dynamically interacts with the input. Even when the learners appear on the surface to have simply 'copied and pasted' the L1-generated input of stereotypical meanings onto their understanding of contextual meanings, there was an agentive reinterpretation of existing contextual meanings. For example, the learners changed their understanding of Kim Jong Un's stance-taking practices from using *ce* to elevate himself to elevating Moon Jae In. These interpretations were enriched by opportunities to discuss knowledge of indexical meanings with peers, who sometimes held contrasting interpretations.

Importantly, our study has gone beyond existing research in demonstrating the importance of using authentic L1-generated and L2-generated input of indexical meanings in pedagogical interventions, along with peer discussion. This approach is different from previous studies such as Cook (2001) and van Compernelle (2014, 2016) which relied on researcher- or teacher-generated concepts such as self-presentation, social distance or power and the teaching of

what [van Compernelle \(2014,2016\)](#) refers to as 'rules of thumb'. These rules of thumb have often been provided in L2 classrooms and textbooks in the form of oversimplified stereotypical meanings (e.g. simplified form-context mappings). During the intervention, the provision of enriched and faithful descriptions of stereotypical meanings coupled with peer discussion disengaged the reliance on abstract and under-defined concepts (such as formality and respect) and also on direct form-meaning connections. The learners gained more resources from the enriched input and peer discussion to diversify their form-meaning connections, and hence developed more situated and coherent explanations for their understanding of contextual meanings.

These findings give rise to important pedagogical implications. They suggest that instruction that enriches learners' inventory of stereotypical meanings helps them to develop the ability to interpret contextual meanings. In our case, providing input of both L1-generated input and L2-generated input proved effective, although future studies may explore the relative importance of these two types of input. Our results suggest that L1 input that is specifically curated from empirical data is more effective than rather providing generic abstract concepts, but this would also need to be investigated further in future studies. Meanwhile, the enrichment of input needs to provide space for learners' agency, allowing for meaning (re)constructions within their own indexical systems. In our study, these (re)constructions took place during peer discussions, which our data suggests are effective due to the opportunities that they provide for interaction, learning from other classmates, and co-construction of nuanced and critical understandings of indexical meanings.

Our findings also suggest that the provision of authentic L1-generated and L2-generated input of stereotypical meanings represents an effective method for learners to acquire knowledge of contextual meanings, even if these contextual meanings are not specifically taught. This is important since the fluid nature of contextual meanings, which vary according to dynamic interactions between various contextual factors (including speakers' identities and relationships and the physical environment), renders them uneconomic to teach, if not totally unteachable. Van Compernelle's proposal of concept-based pragmatic instruction provided one effective way to address this challenge by teaching L2 learners a limited number of abstract scientific concepts ([van Compernelle 2014, 2016](#)), from which learners can extrapolate contextual meanings. Our study suggests that another way for L2 learners to develop their ability to understand contextual meanings is to teach them a limited range of stereotypical meanings. Future studies will need to further assess the effectiveness of this pedagogy in more detail including via longitudinal studies. It would also be important to investigate whether teaching L1- and L2-generated stereotypical meanings is more effective for developing understanding of contextual meanings than teaching abstract scientific concepts, as in [van Compernelle \(2014, 2016\)](#).

More broadly, our findings raise questions regarding the conceptualization of L2 pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence. Pragmatic competence has often been evaluated either on a scale of appropriateness, directness, politeness, and/or formality ([Cunningham 2017](#); [Taguchi 2006, 2011](#)) or the presence/absence of contextualization cues ([Roever 2011](#)). Our findings add to these parameters by proposing that learners' ability to process and produce indexical meanings is an important indicator of L2 pragmatic competence. We follow [van Compernelle \(2016:342\)](#) in seeing the definition of pragmatic competence as going beyond simply 'how-to-say-what-to-whom-when' (as proposed by [Bardovi-Harlig 2013:68](#)) to 'how-to-say-what-to-whom-when-for-creating-a-particular-meaning'. Learning L2 pragmatics is thus not merely learning 'rules for 'proper' pragmatic behaviour', but needs to be understood and assessed in terms of pragmatic meaning making ([van Compernelle 2016: 342](#)). However, more work is needed to develop a comprehensive framework to assess the ability to process indexical meanings within the remit of pragmatic/sociolinguistic competence.

Perhaps of most importance, the results point to the need to decouple pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence from L1 norms. Whereas previous studies have tended to examine L2 learners' pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence against meanings prescribed by

researchers or conventionalized in L1 contexts (e.g., [Chappell and Kanwit 2022](#); [Solon and Kanwit 2022](#)), our findings illustrate that learners do not simply absorb the indexical meanings provided in the input, but rather critically evaluate them, exploit them, and re-position them in their indexical fields, creating ‘third spaces’ ([Kramsch 2009](#)) that allow them to display connections between diverse ideological norms from multiple cultures. These findings suggest that a better measure of competence may lie in this ability to evaluate and exploit social meanings in these third spaces, rather than simply passively following L1 norms.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that L2 learners can use L1- and L2-generated stereotypical meanings to develop their knowledge of contextual meanings. Our results suggest that for this to happen effectively, the input should be enriched by and faithful to authentic L1-generated and L2-generated understandings. Moreover, learners benefit from opportunities to discuss the input and thereby co-construct and integrate new social meanings into their existing knowledge of multilingual ideological norms. Throughout this process, L2 learners play agentive roles in critically evaluating L1-generated input and creatively using these new perspectives to construct hybrid indexical fields. This ability to critically evaluate and reconstruct indexical meanings forms an essential part of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence.

The study raises important questions for future research. First, since our research design only provided a one-off intervention for providing L1-generated stereotypical meanings, the effectiveness of longitudinal instruction needs further examination. Second, whereas we focussed on the immediate effects of the learning activities, future studies will need to look at the long-term developmental outcomes. Third, the study focused on how learners developed understandings of contextual meaning. Although this is an important ability, it would also be useful to examine how learners apply this knowledge when producing pragmatic forms. Finally, we see potential for future research to assess the effectiveness of the techniques used in the current study, which involved using authentic L1- and L2-generated input, with the techniques used in [van Compernelle \(2014, 2016\)](#), which used abstract scientific concepts. Going forward, more research will need to examine how L2 learners acquire knowledge and make use of pragmatic and social meanings as a vital part of L2 development.

Transcription convention

[...]	Omission of irrelevant content, e.g. ‘any other ideas’ asked by the researcher
-	Short pause
0	Non-verbal actions

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