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LANGUAGE CHOICE IN THE INTERACTIONS OF A KOREAN FAMILY IN THE MINARI MOVIE (2020): A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

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Abstract

This study aims to (1) identify language choice patterns (Korean and English) and (2) analyze the social factors that influence them in the interactions of a Korean immigrant family (the Yi family) in the film Minari (2020). This research uses a sociolinguistic approach with a qualitative descriptive method. The data consists of transcripts of the Yi Family characters' dialogues, which are analyzed through Spradley's (1980) analysis stages, including Domain Analysis, Taxonomy Analysis, Component Analysis, and Cultural Theme Analysis. This analysis is used to map and classify language choices into three main communication domains: family, work, and society. Furthermore, to explain the variations found, the analysis was enriched with Janet Holmes' (2013) Social Factors Theory, considering four elements: Participants, Setting, Topic, and Function. The results show that language choices within the Yi family are highly dynamic and situation-dependent, reflecting the process of cultural and linguistic assimilation in an immigrant context. The findings highlight the significant influence of the Setting (home vs public) and Participants' generation (grandparents vs children) on the preference between Korean and English.

Keywords: Language Choice, Sociolinguistics, Movie, Minari

INTRODUCTION

This research is explained by the complex phenomenon of language choice that occurs in the context of immigrant families, which is authentically captured in the film Minari (2020). The film depicts the Yi family, Korean immigrants who moved to Arkansas, United States, and their struggles to adapt, where language becomes the main mirror of identity conflict and cultural assimilation. This emphasizes the importance of understanding how social interactions influence and are shaped by the choice between the mother tongue (Korean) and the new environment's language (English). This study aims to

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identify patterns of language choice (Korean and English) and analyze in depth the social factors that influence these patterns, referring to the dynamics of language in multilingual societies. This research is expected to provide a richer understanding of the linguistic adaptation process that is crucial for immigrant groups, a point that will be emphasized in the findings and discussion.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a sociolinguistic approach with a qualitative descriptive method. According to Abu bakar (2021), descriptive research examined independent variables without comparing them or associating them with other variables, so that these variables are considered independent. The main research data is sourced from utterances and transcripts of dialogues between members of the Yi family in the film Minari (2020), which focuses on interactions between family members and their interactions with the outside community. The data analysis process involved four main stages based on Spradley's (1980) model: Domain Analysis to group data into communication domains (Family, Work, Society), Taxonomic Analysis to classify language choice patterns, to distinguish influencing factors, and Cultural Theme Analysis to draw comprehensive conclusions. Additionally, to enrich the explanation of language choice, the analysis is reinforced with Janet Holmes' (2013) Social Factors Theory, which considers the Participant, Setting, Topic, and Function of each analyzed utterance.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

1. Results of Spradley's Analysis (Domain, Taxonomy, Components, and Cultural Themes)

a. Domain Analysis:

Domain Analysis reveals that the characters in the film Minari divide language use into three main social domains: family, work, and community. In the family domain, Korean and English are used side by side as tools of domestic communication, while in the work and community domains, English is the primary language that must be used to meet professional needs and interact socially with local Americans.

b. Taxonomic Analysis:

Taxonomy Analysis shows details of different language behaviors between generations, where the older generation (parents and grandparents) consistently maintain the Korean language to show authority, command, and emotional warmth. In contrast, the younger generation or children exhibit dynamic code-switching patterns, namely continuing to use Korean when speaking with their parents as a form of obedience, but automatically switching to English when speaking with their siblings.

c. Componential Analysis

Componential Analysis dissects the differences in function and meaning of each language choice, where Korean is identified as a component for conveying personal, emotional, and confidential messages within the family. Meanwhile, English serves as a practical component for demonstrating professionalism in business or work matters, as well as a tool for children to adapt so that they can be accepted by their peers in the outside social environment.

D. Cultural Theme Analysis

Theme Analysis concludes that the overall pattern of communication within the Yi family reflects the major theme of cultural identity negotiation. The use of language is not merely a tool for speaking, but also a symbol of class struggle, an effort to maintain Korean identity amid American cultural dominance, and a representation of the conflict of values between the first generation, who want to preserve tradition, and the second generation, who are more inclined toward assimilation into the new culture.

2. Result of analysis social factors by Holmes (2013)

In the family sphere, language choice is driven by generational factors and the preservation of cultural identity. Jacob, Monica, and Grandmother consistently use Korean to preserve traditional values, show respect for their elders, and ensure that their children remain connected to their cultural roots. In contrast, David and Anne are more comfortable using English when interacting with each other, reflecting the influence of their American environment and education. However, the children still use Korean when responding to their parents or grandmother as a form of compliance with family norms and an effort to maintain intergenerational communication.

In the workplace and society, language choice is more pragmatic, functional, and adaptive to the external environment. Jacob uses English exclusively in business and agricultural matters to achieve economic success, while in public spaces such as churches or hospitals, the family switches to English to conform to the dominant social norms. However, Monica demonstrates a unique pattern through strategic bilingualism, where she uses English with local coworkers but continues to use Korean with fellow immigrants to build ethnic solidarity. Overall, Korean serves as an anchor of identity within the home, while English becomes a tool of assimilation in the outside world.

2. Discussion

This study's analysis reveals that the dynamics of language choice within the Yi family in the film Minari are deeply influenced by Spradley analysis and Janet Holmes' five social factors.

1. Domain Analysis

Domain analysis shows that there's clear social space segmentation that

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determines which language is dominant. The study identified three main domains:

2. Family Domain.

In this private space, Korean remains the main language. The home serves as a cultural refuge where Jacob, Monica, and Grandmother Soonja strive to preserve their roots. Korean is used for routine activities, emotional discussions, and child-rearing. Although the children (Anne and David) demonstrate bilingual abilities, they are forced by the social context of the home to continue using Korean when interacting with the older generation.

3. Work Domain.

This domain shows a shift to English as the functional and professional language. Jacob, as the central figure in the family's economic endeavors, fully adopts English when interacting with American business partners. This shows that English is considered a prerequisite for economic success in America. However, a unique observation was found in Monica, who uses Korean with her fellow Korean coworkers, proving that interpersonal relationships can override language norms in the workplace.

4. Community Domain.

Outside the home and workplace, such as in churches or hospitals, English becomes a tool for integration. For adults, this is a challenging area where they feel limited, while for children, this is an area where they demonstrate their command of English to mingle with their peers.

i. Taxonomy Analysis.

Taxonomy analysis provides a more detailed picture of the structure of language use within the family. There are contrasting patterns of vertical and horizontal communication:

1. Vertical Communication Pattern (Parents to children or grandparents to grandchildren).

Korean dominates as a form of respect and preservation of traditional values. Jacob uses Korean as a tool of authority and technical instruction (such as when teaching David in the fields). Monica uses Korean as an affective language to provide comfort and emotional guidance. Grandmother Soonja, as a representative of the monolingual first generation, becomes the anchor that forces the entire family to stay connected to their mother tongue.

a. Horizontal Communication Pattern (Between siblings).

Anne and David exhibit the phenomenon of dynamic code-switching. When talking to each other without parental supervision, they naturally switch to English. For them, English is a language of comfort, a secret language (to discuss their grandmother without her understanding), and an identity as children growing up in America.

2. Componential Analysis

Componential analysis delves deeper into the contrast in meaning between the use of Korean and English. It was found that each language choice carries different psychological and sociological weight.

Korean as a Representation of Intimacy and Identity. This language is chosen when the topic of conversation is personal, profound, or related to family values. For example, when Monica discusses soil quality issues or concerns about her family's future, Korean provides an emotional depth that cannot be conveyed in English, which they have limited command of.

English as a Representation of Adaptation and Formality. English is used to bridge the gap with the outside world. Jacob uses formal English (with the salutation "Sir") to show respect and professionalism in business transactions. Conversely, for the children, English is a casual language that represents their social identity in school and church environments.

Language Barriers as Isolation: Grandmother Soonja's case shows that the inability to speak English causes social isolation in public spaces (such as church). Grandmother's silence in American social circles is not merely a technical problem, but a representation of the cultural barriers faced by first-generation immigrants.

3. Theme Analysis

The final stage of analysis concludes several major themes that are central to the Yi family's communication:

a. Language as a Symbol of Resistance to Loss of Identity.
   The consistent use of Korean at home is a conscious effort to resist total assimilation. This family wants to be part of America economically, but still wants to maintain their Korean soul culturally.
b. Shifting Linguistic Power.

   There is a hidden tension between the older and younger generations. The children have more "power" in English, which they sometimes use to navigate the outside world for their parents, but they remain subject to their parents' Korean language authority within the home Sociolinguistic analysis concludes that the language choice made by the Yi family is a strategic decision that is systematically influenced by five major social factors according to Holmes' theoretical framework (2013). The first factor is Participants, which is the most fundamental determinant in interaction. In the context of this immigrant family, the identity of the interlocutor determines the "linguistic etiquette" used; the use of Korean is mandatory when interacting with Grandmother Soonja as a symbol of respect for the monolingual older generation, while

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code-switching to English occurs naturally and is very dominant in interactions between siblings (Anne and David) as a sign of familiarity between peers.

The second factor is Setting, where the physical environment creates boundaries for language use. The home functions as a private zone that protects the Korean language so that it remains alive as a family identity, while public environments such as churches, hospitals, and workplaces force the characters to switch to English in order to meet the standards of formality and demands of social integration in America. The third factor, Topic, shows that Korean is consistently chosen when discussing emotional matters, traditional values, or deep inner turmoil because the mother tongue is considered to have a more intimate emotional power. Conversely, transactional and technical topics, such as Jacob's agricultural business or Monica's medical affairs, tend to be discussed in English for the sake of efficiency and clarity of information in the outside world.

The fourth factor is Function, which distinguishes between affective and referential needs in communication. Korean is dominant in performing affective functions, namely to express affection, anger, and parental authority that must be obeyed. Meanwhile, English performs more referential functions, where it is used as a tool to convey facts, professional work instructions, and as a means of adaptation to avoid social isolation. Finally, the fifth crucial factor is the Social Dimension, which includes social distance and status. This study shows that the closer the social distance (intimacy) between family members, the greater their tendency to use Korean to strengthen their bonds. Conversely, in the context of social status outside the home—where they are seen as immigrants who must prove their competence—the use of English serves to shorten the social distance with native Americans.
These five factors work together and are interrelated, proving that the code-switching phenomenon practiced by the Yi family is not linguistic chaos, but rather a form of intelligent identity navigation. They successfully balance the use of Korean to preserve their cultural roots and family values, while adopting English as a "tool for survival" and a functional bridge to be accepted and succeed in their new environment. Overall, Chapter 4 emphasizes that language for immigrant families is a reflection of their emotional journey and relentless efforts to unite two different worlds.

Generational differences are a crucial factor in the phenomenon of code-switching that occurs in the film. David and Anne, as the younger generation, are more exposed to the American

educational environment and therefore tend to use English in their daily communication. However, they still switch to Korean when talking to their parents and grandmother in order to comply with family norms. This study emphasizes that code-switching is not merely a result of limited vocabulary, but rather a communication strategy and symbolic tool for negotiating identity amid cultural transition. The presence of the grandmother, who consistently uses Korean, reinforces the function of language as an anchor of traditional values amid the acculturation process experienced by her grandchildren.

The choice of language in Minari represents the ideological dimension and cultural struggle in achieving the "American Dream." This finding is in line with previous research stating that language in films is not only a means of communication, but also a representation of power relations and social status. The Yi family's use of Korean in public spaces is a small act of resistance to hold on to their cultural roots in a dominant society. Through comparisons with other film studies, this research concludes that for Asian diasporas, language is a complex tool of negotiation; it reflects how individuals balance the demands of a new environment with the desire to maintain their authentic identity.

This pattern of domain separation reinforces the research of Jannah (2018) on the film Captain Phillips and Sholikah (2018) on the film Hannah Arendt, both of which note that multilingual characters consistently separate language use based on the interlocutor and level of formality. Just as Muse uses Somali specifically for his group or Hannah uses German only for personal matters, the Yi family uses Korean as an emotional glue and English as a professional tool to meet the demands of the American environment.

Furthermore, linguistic dynamics within the Yi family reflect acculturation and the potential for language shift influenced by social variables. In line with Edem's (2018) findings that age and educational background influence language variation, the younger generation in Minari (David and Anne) show a tendency to use English more dominantly. This phenomenon is in line with Sari's (2020) research on interethnic marriage families and Leo and Abdullah's (2013) research on Tamil youth in Malaysia, which shows that younger generations tend to switch to languages that are considered to have more social or functional value in their environment. By integrating the perspectives of these researchers, the Minari study confirms that language choice is not merely a communication tool, but a strategy for negotiating identity and a symbol of cultural struggle in a bilingual diaspora environment.

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D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the choice of language in the film Minari is a manifestation of complex social and cultural dynamics that reflect the reality of Korean-American immigrants' lives. Through analysis of Spradley's model and Janet Holmes' social factor theory, it was found that the use of Korean and English is greatly influenced by power relations, age, and cultural norms. Korean serves as a symbol of identity, cultural heritage, and authority within the family sphere, while English becomes the primary instrument for social and professional adaptation in the public sphere. The phenomenon of code-switching that occurs, especially in intergenerational interactions, shows a process of identity negotiation and efforts to maintain communication harmony amid cultural transition. Overall, the choice of language in this film not only serves as a means of communication but also as a symbol of the struggle for survival and identity adaptation in a new environment.

Based on these findings, future research should expand the scope of sociolinguistic studies by evaluating movies from different linguistic backgrounds to compare language selection patterns in immigrant families. It is also recommended to explore the role of ideology and racial identity as forms of social criticism, as well as to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the mechanisms of code-switching and code-mixing in the context of multilingual families, both in films and in real life. This aims to provide a broader understanding of cultural and social interpretations in multicultural diaspora communities.

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