



Grappling with the nuances of another language no easy task



WE RECENTLY attended a wedding in Seoul between a New Zealander and a young Korean woman, Soon-yi. It was an innovative mix of eastern and western culture, with a New Zealand-born celebrant, Keith, whose fluency and grammatical expertise in Korean won the admiration of all present.

Attaining a high level of proficiency in any language after puberty, especially in pronunciation, is generally recognised as an awesome feat. It involves a good deal of time and hard work.

Keith not only had a near-native-like accent, he had also mastered the complex levels of formality involved in using Korean appropriately in different contexts. Formal contexts require a very different style of Korean from informal conversation, and since there are seven speech levels in Korean, and each level has its own set of verb endings, Keith's accomplishment was impressive.

In addition, Korean has a set of forms called honorifics that are required even in casual interaction to appropriately indicate the relationship between the speakers. So, for example, you need to select the appropriate nouns and verb endings to indicate respect to those you are talking to if they are your superiors, or if you don't know them well.

In Korea, being superior means having high professional status, such as teachers, lawyers and doctors, or just being older. Even a small age difference is significant and requires respectful language from the younger to the older person.

Soon-yi's father told us that he must

express himself respectfully to my husband and me, since we were older than him. He explained that he would use the terms "older brother" and "older sister" to address us since that combined the appropriate components of solidarity, as new friends, with respect for our age.

In many cultures, the emphasis on status differences has reduced over the last few decades – how well you know someone has increasingly become more important than relative status.

So in French-speaking cultures, children once used the respectful "vous" pronoun to address their fathers. Gradually what sociolinguists call the "solidarity dimension" has become more important than the "status dimension".

The fact that your father is a family member has become more significant than the fact that he is older and therefore deserving of respect.

New Zealand takes this to the extreme. Even high status people may be addressed by their first names in all but the most formal contexts. When the university vice-chancellor meets staff in the tearoom or in the corridor, for example, he is addressed as "Pat" rather than "vice-chancellor" or "Professor Walsh", as would be the norm in many other cultures.

Only in the most formal contexts, such as graduation ceremonies, law courts, and Parliament, do people use titles to address others. And though more importance is gradually being paid to the solidarity dimension in Korea too, it has not yet progressed as far as it has in New Zealand.

Gender relationships in Korea are