The Status Quo of 'Role Language' Research

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'Role language' refers to sets of speech features that are closely related to the speakers' personal images. Consider the utterance 'I know (that matter)': there are cases in which 'washi ga shit-teoru-no-ja' is associated with an elderly man, whereas 'watakushi ga zonji-teorimasu-wa' is associated with a noble lady. 'Role language' can be considered a type of linguistic 'stereotype'. It is sometimes based on speech features in reality, but it could also be totally unrelated to real speakers (e.g. aliens' and robots' speech, the choppy speech of 'American Indians', etc.)

The concept of 'role language' was first coined by Kinsui (2000). Through Kinsui (2003), the concept became broadly known to general audiences, which was followed by the publication of collected papers (see Kinsui 2007, 2011). Moreover, Sadanobu (2011) coined personal image 'character' in role language studies and increased the precision of the concept.

The research of 'role language' is essentially interdisciplinary. Apart from syntax, lexicology, phonology, semantics, pragmatics, etc. which take internal views of language and form the core of the discipline, various adjacent areas, e.g., dialect studies, history, literature, sociology, developmental psychology, popular culture studies, etc., also have strong relationships with role language research. Researchers with diverse backgrounds have thus shown interest and promoted collaborative research. Unique studies include Kinsui (2007), which explores the history of 'aruyo' language as a stereotype of Chinese people from the language contact history at the end of Edo Era, Tanaka's proposal (2011) of the concept of 'virtual dialect' in the role language sense, etc. Based on collaboration with psycholinguists, developmental psychology research on the acquisition of role language knowledge is advancing. The area of comparative studies is also remarkable. Studies comparing English, German, Korean, Chinese, etc. centred on role language are making progress which is believed to contribute to a higher standard of translation quality.

Another feature of role language research is its easiness of joining with applied studies. Onzuka (2011) analyses role language in Korean Japanese textbooks, and explains the need to involve role language properly in Japanese teaching, which is also attempted in translation instructions.

Role language research is a young area, with its concept evolved only a few decades ago. However, it has broad applications and the ability to attract a great number of researchers. In the future, researchers with different backgrounds are still encouraged to join this area.

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