Doing cuteness in Korea: it’s about how, not about how much
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In a country where cuteness is one of the most prominent aspects of culture, egyo, which can be roughly translated as a “cute act,” or “display of feminine charm,” is a highly salient practice in the local context of South Korea. This paper investigates the meaning of the rising-falling tone (LHL%) in Korean in the context of egyo. It deals with the meaning of the intonational variable in ethnographic contexts, focusing on how different manifestations of LHL% can be used stylistically.

This study analyzes data from a Korean “reality” TV show in which female and male celebrities pretend to be amusing and attractive newly wed couples. The data consist of two distinct styles: couple’s interaction, where celebrities act as couples, and interview, where they confess their feelings and thoughts about the past episodes. An analysis of the acoustic properties of LHL% in the two different styles shows that the speakers use more extreme contours in the couple’s interaction style than in the interview style, showing significant differences in pitch excursions (H-L1: p < .05, H-L2: p < .001), and highest F0 peak (p <.01). These extreme contours contribute to constructing an egyo persona of female characters, which contrasts with a “composed and rational” persona in the interview, constructed by the use of milder contours of rising-falling tone.

Following McLemore (1984) and Podesva (2007, under review), I show that LHL% has a basic meaning that becomes more specific in context. I also show that not only distributional patterns but also acoustic patterns of a variable are salient in the construction of meaning.