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Honorifics and Hierarchy: Gender Inequality in Korean and English Speech Patterns

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Abstract. This paper compares how the Korean honorific system and English vocabulary each encode gender inequality through different mechanisms. English lost grammatical formality distinctions after "thou" and "thee" declined in the 17th century, so bias now surfaces through vocabulary: asymmetric use of professional titles, gendered marital titles ("Miss"/"Mrs." versus a uniform "Mr."), and higher rates of hedging language among women. Korean retains an obligatory grammatical honorific system, and evidence from spousal address, K-drama dialogue, and workplace interactions shows it applied asymmetrically, with women expected to show more deference than they receive. Because English bias operates through optional word choice, it is in principle avoidable; Korean's grammatically mandatory honorific endings make gendered deference a structural feature speakers cannot opt out of. The comparison suggests linguistic sexism is embedded more rigidly in languages with grammaticalized formality than in those relying on vocabulary alone.

Keywords. Linguistics, Honorifics, Hierarchy, Gender Inequality, Korean, English

Introduction

Language is not merely a means of communication. It extends beyond connecting individuals and reflects societal hierarchies. Languages mirror the values of the culture in which they evolved. Languages of stratified societies came to reflect the hierarchies over time. As they develop, their linguistic structure comes to parallel the social structure. Such languages consist of a clear grammatical distinction between formal and informal speech. The degree of formality determines the grammatical structures of words in formal speech. Certain languages that once distinguished formality through the use of distinct formal and informal personal pronouns that evolved to lose it now no longer have grammatical means of distinguishing formal and informal speech. While originally using one second-person pronoun for informal address and another for formal, one of the two disappeared over time as the language's speakers united in using only one to address all. Korean is an example of a language that reflects societal principles. The Korean language is divided into two large varieties: banmal, the informal, casual speech, and jondaetmal, the formal speech. While jondaetmal is used when addressing others with respect and decorum, the usage of banmal indicates familiarity and equivalence between the speakers. Jondaetmal itself is also divided into varying degrees of formality.

Within the usage of jondatemal, inequality emerges as women primarily use a more formal version of jondatemal, despite the speech level being used by all speakers regardless of the gender of the addressee. Compared to Korean, English is a structurally planar language that does not grammatically distinguish formal and informal speech. Since the abandonment of formal and informal pronouns in the 17th century, English has had no grammatical category regarding formal and informal language. Formality and respect are rather displayed through phrasing. The selected vocabulary in a sentence defines the degree to which one formally addresses another. Though English superficially seems equal because of its lack of speech levels, gender inequality is expressed through vocabulary choices during interpersonal communication. While English has a flat grammatical speech level that shrouds implied gender biases shown through vocabulary, Korean, with its honorific system, institutionalizes gender inequality by locking women into a subordinate position in relation to men in social and professional communication.

In English, formal and informal variations of addressing in the second person existed until the 17th century. Informal second-person pronouns 'thou' and 'thee' were used to address someone of lower status than the speaker. Throughout the 17th century, the usage of the informal pronoun declined as more speakers began to use the formal 'you' to address others.¹ As the previously formal term superseded 'thou' and 'thee,' the lexical distinction of hierarchy in English vanished. The rise of the use of 'you' left English without a formal speech level, as the language inherently lacked a grammatical honorific system. The remaining means of expressing formality was through vocabulary selection. The words used when addressing someone formally are through titles that precede names. Though honorific titles seem polite, the titles for women carry traces of patriarchy.

Distinct 'Miss' and 'Mrs.' exist to inform of a woman's marital status. The existence of distinct titles for married and unmarried women, while men are uniformly addressed as 'Mr.,' reveals society's belief that a part of a woman's value lies in her position in relation to a man. The professional title 'Dr.' applies to both female and male individuals who have acquired a doctorate degree. Compared to male holders of the title, women were given less recognition for their doctorate and have a lower likelihood of being introduced by the appropriate title in formal contexts such as lectures. A study by Files et al. discovered that only 49.2% of female speakers at the Internal Medicine Grand Rounds introduced by male presenters were addressed by the professional title, while male speakers were addressed appropriately by fellow male speakers 72.4% of the time.² Female presenters used the appropriate title 97.8% of the time when introducing other female speakers and 95.0% of the time when introducing male speakers.³ Female presenters were more likely to address all speakers by their professional title, while male speakers showed a reduced application of formal titles when introducing female speakers. In an academic setting, male professors were also found to be addressed by their professional title compared to female professors. A study by Takif, Sanchez, and Stewart on university students discovered that while 50% of male professors were addressed as professor, only 11.09% of female professors were addressed in the same manner, where the students were not

¹ Johnson, Anne Carvey. "The Pronoun of Direct Address in Seventeenth-Century English." *American Speech* 41, no. 4 (1966): 261–69. <https://doi.org/10.2307/453500>.

² Files, Julia A., Amy P. Mayer, Marie G. Ko, Palmoa Friedrich, Melissa Jenkins, Michael J. Bryan, Suneela Vegunta, Christopher M. Wittich, Mary A. Lyle, Radhika Melikian, Tammy Duston, Yei-Hsin Chang, and Sharonne N. Hayes. 2017. "Speaker Introductions at Internal Medicine Grand Rounds: Forms of Address Reveal Gender Bias." *Journal of Women's Health* 26 (5): 413–19. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2016.6044>.

³ Files, "Speaker Introductions at Internal Medicine Grand Rounds: Forms of Address Reveal Gender Bias."

instructed to address the professors in the way they address them.⁴ Speaking emphatically is celebrated when done by men. In professional settings, however, women who do so are perceived as overly forceful and brash. To avoid social disapproval, hedging language was employed to soften their opinions and sound less certain. Analysis of medical consultations showed that female doctors often used hedging words such as ‘perhaps,’ ‘maybe,’ and ‘I think’ 4.3 times more per session than did male doctors, who used approximately twice as few hedging words.⁵ Frequent weakening of their resolutions positions female professionals at a lower status than the addressees.

Honorifics are classified into three groups: referent honorifics, hearer honorifics, and bystander honorifics.⁶ The Korean honorifics system is stratified into 6 speech levels. Of the 6, the levels categorized as the hasipsio-che group and haeyo-che group are utilized the most in formal contexts where separation between the speaker and the referent needs to be distinguished.⁷ Speech in hasipsio-che indicates the highest degree of separation between the interlocutors. Words in hasipsio-che are formed by suffixing -sipsyo, -nida, -ipnida, -sida endings to verbs depending on the sentence’s function. Speech in haeyo-che indicates a lower degree of separation between interlocutors than does speech in the hasipsio-che. Words in haeyo-che are formed by suffixing -yo, -seyo, and -eoyo to verbs depending on the sentence’s function. Haeyo-che is versatile, as it can be used when addressing superiors as well as people of a similar age range in a low-familiarity context. Using both the hasipsio-che and haeyo-che to address another immediately positions the speaker below the addressee. The usage of honorifics is asymmetrical between women and men. Utilization of honorifics requires the speaker to address the other person correspondingly. A study conducted by Ri revealed that married couples, men addressed their wives with less deference while women addressed their husbands more respectfully. Calling spouses by their first names in banmal was more commonly done by male subjects, while female subjects were shown to prefer indirect, more polite terms over first names.⁸ Media portrayal of communication in a marriage reflected this dynamic between couples. Analysis of K-drama scripts from shows that aired in the late 90s in Korea showed male characters using banmal to their wives while the women used honorifics to their husbands.⁹ The dialogue illustrated the traditional dynamic in a marriage that creates inequality between wives and husbands. Even in present relationships, traditional pressure causes women to hesitate to drop the honorific suffix when conversing with a male interlocutor in romantic or familial contexts. Female speakers showed reluctance towards conversion to banmal, while

⁴ Takiff, H. A., D. T. Sanchez, and T. L. Stewart. 2001. "What’s in a Name? The Status Implications of Students’ Terms of Address for Male and Female Professors." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 25 (2): 134–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-6402.00015>.

⁵ Yusupova, Sabohatxon. 2025. "Gender-Based Comparative Analysis of Respect in Linguistic Expression: A Study of Uzbek, Japanese, English, and German." *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 12 (1). doi:10.1080/23311983.2025.2512789.

⁶ Brown, Lucien. 2011. "Korean Honorifics and Politeness on Second Language Learning" *Pragmatics & Beyond New Series*, no 206 (April 2011): 20. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.206>

⁷ Brown, "Korean Honorifics and Politeness on Second Language Learning," 25

⁸ Ri, Nin. 2024. "Gender Bias in Korean Spousal Terms: Insights from An Online Survey and Comparisons With Japanese and Chinese". *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 11 (5):159-81. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.115.16955>.

⁹ Kim, Duk-Young. 1999. "Korean Honorific Markers with Respect to Socio-Cultural Aspects" <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/bc4d0229-aa72-4d76-9166-f8512d40820b/content>

male speakers did so with more ease.¹⁰ In the workplace, female workers were given less verbal respect than they deserve according to societal etiquette. The Korean workplace hierarchy is vertically organized, with one's position determining the level of respect they are expected to be shown by others. Despite the contrast in office rank, male workers tended to speak to female superiors more informally than the office environment dictates. Cases such as "[dropping] honorifics" and "addressing...as if she were a younger subordinate" occur to many female entrepreneurs.¹¹ The lack of use of honorifics in the workplace is a sign that women are societally viewed as inferior to men.

In the Korean language, linguistic sexism is manifest mostly through asymmetric usage of honorifics rather than through vocabulary as it is in English because unequal use of honorifics outshines the inherent sexism in certain Korean words. Words including those that are combinations of the prefix 'yeo-' and terms for professions are sexist in the sense that the original term without the prefix signifies that the holder of the occupation is male, and that women are categorized separately. Hence, words such as yeogyosa (female teacher) and yeojikwon (female employee) contribute to sexist language usage. In English, the message conveyed through a sentence depends on the speaker's choice of vocabulary. The speaker can thus avoid delivering a sexist message by considering their choices. Honorific endings in Korean are morphosyntactic aspects that are more difficult to avoid in formal settings, as all sentences must conclude with an ending that belongs to one of the speech levels, with informal speech disapproved. In the workplace, when a male colleague addresses a female colleague or superior without honorifics, the power dynamic is overridden by a morphosyntactic decision that undermines women.

Speech in both English and Korean has distinct means of expressing sexism. The grammatical structure of the two languages plays a significant role in the sentences that can be formed. Sentences in English, lacking stratified speech levels, are swayed by the lexical choices of the speaker. Gender bias in English is shown through a speaker's decision to include words that carry inherent patriarchal values. In Korean, where speech levels persist, gender bias is shown through an uneven usage of honorifics in familial and formal contexts.

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¹⁰ Kwak, Bařtanová. 2020. "Offering shifts to casual language ('ban-mal') in the Korean TV show "We Got Married"

¹¹ Miller, Liat. 2021. "The Professional Struggles of Contemporary Korean Women: Origins and Consequences of the Glass Ceiling" *Master's Projects and Capstones* (August 2021) <https://repository.usfca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2186&context=capstone>

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