

Phonetics and politeness: Perceiving Korean honorific and non-honorific speech through phonetic cues



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Abstract

In languages such as Japanese or Korean, most research on politeness focuses on morphological and lexical honorifics. Here, we ask whether listeners can perceive the intended honorific level of Korean utterances even in the absence of explicit verbal markers, and whether these phonetic cues are available cross-linguistically. We carried out two perception experiments with Korean listeners and also English listeners with no knowledge of Korean. In Experiment 1, stimuli from multiple voices were presented at random and participants had to judge the intended honorific level of isolated stimuli. Overall accuracies were low (58% for Koreans; 53% for English listeners). In Experiment 2, we blocked the presentation of different voices and asked participants to compare honorific and non-honorific speech from the same voice. Accuracies increased to 70% for Koreans and 57% for English listeners, indicating that speech acoustics become an important cue for politeness-related meanings when listeners can compare utterances produced by the same speaker. Our work shows that politeness does not merely reside in verbal markers but is co-signaled by phonetic cues. And, because the English listeners performed above chance on Experiment 2, the results suggest that some acoustic correlates of politeness may be understood in similar ways across cultures.

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1. Introduction

The recognition of vocal aspects of (im)politeness dates back to the earliest days of modern politeness theory. Indeed, [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) seminal work on politeness universals contained a short section dedicated to “phonetics and prosody”, where phonetic aspects of politeness in such languages as Tzeltal, Tamil and Basque were discussed. We can thus say that politeness research has long recognized that politeness resides not just in *what* people say, but also in *how* people say something. Hence, we expect the phonetic quality of delivery to be important alongside lexical and morphological politeness formulae.

Despite this, the acoustic analysis of (im)polite language has never flourished within the pragmatics and politeness literature, including phonetic perception studies. Early studies focused mostly on anecdotal observation rather than actual

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phonetic measurement. For example, Brown and Levinson (1987:267) suggested that Tzeltal speakers employ high pitch¹ for negative ('deferential') politeness and creaky voice for positive ('friendly') politeness. Corum (1975) noted that palatalization might be linked to negative politeness in such languages as Basque. And Loveday (1981) observed that Japanese women, but not men, raise their pitch when speaking politely. More recently, some studies on impoliteness feature discussion of prosody, including Culpeper's (2005) analysis of how British English television quiz show hosts use intensity, pitch and pauses to create suggestions of impoliteness.

Phonetic studies that incorporate detailed acoustic analyses of polite speech are few in number and often do not address the implications of their findings for politeness research. Notably, Nadeu and Prieto (2011) showed that pitch range and concurrent facial gestures together affected politeness ratings of Catalan participants; similarly Ofuka et al. (2000) found that a final pitch rise leads to increased politeness ratings in Japanese. Campbell (2004) found that breathy phonation was used by Japanese speakers when talking to strangers (for a related study on voice quality, see Ito, 2004). Winter and Grawunder (2011, 2012) attempted to develop a more comprehensive "phonetic profile" of honorific speech in Korean. It was found that basically any measurable phonetic aspect covaries with honorific levels, including pitch, loudness, voice quality and speech rate, as well as the occurrence rate of filled pauses and breathing sounds. This study indicates that politeness affects speech acoustics to large extents, and at a fairly general level.

We believe that integrating mainstream politeness research and phonetic analysis better informs our understanding of the rich system of politeness. From the discursive approach to politeness (see e.g. Grainger, 2011:170), politeness is no longer seen as residing in individual lexical items or grammatical structures. Watts (2003:168) states categorically that "no linguistic structures are inherently polite". Indeed, Brown (2013) demonstrated how Korean honorific forms—perhaps the most iconic politeness markers—may be used sarcastically as markers of impoliteness. Thus, an analysis that purely focuses on lexical and grammatical markers may in some cases be insufficient to explain how an utterance is perceived in terms of (im)politeness. Alongside the undeniable influence of contextual factors, the phonetic quality of an utterance can be expected to play an important role.

Phonetics furthermore has the potential to suggest underlying motivations for politeness phenomena cross-linguistically: Some languages such as Japanese associate high pitch with politeness (Ohara, 2001; Ofuka et al., 2000). Ohala's (1984, 1994) frequency code hypothesis explains the association between high pitch and politeness via a link between high pitch and perceived subdominance (see also Gussenhoven, 2002; Chen et al., 2004). However, in other languages such as Korean (Winter and Grawunder, 2012 – see below) and perhaps Mursi (Irvine, 1979), low pitch correlates with politeness-related phenomena. Winter and Grawunder (2012:812) propose that high pitch may also indicate animatedness or arousal, which may conflict with perceptions of politeness in certain languages such as Korean. These findings show how phonetic aspects of speech are tied in with cross-cultural differences in the realization of politeness. However, since studies such as Winter and Grawunder (2012) rely on production data, more work is needed to examine the role of these acoustic cues in the perception of politeness.

The current study assesses the importance of phonetics in politeness perception, focusing on Korean as a test case. Korean contains two main speech registers: an honorific register known as *contaymal* ('respect-speech') and a non-honorific register known as *panmal* ('half-speech'). Whereas honorific *contaymal* is used prototypically when addressing elders, superiors and adult strangers, non-honorific *panmal* is applied when interacting with intimate adults of equal or inferior age/rank, as well as with children.² There are in fact numerous sub-levels within Korean *contaymal* and *panmal*, the intricacies of which are beyond the scope of the current paper. However, this simple binary contrast is the most basic and fundamental distinction and the one which Korean speakers are the most sensitive to (Lee and Ramsey, 2000:260).³

Politeness is of course a complex phenomenon that has been defined in different ways (see Eelen, 2001:1–29) and that has different cross-linguistic and cross-cultural realizations. However, the use of honorifics (and other social deictic forms) to appropriately mark social relationships has long been recognized as one important mode of politeness. Ide (1989) defined it as "discernment politeness", which she contrasted with "volitional politeness" (i.e. use of verbal strategies for performing sensitive speech acts). Although the need to encode social position according to "discernment" is probably universal, it is

¹ For reasons of simplicity, in this paper we do not separate "pitch" and "fundamental frequency (f0)", referring to them both as "pitch".

² The usage of honorific *contaymal* may overlap to some extent with the concept of formal speech. However, although Korean speakers will use *contaymal* when speaking in formal scenes, they will also use it in more casual encounters with elders and superiors. Moreover, *contaymal* speech does not always contain other well-known markers of Korean formality, such as the formal comitative particle *kwa/wa*, which replaces the casual *hako* in formal speech (see Kim and Biber, 1994). Thus, rather than primarily signaling formality, *contaymal* indexes respect for those of superior social standing.

³ Our description of Korean honorifics as being composed of two registers differs from traditional accounts which focus on the distinction between addressee honorifics, subject honorifics and object honorifics (e.g. Lee and Ramsey, 2000). Note also that we use the term *panmal* according to the layman sense. This usage is broader to how the term is sometimes used within Korean linguistics to refer only to the "intimate" speech style.

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