

Politeness levels in the Korean language

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Abstract: This article examines the category of politeness in the Korean language as a unique linguistic and cultural phenomenon that reflects Confucian traditions, social values, and hierarchical relations characteristic of Korean society. The main focus is on the analysis of the main levels of speech etiquette, such as formal-polite, informal-polite, and informal speech, as well as the grammatical and lexical means that provide their expression.

The article describes in detail the use of formal and informal grammatical endings, honorific verbs, polite nouns and pronouns, and special expressions to indicate respect. The features of the use of the suffix (으)시, honorific forms of verbs and nouns, as well as the nuances of choosing speech levels depending on social status, age, and context of communication are revealed.

Keywords: Korean language, category of politeness, speech etiquette, formal speech, informal speech, honorific forms, grammatical endings, social hierarchy, intercultural communication, Confucian traditions, Korean culture.

Introduction: The Korean language is one of the languages in which the categories of politeness play a significant role in communication. These categories form the foundation of interactions between people, determining how one should address a conversation partner depending on their age, social status, and the closeness between the speaker and the addressee. This article explores the main aspects of politeness in the Korean language, including the system of speech levels, the peculiarities of address, and the cultural context.

Speech Levels (높임법)

The Korean language has 7 categories of politeness, which reflect the degree of respect or closeness between speakers. Each category has unique verb endings characteristic of that particular level. The degree of politeness in each category can further be expressed with the polite form by adding the respectful suffix 시. The names of the categories in Korean are derived from the verb 하다 (to do) + verb-ending suffix of the respective category + suffix 체, meaning "style."

Some of these styles are gradually disappearing from colloquial Korean and are mainly used in historical films or novels.

Formal-Polite Speech (합쇼체)

This is the modern conversational formal-polite style. It is also called the formal polite style. It is the most common style when interacting with strangers and is generally used at the beginning of a conversation, gradually transitioning to less formal styles. It is characterized by verb endings such as -습니다/-습시다.

Used:

Between strangers during the first meeting.

Often between male colleagues.

By television hosts.

When addressing customers.

In some set expressions, e.g., 만나서 반갑습니다 ("Nice to meet you").

Example:

- 가십니까? (Are you going?)

Informal-Polite Speech (해요체)

This style is used more frequently in everyday communication with peers or colleagues. The endings -

요 give speech a friendly and respectful tone.

Used:

In phrasebooks for foreigners.

Between strangers, especially of the older generation.

Often between female colleagues.

Between younger strangers, as an alternative to formal-polite speech.

As a less formal polite style between strangers or acquaintances (not close).

Example:

- 가요. (I am going.)

Official-Neutral Speech (하오체)

This level is rarely used and is associated with traditional or literary speech. It is a semi-formal or "middle" style. Initially, it was a poetic style and was used in unclear social situations. However, due to its excessive use by authorities during the dictatorship, it acquired a negative connotation. Therefore, it is almost never used by the generation that grew up after the democratization of Korea. It is mainly used by the older generation (over 60).

Used: Occasionally between older people, civil servants, police officers, middle managers, and those temporarily in charge of people of higher status.

In written form, especially by men, mostly on the internet.

In historical dramas to give dialogues an archaic tone.

Present: 하오

Present Honorific: 하쇼/ 하시오

Informal-Neutral Speech (해체)

This is a widely used conversational style. It is used between close friends, family members, or younger people.

Example:

- 가. (Go.)

Haera-style. Officially Familiar Style

This is a simple conversational style used in written speech when the narration is in the third person. It is used in impersonal written language, such as instructions, manuals, etc. This style is common in conversation with younger people or peers.

Used:

When addressing close friends or relatives of roughly the same age and adults when speaking with children.

In impersonal written language (in books, newspapers,

magazines, etc.).

In certain exclamations.

Present: 한다

Present Honorific: 하신다

Hage-style. Neutral Style

A middle-familiar style of communication. It is not used with children and never in communication between blood relatives. It is not very common in communication and is mostly used by the older generation (over 60).

Used:

By older people when addressing youth, friends, or non-blood relatives (e.g., son-in-law, daughter-in-law, father-in-law, mother-in-law) in a friendly manner.

Occasionally between male friends.

In novels.

Present: 하네

Present Honorific: 하시네

Hasoseo-style. Highly Formal Officially-Polite Style

This style is traditionally used when addressing the king, queen, or high-ranking officials. It belongs to archaic styles and is used exclusively in historical dramas and the Bible.

Present: 하나이다

Present Honorific: 하시나이다.

이다 – 이나이다 - 이오 – 이네

이다 Honorific Suffix 시 – 이시나이다 - 이시오 / 이쇼 – 이시네

있다 – 있으나이다/ 있나이다 - 있오 – 있네 / 있으네

가다 – 가나이다 - 가오 – 가네

가다 Honorific Suffix 시 - 가시나이다 - 가시오 – 가시네

먹다 – 먹나이다 – 먹오 - 먹네

읽다 - 읽나이다 / 읽으나이다 - 읽오 – 읽네 / 읽으네

돕다 - 돕나이다 / 도우나이다 - 도오 / 도오 – 돕네 / 도우네

쉽다 - 쉽나이다 / 쉬우나이다 - 쉬오 / 쉬우오 – 쉽네 / 쉬우네

듣다 - 듣나이다 / 들으나이다 - 들오 - 듣네 / 들으네

빠르다 – 빠르나이다 - 빠르오 - 빠르네

하얏다 – 하얏나이다 / 하야나이다 - 하야오 - 하얏네
/ 하야네

잇다 - 잇나이다/ 이으나이다 - 이오 – 잇네 / 이으네

만들다 - 만드나이다 - 만들오 – 만드네

Addressing and Respectful Forms

One of the key characteristics of the Korean language is the use of respectful forms (존댓말) and special suffixes that emphasize the social status of the addressee. For example:

- 씨 (ssi) – added to a name to show politeness.

Example: 김민수 씨 (Mr. Kim Min-su).

- 선생님 (seonsaengnim) – used when addressing teachers or specialists.

There is also a system of respectful verbs such as:

- 먹다 (to eat) → 드시다 (respectful form).
- 자다 (to sleep) → 주무시다 (respectful form).

The Influence of Context on the Choice of Speech Style

The choice of speech style is determined not only by the status of the interlocutor but also by the situation. For example:

- At work, colleagues use formal-polite or informal-polite speech.
- In the family, informal speech is more common.

Cultural concepts of hierarchy (hierarchical relationships based on age and status) have a strong influence on the language. For example, younger people are always expected to address older people with respect.

Cultural Aspects of Politeness

Politeness in the Korean language is closely tied to Confucian philosophy, which has shaped social norms in Korea for centuries. Respect for elders, subordination, and harmony are key elements of this philosophy. These elements manifest in both language and everyday behavior.

The category of politeness in Korean is not just a grammatical or lexical feature, but a reflection of deep cultural values. It shows how important respect for others—based on their age, social status, and position—is in Korean society. This aspect of the language has been shaped over centuries and continues to be one of the key elements of Korean speech today.

Studying the category of politeness is not just about learning grammar and vocabulary, but also about immersing oneself in a unique philosophy of communication. In Korean culture, language is not just a means of transmitting information, but also a way to express respect and acknowledge hierarchy. Even casual conversations require the speaker to pay attention to details: who they are speaking to, the context, and the goals they are pursuing.

For foreigners learning Korean, the category of politeness often becomes a real challenge. A mistake in choosing the correct level of speech can be perceived as impoliteness, even if the intentions are good. For example, if a student addresses a teacher informally, it may be seen as rude. Conversely, excessive use of formal forms among friends may create a sense of artificiality and detachment.

However, mastering polite forms is not only a step toward improving language skills but also a way to understand Korean society. The deeper a person masters these subtleties, the better they understand the mentality and values of Koreans: respect for elders, attention to detail, and a desire for harmony in communication.

It is important to note that the category of politeness is not static. Modern Korean is gradually changing, adapting to the realities of the new era. Young people are increasingly using less formal levels of speech, especially on social media or among peers. However, the core principles of politeness remain unchanged, especially in professional settings and family relationships.

The Korean language is not just a means of communication; it is a way of expressing cultural values. The category of politeness reminds us that respect and attention to others are the foundation of a harmonious society. By learning Korean, a person learns not only to speak but also to think with respect, making this experience invaluable for both language development and personal growth.

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