

Honorific and Elevated Vocabulary as Face-Attacking Strategies in Korean and French: A Contrastive Study of Mock Politeness

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This study explores how formal, elevated, and honorific vocabulary functions within face-threatening acts (FTAs) in French and Korean. Such words are conventionally defined as markers of respect, refinement, or deference, yet they carry a communicative weight that can exceed and even invert their dictionary meaning: in certain contexts the same term, rather than signaling politeness, produces mockery, sarcasm, pretension, or ironic distance. This phenomenon corresponds to what Culpeper (1996) terms mock politeness or sarcasm — a face-threatening act carried out through politeness strategies that are manifestly insincere and thus remain mere surface realizations. The study examines the conditions under which elevated vocabulary is read as genuine courtesy and those under which it tips toward face attack.

That such a reversal is possible follows from a broader principle: no expression is inherently polite or impolite, since its interpretation depends on the conditions of use rather than on the form itself (Culpeper, 1996). Charaudeau (2014) makes a parallel point for French, observing that politeness devices are stable as categories of the language but unstable in discourse, where an excess of polite markers can produce the opposite effect and be read as insincere or affected — a reversal whose interpretation is, in turn, culturally conditioned. On the Korean side, honorific forms likewise function as indexical stance markers whose pragmatic force is contextually determined rather than socially prescribed (Strauss & Eun, 2005) — a dynamic that, we argue, applies equally to honorific vocabulary.

The analysis for this research is anchored on three lexical items per language, deliberately spanning different word classes to show that the phenomenon is lexical rather than tied to a single grammatical category: a noun (French *demeure* 'dwelling, residence' vs. *maison* 'house'; Korean 댁 vs. 집), a verb (*se restaurer* 'to take refreshment' vs. *manger* 'to eat'; 진지를 잡수시다 vs. 밥을 먹다), and an adjective (*souffrant* 'unwell, indisposed' vs. *malade* 'sick'; 편찮으시다 vs. 아프다). Each item has a neutral counterpart and a markedly elevated or honorific form that can be redeployed ironically. The method is questionnaire-based, using two parallel surveys — one for French speakers, and another for Korean speakers. After collecting sociolinguistic profile data and respondents' self-reported attitudes toward politeness, each survey embeds the target word in a controlled series of micro-situations that vary the pragmatic dimensions known to govern the weight of an FTA — relative power, social distance, intimacy, and situational formality (Culpeper, 1996). For each, respondents tag their intuitive perception from a fixed inventory of categories ranging from natural, formal, and polite to ironic/sarcastic, pretentious, mocking, and inappropriate, allowing the same lexical form to be tracked across contexts. A final forced-choice task in authentic corpus extracts tests register preference in natural usage.

Preliminary results, based on an exploratory sample (French N=10, Korean N=6), show a consistent pattern across both groups: elevated or honorific vocabulary is perceived as natural and appropriate in institutional and formal contexts, but as exaggerated, ironic, or face-threatening in informal, symmetrical exchanges — a register–context congruence effect that holds across the two typologically distinct systems. Both groups further display an

upward over-formalization/over-honorification bias in the corpus-based lexical choice task, and both recognize the multifunctionality of politeness beyond sheer courtesy, most notably for hierarchy marking, request mitigation, and face-protection. The two systems nonetheless diverge in the intensity of the effect: misapplied honorific vocabulary in informal Korean contexts elicits markedly stronger perceptions of mockery and sarcasm than its French counterpart, which tends instead to be read as merely pretentious or odd — a contrast plausibly linked to the grammaticalized, referent-encoding nature of Korean honorification versus the more freely selectable lexical register of French.

This study departs from an already familiar observation: that grammatical resources can be turned to mockery — as when the Korean subject-honorific suffix *-si-* is sarcastically attached to a social equal (e.g. 웃기시네; 문금현, 2018), the deferential marker itself producing the ironic sting. Against this backdrop, it asks a different question: whether the two languages also recruit lexical resources — elevated and honorific vocabulary — toward this same end, and if so, how differently. The aim of this study is not to adjudicate which linguistic resource is "responsible" for the effect, but to contrast the two systems: to ask whether French, whose honorific grammar is more limited (chiefly the *tu/vous* distinction), leans more heavily on lexical register where Korean can draw on both lexical and grammatical honorification, and how each language's available words are mobilized when politeness is turned against itself.

Selected References

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