

## 韓国語の敬語の文法的側面と社会構造\*

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### Grammatical Aspects of ‘Honorification’ and the Sociological Structure of the Korean Language

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#### 1. Introduction

The author studied the Korean language as part of his studies on East Asian Cultural Anthropology at Keimyung University 啓明大学 in Taegu, South Korea. The author was employed by Taegu National University of Education 大邱国立教育大学 and the ETON Academy in South Korea before moving to Nagasaki in the year 2000 where he has resided ever since. The similarities and differences between the Japanese and Korean language has been a topic of great interest to the author. For this article, the author would like to share thoughts on the honorification process of the Korean language.

Language is reflected by the individual society member and has a direct impact on culture and behavior. Honorifics in the Korean language has an impact upon the Korean culture because such honorifics within language is reflected in behavior as well as speech. To gain an understanding of honorifics in Korean it is necessary to look at not only grammatical aspects, but also the sociological aspects that affect the honorification system. The honorific system, known as *yeong-ye* 영예 in Korean functions to indicate the social and psychological distances between people. This article will look at both the grammatical and sociological aspects as well as make references to the differences between polite speech in Korean and English and other European languages.

#### 2.1 An Overview of the Korean Language and Thoughts on Language Study

The Korean language is spoken by more than 75 million people, of whom 48 million live in South Korea and 24 million in North Korea. There are more than two million speakers in China, approximately one million in the United States, and about 500,000 in Japan (Britannica.com, 2019).

The written language is known as 한글 “Hangul”. Hangul is a system of symbols expressed in Korean alphabet characters. According to legend, Hangul was created by King Sejong of the Yi Dynasty (1418-50) for the purpose of enlightening illiterate people. Hangul is one of the only languages that developed a writing system to exactly conform to a spoken language and evolved after the full development of a spoken system. Hangul is often described as being the most scientifically designed language in the world. At the time of its creation, Hangul consisted of 14 consonants and 10 vowels, totaling 24 alphabetic symbols. It should also be noted that historically, the Japanese language originally had a vowel system closely resembling Korean, specifically with the *-i* “ui” and *ㅏ* “ae” sounds which are no longer used in the modern Japanese 5-vowel phonetic system. Hangul was used by the lower-class because of the Confucian ideology that good things require hard work and the upper-class thought that it was too easy. Chinese characters known as *hanja* 한자 or 漢字 were commonly used by the upper-class whereas the *hangul* 한글 was historically used by the lower-class. Knowledge of Chinese ideograms or 한자 *hanja* permeates the Korean hangul characters—without an underlying knowledge of *hanja*, one

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would not know where to correctly divide words.

As for non-native speakers studying the Korean language, this author concurs with the learning theories of Robert M. Gagne (1916-2002). Gagne is famous for his book “The Conditions of Learning” and for his learning theories including the “Nine Levels of Learning”. As a behaviorist, Gagne suggested that learning must be organized into a hierarchy. This process of organization helps the learner to visualize new material and the instructor sequence instruction. The author wrote at length concerning the relevance of Gagne’s theory for the instruction of foreign languages in his September 2017 article titled *A Report on the Process of Learning and Educators Influencing Instructional Design* in the Journal of Multidisciplinary Education and Research. For example, English alphabet letter instruction through Gagne’s theory is not taught in order from A to Z. Letters with similar shapes are grouped together. Lower-case letters such as *e*, *a*, and *c*, are taught together while upper-case letters such as B, P, and D are taught together. In order to develop the list of groups, the teacher must consider the shapes and similarities of letters. This ensures that every letter will be placed in a group and it reinforces the importance of grouping the letters (Gagne, 1968). The author, as an EFL educator found value in focusing on letters such as lower case “b” and “d” that both sound and look similar. Such letters are especially confusing for young learners and can if not well-understood become an impediment to proper spelling. Moreover, groups of characters may be divided according to phonetics or pronunciation which would make letters such as A, H, J, and K taught together while B, C, D, E, G, P, T, V, and Z are grouped together.

Likewise, Japanese katakana characters would be grouped according to shape such as フ、マ、ヌ、ス or シツソン and hiragana characters such as の、あ、め、ぬ or さ and き would be grouped together. Moreover, the author found that grouping Korean *hangul* characters according to pronunciation aided in his studies

of the Korean language. The proper pronunciation of ㅏ ㅓ and ㅗ ㅛ or the “o” and “yo” vowels are determined by the shape of the speaker’s mouth when pronouncing these characters. One’s mouth should be circular when pronouncing the “horizontal vowels” ㅏ and ㅗ. However, one’s mouth should be slightly closed in an oval shape for the proper pronunciation of the “vertical vowels” ㅓ and ㅛ (Flake, 2017).

## 2.2 Dialects of the Korean Language

Aside from the standard language, there are few a clear boundaries between Korean dialects, and they are typically grouped according to geographic or cultural regions. These local dialects are called 말 *mal*, which literally means “speech”, also known as 사투리 *saturi*, or 방언 *bangeon*, in Korean. The standard language (*pyojuneo* or *pyojunmal*) of both South Korea and North Korea is based on the dialect of the area around Seoul, though the northern standard has been influenced by other dialects. Some dialects of Korean are conservative, maintaining Middle Korean sounds (such as *z*, *β*) which have been lost from the standard language, whereas others are highly innovative.

The division of the two Korean nations has resulted in increasing differences among the dialects that have emerged over time. As Jason Strother (2015) wrote in his article on the language differences between North and South Korea, the differences are found in which countries each half of Korea allied with. Since the allies of the newly founded nations split the Korean peninsula in half after 1945, the newly formed Korean nations have since borrowed vocabulary extensively from their respective allies. As the Soviet Union helped industrialize North Korea and establish it as a communist state, the North Koreans would therefore borrow a number of Russian terms. Likewise, since the United States helped South Korea extensively to develop militarily, economically, and politically, South Koreans would therefore borrow extensively from English (Strother,

2015). The differences among northern and southern dialects have become so significant that many North Korean defectors reportedly have had great difficulty communicating with South Koreans after having initially settled into South Korea. In response to the diverging vocabularies, a Smartphone app called *Univoca* was designed to help North Korean defectors learn South Korean terms by translating them into terms more readily understood in North Korean (Strother, 2015).

### 3. Grammatical Aspects of Korean Honorifics

In Korean, there are two types of honorification processes. That is the honorification process controlled by the speaker-referent axis and the honorification process controlled by the speaker-addressee axis. The use of the referent-controlled honorification process creates psychological distances between the speaker and the referent. The addressee-controlled honorification process used in formal situations has the effect of making neutral words more refined. These two processes can therefore be seen as having different purposes. The referent-controlled process can be further classified into two more types, 존경어, 겸양어 and 정녕어. 존경어 also referred to as respect language, is the process of subject honorification. 존경어 is the more common of the two processes also being found in other languages such as Japanese.

However, 겸양어 also defined as humility or humbling language is the process of object honorification. This type of honorification is less common. It is more common in Japanese than it is in Korean. The honorification process controlled by the addressee is referred to as 정녕어 or polite language. This form is widespread throughout the world. It can be found in French, German and Japanese.

There are many levels of politeness in Korean Honorifics. There is a non-polite and non-honorifying form often referred to as the dictionary form. There is also the polite form 정녕어 which can be either neutral or honorifying. This form is also referred to as the noun+*imnida* 입니다, the verb+*munida* 무니다 (after vowel) or verb+*sumnida* 습니다 (after consonant) form. There is often a correlation between the polite form and honorific as situations where honorific are used usually call for the use of polite forms. It is possible though to show reverence to somebody by using honorific even when speaking in the non-polite form.

A sentence can be exalted or humbled by changing the form of the verb. In Japanese, verbs which are used in high frequency also have exalting and humbling substitutes. However, the exalting and humbling forms are the same in Korean. Some examples of these are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Examples of Exalting and Humbling Verb Forms

<i>Japanese Example:</i>			
English	neutral/原形	exalting/尊敬	humbling/謙遜
to eat	食べる <i>taberu</i>	召し上がる <i>meshiagaru</i>	頂く <i>itadaku</i>
to go	行く <i>iku</i>	いらっしゃる <i>irassharu</i>	参る <i>mairu</i>
<i>Korean Example:</i>			
English	neutral/중립	exalting/고상	humbling/겸손
to eat	먹다 <i>mokta</i>	잡수시다 <i>chapsushida</i>	잡수시다 <i>chapsushida</i>
to sleep	자다 <i>jada</i>	주무시다 <i>jumushida</i>	주무시다 <i>jumushida</i>

[Source: author]

Verbs as well as adjectives may be easily converted into an honorific form by adding the suffix -시 *-shi* or -으시 *-eushi* after the root word or stem and before the ending. Thus, 가다 *kada*

or “to go” becomes 가시다 *kashida*. Table 2 provides reference to examples of how base verbs and adjectives are converted to honorific form.

Table 2. Base Verb and Honorific Forms

English	base verb/adjective	regular honorific
to go	가다 <i>kada</i>	가시다 <i>kashida</i>
to receive	받다 <i>batda</i>	받으시다 <i>badeushida</i>
(to be) small	작다 <i>jakda</i>	작으시다 <i>jageushida</i>

[Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean\\_honorifics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_honorifics)]

Several verbs in the Korean language have suppletive honorific forms. Such verbs are unique in their suppletive humble forms, since they are used when the speaker is referring to him or herself in polite situations. These include 드리다 *deurida* and 올리다 *ollida* for 주다

*chuda*, meaning “give”. 드리다 *deurida* is substituted for 주다 *chuda* when the latter is used as an auxiliary verb, while 올리다 *ollida*, literally meaning “raise up” is used for 주다 *chuda* in the sense of “to offer”. Further suppletive honorification in the Korean language is described in Table 3.

Table 3. Base Verb and Suppletive Honorific Forms

English	base verb/adjective	suppletive honorific
to be	있다 <i>itda</i>	계시다 <i>gyesida</i>
to drink	마시다 <i>mashida</i>	드시다 <i>deusida</i>
to eat	먹다 <i>mokda</i>	드시다 <i>deusida</i>
to eat	먹다 <i>mokda</i>	잡수시다 <i>chapsusida</i>
to sleep	자다 <i>jada</i>	주무시다 <i>jumusida</i>
to be hungry	배고프다 <i>paegopuda</i>	시장하시다 <i>sijanghasida</i>

[Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean\\_honorifics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_honorifics)]

The Korean language is very unique for creating honorifics through the use special “honorific” nouns in place of regular nouns. A common example is using 진지 *chinji* instead of 밥 *baḥ* for a “meal” or “food”. Honorific nouns are often used to refer to relatives. The honorific

suffix -님 *-nim* is affixed to many kinship terms to make them honorific. Thus, someone may address his own grandmother as 할머니 *halmoni* but one must refer to another person’s grandmother as 할머니님 *halmonim*. Refer to Table 4 for examples of honorific noun forms in the Korean language.

Table 4. Base Noun and Honorific Noun Forms

English	base noun	honorific
paternal grandfather	할아버지 <i>halaboji</i>	할아버님 <i>halabonim</i>
paternal grandmother	할머니 <i>halmoni</i>	할머니님 <i>halmonim</i>
father	아버지 <i>aboji</i>	아버님 <i>abonim</i>
mother	어머니 <i>omoni</i>	어머니님 <i>omonim</i>
a male’s older brother	형 <i>hyong</i>	형님 <i>hyongnim</i>
a male’s older sister	누나 <i>nuna</i>	누님 <i>nunim</i>
a female’s older brother	오빠 <i>oppa</i>	오라버니 <i>oraboni</i>
a female’s older sister	언니 <i>onni</i>	
son	아들 <i>adul</i>	아드님 <i>adunim</i>
daughter	딸 <i>ttal</i>	딸님 <i>ttanim</i>

[Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean\\_honorifics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_honorifics)]

As in the example of using the vocabulary 할머니 *halmeoni* or 할머니님 *halmeonim* for grandmother is determined by blood relation to the person in reference, the use of family vocabulary in the Korean language is quite complex. The vocabulary

for family members is determined by one’s own gender and immediate blood relation to the person being mentioned. The author is fascinated by the various titles given and use of vocabulary to determine blood relationships and in-law

relationships.

Honorific forms of address include 씨 *-shi*, which is the most commonly used honorific used amongst people of approximately equal speech level. It is attached at the end of the full name or after the given name if the speaker is familiar with the listener; otherwise, it is more polite to be used with one's family name. 님 *-nim* is the highest form of honorifics and above 씨 *-shi*, but is still used as a commonplace honorific for guests, customers, clients, and unfamiliar individuals. 님 *-nim* is also used towards someone who is revered and admired for having a significant amount of skill, intellect, knowledge, etc. and is used for people who are of a higher rank than oneself. Examples include family members 어머니 *omo-nim* and 아버지 *abo-nim*, teachers 선생님 *songseng-nim*, holy men such as priests and pastors 목사님 *moksa-nim*, and a God 하나님 *hana-nim* (Wikipedia, 2019).

야, 아 *-ya* or *-a* is a casual title used at the end of names. It is not gender exclusive. If a name ends in a consonant 아 *-a* is used, while 야 *-ya* is used if the name ends in a vowel. 야 *-ya* or 아 *-a* is used only between close friends and people who are familiar with each other, and its use between strangers or distant acquaintances would be considered extremely rude. 야 *-ya* or 아 *-a* is only used hierarchically horizontally or downwards: an adult or parent may use it for young children, and those with equal social standing may use it with each other, but a young individual will not use *-ya* or *-a* towards one who is older than oneself.

군 *-gun* is used moderately in formal occasions such as weddings, for young, unmarried males. 군 *-gun* correlates to 君 *-kun* in Japanese and is also used to address young boys by an adult. -yang 양 *-yang* is the female equivalent of 군 *-gun* and is used to address young girls. Both are used in a similar fashion to 씨 *-shi*, succeeding either the whole name or the first name in solitude.

#### 4. Sociological Aspect of Korean Honorifics

The language of Korea highly reflects the observance of a speaker's relationships with

both the subject and the audience. Speech levels and the extensive honorifics system in the Korean language is used as a tool to reflect the speaker's relationship to the subject and the audience. It is generally accepted that honorifics were used to express the difference in social status between speakers and has evolved to differentiate the level of familiarity between the speaker and the listener. To understand the use of honorifics in Korean, one must first have an understanding of group relationships in Korea. People derive their identity from the group that they belong to. Examples of these groups are one's family, work place or school. Within these groups hierarchy is strictly observed. This hierarchy is based on rank, position, social status and sex. In the hierarchical situation the higher status person uses non-polite forms and the lower status person uses polite forms. In the work place hierarchy is based on length of service and seniority. In the past, in school, deference was given to teachers though this is decreasing in a lot of elementary and high schools today with student being on a more casual relationship with their teachers. In contrast hierarchical relationships are strictly enforced in school clubs. Duration of friendship does not change these status roles.

Though the hierarchy system is enforced within one's own group when interacting with another group all members of that group are treated as if they have a higher status. All in group members are humbled and all out group members are exalted regardless of rank, age or sex. In this way when you have people from different groups talking to each other, both groups treat each other deferentially. They exalt each other whilst at the same time using humbling forms for themselves and members of their own group.

The use of special noun or verb endings are used when talking about someone superior in status in order for a speaker to distinguish the superiority of the listener. The superiority of the listener may be determined by age—if the listener is an older relative, an unfamiliar

stranger of similar or greater age, an instructor or employer, a customer, etc., then the noun or verb endings are adjusted to show respect. It should be noted that mistaken dictation or wrong speech levels can also be potentially considered insulting depending on the discrepancies between the expected honorific form and the used form of speech.

### 5. Similarities between Korean and Japanese

Although the Korean people are homogeneous, possessing a single spoken language, literature and authentic history extending back thousands of years, there are striking similarities between the Korean and Japanese language and culture. It is also necessary to consider these similarities between the Korean and the Japanese languages. Such a topic has been of great interest to linguists for many years. When one considers the variety and phonetic variations within the Asian languages and that such languages as Thai, Cambodian, Mandarin, Vietnamese, follow an entirely different phonetic system based upon tonal variances, Korean and Japanese stand out as their own group within Asian languages. Korean and Japanese also share the same sentence pattern of subject-object-verb. Emphasis on the verb at the end of the sentence and the congregation of the verb to reflect different formalities of speech is remarkable similarity between these two languages. Moreover, both Korean and Japanese have developed their vocabulary from the Chinese language, but the pronunciation has been altered from the original Chinese expressions in order to match the phonetics and writing systems of their language.

The written languages of Korean and Japanese has similarities due to the fact that both languages evolved into an alphabet after the adaptation of the Chinese written ideograms (kanji or *hanja* 漢字) characters. Knowledge of Chinese ideograms or 한자 *hanja* permeates the Korean *hangul* characters—without an underlying knowledge, one would not know where to correctly divide words. As an example, the *hangul* characters 학교, 하교, 학요 all correlate

to phonetics of the *hanja* 学校 pronounced *gakkou* in Japanese and *hakkyo* in Korean. However, 학 교 is the correct “spelling” in Korean since it correlates to the *hanja* characters 학 for 学 and 교 for 校. Even if the Chinese ideograms are not being directly rendered, the Chinese ideograms exist in that the correct division of the *hangul* characters is determined by the original Chinese ideograms as being directly spelled out in *hangul*. Therefore, knowledge of Chinese ideograms remains essential for understanding the Korean language.

Similarities between Korean and Japanese were noted by Arai Hakusei in 1717 and the idea that the two might be related was first proposed in 1781 by the Japanese scholar Teikan Fujii. In the West, the idea gained attention through the William George Aston’s linguistic studies in 1879. Research continued up to 1910 as the scholar Shosaburo Kanazawa proposed that the languages had profound correlation. The author also finds the divers dialects of the Japanese and Korean language strikingly similar. The Taegu dialect that the author was submerged in is akin to the Kansai dialect of Japan in that it was boldly different from the standardized dialect of Seoul in the Case of Korean and Edo or Tokyo in the case of Japanese. The Altaic Hypothesis is a topic of debate among linguistic anthropologists as there is great Skepticism over the relation of the Japanese language to Altaic, in part due to the unsuccessful attempts to establish genealogical relationships

The author has also noticed a profound similarity with the cultural mindset behind the “set phrases” or 決まり文句 *kimari-monku* or 상투어 *sangtu-o* within the Korean and Japanese language. While many of the set phrases for specific situations are represented in both the Korean and Japanese language, there is often no counterpart in the English language.

頂きます *itadakimasu* is spoken before eating a meal followed by 御馳走様でした *gochisosama deshita* in Japanese. Likewise, 잘 먹겠습니다 *chal mogessumnida* is followed by 잘 먹었습니다 *chal mogossumnida* in Korean. 수고 하셨습니다 *sugo hashossumnida* is spoken to work colleagues in

Korea which carries the same meaning as お疲れ様でした *otsukaresama deshita* in Japanese. Expressions that are culturally dictated as being necessary to be said in a certain situation to maintain cultural norms are amazingly similar between Korean and Japanese. Although the language is different, the mindset is the same. The cultural value associated with such expressions is similar. As language is a reflection of culture, this is perhaps an example of greater cultural similarities. The author, having studied anthropology in universities in Japan and Korea believes that this similarity heavily supports the 渡来人 *toraijin* theory of Koreans being the ancestors of the Japanese. Language is included as the cultural evidence while DNA studies, Mongolian birthmark called 蒙古斑 *mokohan* in Japanese is explained in Korean mythology as the bruise inflicted by the shaman spirit 삼신할미 *samshinhalmi* that, according to legend, slapped the baby's behind in order to hasten the baby to quickly exit from his or her mother's womb. The Mongolian birthmark is also the source for the Japanese idiom 尻が青い *shiri ga aoi* referring to the blue colored birthmark children often have at birth. The Mongolian birthmark is deemed as physical evidence of a biological link between Koreans and Japanese by many anthropologists.

## 6. Conclusion

The Korean honorific system can be seen to have similarities and differences to other languages besides Japanese. As is the same and English and other European languages, the first factor in deciding the level of politeness used is the degree of acquaintance or intimacy. It can also be likened to English in the more polite expressions tend to be longer. Furthermore, negative questions and the non-definitive way of asking tends to be more polite.

One way in which Korean differs from English is the refrain of the use of the word “you”. In English, unless directly addressing someone, the term “you” being neutral is acceptable in referring to a superior. As an example in English “would

you mind checking this for me” would be appropriate to say to a teacher. In contrast, the same sentence in Korean would be considered very rude. In Korean one should always use a title or the person's name if known. To refer to a superior as *no* is considered impolite. Moreover, the over-usage of personal pronouns is likewise considered rude. 너 *no* is the informal and 당신 *tangshin* is the formal term for “you”; however, 당신 *tangshin* has a confrontational nuance that can be offensive if used incorrectly. However, 당신 *tangshin* is frequently used in songs and drama performances without sounding confrontational or offensive. Other words for 당신 *tangshin* are usually substituted whenever possible. For example, a person's name, professional title, or a term for kinship. Professional titles include 선생님 *sonsengnim* or “teacher”/ “doctor”, 사장님 *sajangnim* “boss”, etc. The plural 여러분 *yoreobun* is used to signify a group for the plural form of “you”. You may also hear 그 쪽 *kujjok* when someone is addressed. 그 쪽 *kujjok* is used in place of 당신 *tangshin* in certain social situations. 그 쪽 *kujjok* literally means “that side” similar to そちら (の方) *sochira (no kata)* in Japanese. However, in most conversations “you” is heavily avoided and listeners rely upon context to supply meaning.

English often uses “I” as a vocal crutch for each expressed idea of the speaker. Korean follows by the context of the sentence whether it is the speaker referring to his/his self or another individual. Also, Korean has honorific expressions for the personal pronoun “I” spoken as 나 *na* is the informal expression, and 저 *cho* is the humble form. Moreover, 저희 *johui* is the humble form of 우리 *uri* for the pronoun “we”. However, Korean language allows for coherent syntax without pronouns, effectively making Korean a so-called pro-drop language, thus Koreans usually avoid using the second-person singular pronoun, especially when using honorific forms. Third-Person Pronouns are occasionally avoided as well, mainly to maintain sense of politeness. Such usage of the personal pronoun reflects the various levels of speech.

The author found that the pronoun *우리 uri* for “we” or “our” based on context is used quite liberally by Koreans for nationalistic or patriotic purposes to unify cultural concepts through language. For example, the nation of Korea is called *우리 나라 uri-nara* or “our country” and the Korean language is often referred to as *우리말 uri-mal* or “our language/words”. Moreover, the author has discovered that by marrying a Korean that he inadvertently claimed an *우리 딸 uri-ttal* or “our daughter” for his spouse. The context that *우리 딸 uri-ttal* is spoken in reference to the idea that a “daughter of our land has been stolen”.

In many European languages there are two forms for the second personal pronoun. For example in French *tu* and *vous* and in Latin *tu* and *voi*. The former (T) is the familiar form and the later (V) is the polite form. In the past in Europe superiors spoke to inferiors in the non-polite form (T) and inferiors spoke to superiors in the polite form (V). This can be related to Korean with V corresponding to the *-입 니 다 ~imnida* form and the T the *-이다 ~ida* form. In both European languages and Korean by switching between the two different forms one can show inferiority or reverence, intimacy or formality. *-이다 ~ida* form is used for condescension or intimacy *-입 니 다 ~imnida* form is used for reverence or formality.

With the broadening use of the T form today there is a big difference in the range of use when comparing to the use of the non-polite form in Korean. For example T can be used for fellow students and co-workers. This can be contrasted to the narrow use of the non-polite form in Korean. In fact it is often in these same situations in Korean that the hierarchical system is adhered to. European languages also differ in that if there is no second person pronoun, a sentence is mutual, whereas a Korean sentence has to be expressed in either the polite or the non-polite form. Korean also differs in the honorifics can be used for a third party which is not possible in European languages.

Japanese follows the same pattern for formality. Plain form verbs are for condescension or intimacy

while *~ます ~masu* form verbs represent reverence or formality. After a noun, *だ da* used as the abridged form of *です desu* is considered colloquial and informal, whereas the *です desu* form is polite and reverent.

As one can see, the honorification process in Japanese and Korean are quite similar. In both languages, there are not only grammatical aspects to consider but also social aspects. When and what type of honorifics are appropriate to be used in given situations is based on sociological factors. The author acknowledges both the differences and similarities between Japanese and Korean honorification systems.

This article was written with the intent to fuel further study on the Korean language and to promote the Korean language program at Nagasaki Wesleyan University.

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