

# A Comparative Study of Honorifics in Chinese and Korean

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**Abstract.** As the core carrier of culture, language directly reflects the cultural characteristics and structures of its country. Given the geographical proximity of Korea and China and their shared Confucian cultural traditions, the languages of these two nations exhibit significant connections and comparable features. This paper delves into the similarities and unique aspects of honorifics in Chinese and Korean. By exploring the origins of honorifics in both languages, it conducts an in-depth comparative analysis to reveal their unique value in the transmission of linguistic civilization.

**Keywords:** Chinese, Korean, honorifics, comparative analysis

## 1. Introduction

In daily life, the way people express respect towards each other is known as honorifics. Using honorifics is an essential means to unify respect for others and oneself, and it represents a linguistic phenomenon that shows respect towards the listener or the subject involved [1]. Whether interpersonal feelings can be communicated effectively largely depends on the manner and emotion with which the interlocutors speak. Former Harvard University President Elite once said, "In the education of a cultivated person, one type of training is indispensable. That is, graceful and elegant conversation." Honorifics are a crucial component of refined conversation and are one of the basic elements essential for displaying the speaker's demeanor and charm. Chinese and Korean honorifics not only carry the essence of traditional cultures of China and Korea but also reflect various aspects of modern social life. Correctly understanding and mastering the honorifics of both China and Korea can not only ensure that language use achieves social communication goals but also help us deepen our understanding of the societies and cultures of the two countries.

## 2. Formation and Historical Evolution of Honorifics in Chinese and Korean

### 2.1. Formation and Evolution of Chinese Honorifics

Confucianism is the most important reason for the formation of honorifics in Chinese. Confucianism emphasizes the concept of "li" (礼), or ritual propriety, and many famous Confucian sayings always urge people to understand "li." Due to this historical background and feudal culture, the ideas of humility, respect for others, and self-deprecation have permeated various aspects of Chinese and Korean societies, speech behaviors, and ways of thinking since ancient times. Influenced by feudal etiquette and hierarchical systems, ancient Chinese was rich in complex honorifics and humble expressions. After the Xinhai Revolution and the May Fourth New Culture Movement, Western concepts of democracy and equality gradually permeated Chinese consciousness, shaking the dominant position of Confucianism. Consequently, vocabulary reflecting hierarchical concepts in speech activities gradually decreased. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, the already limited number of honorifics and humble expressions was further impacted. The subsequent Reform and Opening Up significantly transformed people's social lives and mindsets. Feudal-style honorifics lost their social and political foundation, and those based on hierarchical notions gradually faded from the historical stage. Thus, modern Chinese honorifics are far less varied than those of ancient times.

### 2.2. Formation and Evolution of Korean Honorifics

During the Warring States period, Confucian culture spread to the Korean Peninsula along with the introduction of Chinese characters. Despite the influx of Western learning in the late 18th century and Japanese colonial rule in the early 19th century, the

dominant position of Confucian thought remained unchanged. After Korea's liberation in 1945, the massive influx of Western culture prompted Korea to launch a cultural renaissance movement in the 1960s, aiming to promote traditional culture and integrate advanced Western culture. Confucian thought continued to be preserved and inherited in Korea. Therefore, Confucianism has never weakened in Korea and remains deeply rooted in the Korean mindset. The introduction of Confucian thought established strict relationships between leaders and subordinates, and Korean honorifics were formed within this socio-cultural context [2]. Today, the function of polite language in Korean has changed, transitioning from a behavioral rule to a moral norm. It has shifted from expressing hierarchical superiority to politeness and humility, aiming not to maintain hierarchical differences but to sustain interpersonal relationships and social harmony.

### 3. Structural Classification and Functional Comparison of Chinese and Korean Honorific Systems

#### 3.1. Lexical Honorifics

##### 3.1.1. Kinship Terms and General Nouns

In both Chinese and Korean, kinship terms and general nouns contain honorific morphemes such as “尊” (respect), “高” (high), “大” (great), “贵” (noble), “令” (esteemed), “芳” (fragrant), “玉” (jade), as well as humble morphemes like “小” (small), “家” (family), “拙” (clumsy), “愚” (foolish), and “敝” (humble). For example:

- 고 (高) — 고당 (高堂, esteemed parents), 고명 (高名, high reputation), 고견 (高见, high opinion)
- 귀 (贵) — 귀국 (贵国, your esteemed country), 귀빈 (贵宾, distinguished guest), 귀부인 (贵夫人, esteemed wife)
- 대 (大) — 대인 (大人, great person), 대국 (大国, great country), 대가 (大家, expert)
- 영 (令) — 영애 (令爱, esteemed daughter), 영부인 (令夫人, esteemed wife), 영제 (令弟, esteemed younger brother)
- 옥 (玉) — 옥체 (玉体, esteemed body), 옥필 (玉笔, fine brush), 옥안 (玉颜, esteemed face)
- 폐 (敝) — 폐사 (敝舍, my humble home)
- 절 (拙) — 졸작 (拙作, my clumsy work)
- 우 (愚) — 우견 (愚见, my humble opinion)
- 소 (小) — 소인 (小人, humble person)

In addition, Korean nouns also include honorific terms formed from native words, such as *진지* (饭, rice) and *말씀* (话语, words), as well as honorific terms composed of Chinese characters, such as *연세* (年龄, age), *생신* (生辰, birthday), and *성함* (姓衔, name). In modern Korean, these honorific kinship terms and general nouns derived from Chinese are borrowed from the Chinese language. The usage frequency of these honorific kinship terms and general nouns formed with these Chinese character morphemes in both Chinese and Korean is not high and is typically reserved for written language, such as in correspondence, or in formal occasions like diplomatic settings.

##### 3.1.2. Personal Pronouns

The honorific forms of personal pronouns in Chinese are very limited, with “您” (nín) being the most representative and typical polite expression among pronouns and the entire range of Chinese honorifics. Its plural form is “您几位” (nín jǐ wèi). Additionally, some other forms are still in use, such as “诸位” (zhū wèi), “各位” (gè wèi), and “列位” (liè wèi). “您” is often used instead of “你” (nǐ). In everyday life, “您” is commonly used by subordinates to superiors, strangers, children to elders, students to teachers, and servants to masters to show respect.

In contrast, Korean has a greater variety of honorific personal pronouns than Chinese. Chinese once had numerous forms for self-deprecation or humble self-references, such as “本人” (myself), “小人” (xiǎo rén), “小生” (xiǎo shēng), “小弟” (xiǎo dì), “愚弟” (yú dì), and “卑人” (bēi rén). These humble forms are now rarely used. In Korean, the honorific meaning in the first person is achieved through humble singular “저” (I) and plural “저희” (we). Compared to the first person, second and third person pronouns in Korean primarily use words that elevate the status of the other party and are relatively more active in actual use. It is worth mentioning that many scientific and grammar books translate the second person “당신” uniformly as “您” in Chinese, which is debatable. This is mainly because the levels and ranks in Korean have a certain influence on language, whereas in Chinese, this sense of hierarchy is weaker, reflecting a sense of equality [3]. The Chinese second person honorific “您” has a relatively straightforward meaning of respect, while the Korean second person pronoun “당신”, besides expressing respect in formal situations, is also frequently used between spouses or in arguments. Therefore, when translating, it is important to grasp the correct choice of Chinese words based on the context.

### 3.1.3. Verbs

In Chinese, there are many honorific verbs that contain honorific morphemes.

#### 3.1.3.1. Honorific Verbs Containing a Specific Honorific Morpheme

In Chinese, some morphemes inherently express honorific meanings, such as “贵” (noble), “高” (high), “大” (great), “拜” (bow), “惠” (favor), “玉” (jade), “奉” (offer), “光” (light), “谨” (respectfully), “请” (please), and “垂” (bestow). Honorific expressions containing these morphemes are commonly found in phrases like “贵庚” (your esteemed age), “贵姓” (your esteemed surname), “贵方” (your esteemed side), “高龄” (advanced age), “高寿” (longevity), “高见” (your valuable opinion), “大名” (your name), “大寿” (your grand birthday), “拜读” (to respectfully read), “拜访” (to respectfully visit), “拜托” (to entrust respectfully), “惠书” (your kind letter), “惠顾” (your kind patronage), “惠赠” (your kind gift), “玉手” (your jade-like hand), “玉体” (your body), “玉照” (your photograph), “奉陪” (to accompany respectfully), “奉劝” (to advise respectfully), “奉还” (to return respectfully), “光临” (your presence), “光顾” (your visit), “谨祝” (to respectfully wish), “谨献” (to respectfully offer), “谨悉” (to respectfully acknowledge), “垂怜” (to bestow pity), “垂问” (to bestow inquiry), “垂询” (to bestow inquiry), “请进” (please come in), “请坐” (please sit), “请教” (to respectfully ask for advice).

#### 3.1.3.2. Honorific Vocabulary

In modern Chinese, the most commonly used and widely applicable honorifics are vocabulary items like “借问” (may I ask), “敬礼” (salute), “海涵” (forgive), “包涵” (forgive), “鼎立” (support), “呈献” (present), “领教” (learn from), “恭喜” (congratulations), “效劳” (serve), “厚爱” (your kind affection), “幸会” (pleased to meet you), “久仰” (long admired), “莅临” (attend), “承蒙” (receive kindly), “恩师” (respected teacher). These terms are frequently used in various contexts.

#### 3.1.3.3. Honorific Phrases

Honorific phrases usually appear as word groups that express honorific meanings. These phrases include “金口玉言” (golden words), “尊姓大名” (your esteemed name), “贵姓高名” (your esteemed surname), “洗耳恭听” (to listen respectfully), “拜读大作” (to respectfully read your work), “高抬贵手” (to ask for mercy), “承蒙错爱” (to receive misplaced affection), “仰吞玉言” (to respectfully accept advice).

In Korean, most verbs with the honorific suffix “—시” are native verbs and are used to show respect; verbs without the honorific suffix “—시” are also mostly native verbs used to express humility or deference. Some basic Korean verbs have fixed forms for honoring others, humbling oneself, and belittling others. These forms are mostly native words. Korean honorifics include forms for belittling others, while Chinese only uses forms for honoring others and humbling oneself. For example:

To respect	To belittle, to humble oneself
먹다, 잡수(시)다, 드시다	처먹다(informal, derogatory)
죽다, 세상뜨다, 돌아가시다	튀지다(informal, derogatory)
말하다, 말씀하시다	지껄이다(informal, derogatory), 말씀드리다(humble form)
묻다	여쭙다, 아뢰다(humble form)
주다	드리다, 올리다(humble form)
데리다	모시다, 배행하다(humble form)

From these examples, we can see that many basic Korean verbs’ honorific forms are composed with the honorific suffix “—시,” while the belittling and humble forms generally do not contain the suffix “—시.” However, within these native honorific verbs, the degree of combination between the suffix “—시” and other morphemes varies. In verbs like “계시다”, “주무시다”, “잡수시다”, and “모시다”, “—시” is tightly integrated with the internal morphemes, forming a single unit. In verbs like “웃으시다”, “보시다”, “오시다”, and “가시다”, the combination of the non-honorific forms “웃다”, “보다”, “오다”, and “가다” with “—시” is less tight.

### 3.2. Grammatical Honorifics

Chinese polite expressions lack grammatical forms and are not as prominent as those in Korean. Therefore, this section will only analyze the grammatical forms of Korean honorifics. These are primarily expressed through sentence endings and are divided into subject honorifics, object honorifics, and listener honorifics [4]. The characteristic of Korean honorific grammatical forms is that respect is shown through honorifics, not through humbling oneself.

#### 3.2.1. Sentence Endings

Sentence endings appear at the end of sentences to indicate completion. Honorifics can be achieved through sentence endings. The Korean dialogue system is divided into speech levels: to superiors, equals, and subordinates, using different sentence endings for each. In sentences addressed to superiors, honorific sentence endings are used, such as:

Declarative:

-ㅂ니다/습니다, -아요/어요/여요, -지요, -르래요

Interrogative:

-ㅂ니까/습니까, -아요/어요/여요, -르까요, -르래요

Imperative:

-십시오/으십시오, -아요/어요/여요, -세요/으세요

Prepositive:

-ㅂ시다/읍시다, -아요/어요/여요

#### 3.2.2. Subject Honorifics

Subject honorifics are a special speech construction that emphasizes respect for the action performer within a sentence. The expression changes based on the social relationship between the speaker and the listener. Respect for individuals often varies due to factors such as age, social rank, and intimacy. For example:

Honorific: 교수님께서 연구실에 계신다 (The professor is in the lab).

Non-honorific: 친구가 도서관에 있다 (My friend is in the library).

The professor is the subject performing the action. When the professor's age or social status is higher than that of the speaker, the speaker must use honorific forms. Therefore, "계신다" with a respectful nuance is used instead of the simple existential verb "있다" used in "My friend is in the library." The nominative particle also changes from "가/이" to the honorific form "께서" to show respect.

#### 3.2.3. Object Honorifics

The core of object honorifics lies in expressing deep respect for the esteemed object by transforming it into the object in the subject's expression. When the subject faces an object worthy of high respect, this is usually reflected in the predicate through the use of humble terms to show respect. For example:

Honorific: 동생은 엄마께 생일 선물을 드렸다. (My sister gave a birthday gift to our mother.)

Non-honorific: 친구들이 나에게 생일 선물을 주었다. (My friends gave me a birthday gift.)

In the sentence "동생은 엄마께 생일 선물을 드렸다" (My sister gave a birthday gift to our mother), "동생" is the subject performing the action, and "엄마" is the object receiving the action from the subject. Although "엄마" is not the direct actor, the action's object is an elder, so the honorific dative particle "께" and the honorific verb "드리다" are used. In contrast, in the sentence "친구들이 나에게 생일 선물을 주었다" (My friends gave me a birthday gift), the action receiver "나" and the action performers "친구들" are of equal status, so the non-honorific dative particle "에게" and the verb "주다" are used.

#### 3.2.4. Listener Honorifics

This aspect expresses the speaker's respect for the listener and the degree of intimacy. Listener honorifics are generally divided into six levels: "하쇼체," "하오체," "하게체," "해라체," "해체," and "해요체." "하쇼체" is used in the highest respect situations, "하오체" in general respectful situations, "하게체" in casual yet respectful situations, "해라체" in the least respectful situations, "해체" in casual or least respectful contexts, and "해요체" can be used in highly respectful or generally respectful situations.

하쇼체 is the highest level of respect, suitable for highly respectful scenarios like addressing elders, superiors, or other situations requiring utmost respect.

하오체 is used in generally respectful yet somewhat informal contexts, suitable for familiar peer interactions or seniors addressing juniors in a friendly but not overly formal manner.

하계체 is used in familiar yet respectful relationships, often seen in peer interactions and seniors speaking informally to juniors.

해라체 is the least formal and respectful, suitable for informal scenarios without strict etiquette, covering interactions between seniors and juniors, or casual exchanges among peers.

“하쇼체”, “하오체”, “하계체”, “해라체” are used ceremoniously, characterized by directness and objectivity, hence they belong to the formal style. “해체”, “해요체” are used informally without honorifics, characterized by naturalness and subjectivity, hence they belong to the informal style.

#### 4. Reasons for the Differences in Honorifics between Chinese and Korean

China and Korea, as Eastern nations sharing the tradition of Chinese characters and deeply influenced by Confucian ideals, each possess unique systems of honorifics. However, despite originating from the same cultural roots, the use of honorifics in these two countries displays notable differences. Korean honorifics exhibit a rich diversity, whereas Chinese polite expressions appear more limited in comparison. Korean honorifics encompass a wide range of vocabulary forms and intricate grammatical structures, providing diverse and nuanced expressions. In contrast, Chinese honorifics are primarily reflected at the lexical level, with relatively limited honorific vocabulary in actual use. Fundamentally, the disparity in the use of honorifics between Chinese and Korean stems from the unique linguistic characteristics of each language.

From a synchronic perspective, languages with an SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) structure tend to lack rich morphological markers, preferring to express various grammatical features analytically. In contrast, languages predominantly featuring an SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) structure often possess complex morphological systems, relying on morphological changes to convey rich grammatical features. Chinese, categorized as an isolating language, has relatively stable lexical forms that seldom change with context. On the other hand, Korean is classified as an agglutinative language [5], with highly flexible lexical forms that dynamically change with sentence structure. Korean adjusts word suffixes according to different occasions and communication partners. The diversity of vocabulary and the richness of suffixes are key factors in the development of Korean honorifics.

#### 5. Conclusion

Language and culture are inseparable; they are deeply rooted in specific ethnic cultures, and no language can exist independently of its rich cultural background. Despite the longstanding cultural exchanges between China and Korea, unique historical, geographical, and natural factors have shaped their distinct cultural characteristics. Consequently, Chinese and Korean exhibit significant differences in the use of honorifics. A thorough comparison and analysis of Chinese and Korean honorifics, exploring their similarities, differences, and respective formation backgrounds, undoubtedly enhance our understanding and ability to accurately use these two languages in relevant contexts.

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