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THE CODE OF POLITENESS WITHIN THE KOREAN FAMILY

ALIMOVA DILBAR
Lecturer
Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
e-mail: alimovad123@gmail.com

Abstract: The article analyzes the concept of linguistic politeness within the Korean family as a reflection of Confucian values and social hierarchy. It provides a detailed description of address forms used for parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses, as well as in-laws. Special attention is given to grammatical and lexical markers of respect (honorifics, the suffix -nim, special verb forms), age hierarchy among siblings, and gender aspects of address. The article also traces modern trends in the evolution of family etiquette: the shift from the traditional extended family to the nuclear family, the rise of egalitarianism in spousal communication, and the softening of strict patriarchal norms. The material will be useful for linguists, cultural studies scholars, Korean language teachers, and anyone interested in Korean culture.

Keywords: Korean language, politeness, family relations, honorifics, address forms, age hierarchy, Confucianism.

Inside the family, behind the shelter of its walls, the Korean language does not become simpler – on the contrary, it is here that the system of politeness reveals itself in all its complexity and depth. In the family, only younger members are usually called by their first names; the main form of address is the respectful form of kinship terms. This sphere is governed by its own code of respect, shaped by Confucian principles that make elders and those of higher social standing the unshakable centres of hierarchy.

Politeness in the family is its foundation. At its core lies the Confucian system of the "five relationships" (오륜, onyun): it prescribes that between father and son there should be love, between husband and wife – attention to their respective roles, and between older and younger – a strict order. These ethical laws permeate every exchange of words, determining the dynamics within each family dialogue.

At the heart of this system are two pillars: the concept of filial piety (효도, hyodo), which demands absolute respect for parents and care for them, and the patriarchal structure, in which power and inheritance pass through the male line.

To understand how these values manifest in practice, we need to examine sequentially all the key roles and their reflection in language – from the most respected elders to those whose status is the most vulnerable.

1. Addressing Parents (부모님): The Foundation of Family Hierarchy

The linguistic model of relationships with parents in Korea is undergoing evolution, but still demonstrates the depth of Confucian respect:

Levels of politeness: There are standard respectful and familiar variants. It is important to remember that first-name address borrowed from Western etiquette, when used for parents or older relatives, is considered unacceptably rude.

Abeoji / Eomeoni (아버지 / 어머니): These are respectful and formal addresses ("father" / "mother"). Children who use these forms with their parents often demonstrate special deference and distance.

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Appa / Eomma (아빠 / 엄마): These are informal and affectionate addresses ("dad" / "mom"), widely used within the family and showing attachment and comfort in the relationship.

Bumo-nim (부모님): Used to refer to both parents as a couple, emphasising their joint significance, authority and high status.

Honorifics in action: When speaking about parents to outsiders, special honorific verbs and vocabulary are obligatory: (이)시다, as well as special words for exalting – for example, 성함 (name), 연세 (age) and 댁 (house), as well as 계시다 (to be located).

2. Grandparents (조부모님) and Aunts & Uncles

The Korean system clearly illustrates the difference between blood relatives and relatives by marriage, requiring the use of special respectful forms – especially when addressing the older generations.

Note: the suffix -님 turns an ordinary word into a deeply respectful one:

할아버지 → 할아버님: A respectful title for addressing a grandfather or an elderly man, symbolising reverence and hierarchy.

할머니 → 할머님: A respectful address for a grandmother or an elderly woman.

외할아버지 / 외할머니: The addition of 외 indicates belonging to the maternal line, which is obligatory for specifying kinship.

The same principle applies to uncles and aunts: if relatives on the mother's side are distinguished by the prefix 외- (외삼촌 – mother's brother), then relations on the father's side require gradation by seniority, not only by kinship. An uncle – the father's elder brother (큰아버지) and the father's younger brother (작은아버지) – receives different forms of address depending on his position and age relative to the father.

3. Address Between Brothers and Sisters (형제자매)

Age hierarchy is most clearly manifested in the language of siblings. Koreans cannot speak about brothers and sisters without indicating whether the person is older or younger than the speaker:

If you are… Your address Term Pronunciation

Male to older brother 형 hyeong

Male to older sister 누나 nuna

Female to older brother 오빠 oppa

Female to older sister 언니 eonni

Anyone to younger sibling 동생 dongsaeng

These terms extend far beyond the biological family, serving as universal markers of closeness, hierarchy and age in Korean society.

4. Spousal Addresses

The traditional model of family hierarchy prescribed the absolute "suppression" of the wife's personality before the husband, which was reflected in language: the husband was expected to use humbling forms for his wife (manura), while the wife was expected to use honourific words that exalted her husband.

Modern Korean shows a shift from traditional, hierarchical forms of address to more egalitarian ones, reflecting changes in society over the past 70 years:

Yobo (여보): The classic, universal address "darling". It is the only surviving bidirectional address, which, according to mass-media research, appeared in the post-colonial period and signals intimacy based on the notion of close distance.

Jagi (자기): Something like "my other half" or "sweetheart". Most often used in intimate romantic relationships and considered very affectionate and modern.

Proper name + -ssi: Reflects growing egalitarianism in contemporary Korean society, as spouses address each other by name with the addition of the neutrally polite suffix -ssi.

5. The Complex World of In-Laws (인척)

The situation of entering the husband's family has traditionally been the most delicate, and therefore the most strictly regulated. Each type of relative has a strictly defined name.

Even though the wife is not a blood relative of the husband's family, she is obliged to use exclusively polite forms of address and employ special honorifics:

The highly respectful -님 (e.g., 시아버님 for father-in-law) is an almost obligatory component of speech.

There are different forms for the husband's elder brother (아주버님) and the husband's younger brother (시동생).

6. Politeness Rules for Children

Children learn the rules of politeness from an early age; these depend largely on the particular family and vary from very strict to more relaxed.

The language itself clearly demonstrates this: if grown-up children continue to use 아버지 / 어머니, this emphasises a respectful distance. At the same time, the widely used 아빠 / 엄마 among the younger generation may indicate warmer and closer relationships where formality has already been overcome. This choice of words within the same family is a subtle indicator of its internal atmosphere.

7. Hierarchy in the Extended Family

The traditional large Korean family (대가족) was governed by strict rules codified in the language:

· Status of the first-born son (맏아들): Traditionally, the eldest son had the greatest authority among the children, as he inherited the headship of the family. This went so far that even older sisters were not allowed to use informal speech when addressing him.

Status of the eldest son's wife (맏며느리): The position of the eldest son's wife was particularly significant but also the most burdensome, as the main load of caring for the mother-in-law and performing rituals fell on her.

The daughter-in-law's code: The daughter-in-law had to use maximally polite forms with everyone in the family who was above her in status, creating a powerful linguistic pressure, especially if the family was conservative.

8. Modern Changes and Evolution of the System

Contemporary Korean society is not static; under the influence of globalisation and social shifts, family communication is undergoing serious changes, softening some traditional aspects:

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Erosion of the extended family: The shift to the nuclear family has led to many formal addresses typical of the extended family gradually falling out of use.

Gender shift: Women are increasingly rejecting humiliating labels like ajumma, preferring other, more neutral or status-based forms of address.

Egalitarianism: Increasingly, spouses and siblings communicate on equal terms, using first names and less formal speech levels, reflecting a general decrease of hierarchy in everyday life.

Conclusion

Linguistic politeness in the Korean family is not an archaic ritual but a living, breathing organism. It reflects a deep cultural code based on Confucian ethics and respect for hierarchy and age. Despite the rapid modernisation of society, these linguistic norms continue to shape Korean identity, and this deep foundation of respect, encoded in every word, remains the basis for building harmonious and strong family relationships in Korea.