

Honorific Language Use and Family Harmony in Korean Households: A Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

The Korean language is characterized by a complex and systematic honorific speech system, which encodes respect and social hierarchy directly into grammatical and lexical forms. While honorific speech has traditionally played a central role in sustaining hierarchical order in formal institutions such as schools and workplaces, its function within the family, an environment oriented toward intimacy rather than hierarchy, remains contested. This study investigates whether the use of honorific speech in the family setting is associated with perceived family harmony or emotional distance among Korean adolescents. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 210 participants aged 10 to 24 in South Korea. Honorific speech usage frequency and perceptions of family harmony were measured using self-report scales assessing respect, communication quality, conflict resolution, and emotional support. The results indicate that a supermajority of respondents (71.9%) reported using honorific speech when addressing elder family members. This prevalence coincided with consistently high agreement across family harmony indicators, including respect toward parents, emotional support, and effective conflict resolution. Notably, frequent honorific use was not associated with lower intimacy; rather, the findings suggest a positive association between honorific speech and perceptions of harmonious family relationships. Taken together, these findings challenge the assumption that linguistic formality necessarily undermines emotional closeness in the home. Instead, they suggest that honorific speech may function as a culturally grounded mechanism that supports respectful communication and relational stability within contemporary Korean families.

Keywords: Honorifics; harmony; family relationships; parenting style; hierarchy; confucianism; sociolinguistics; sociopsychology

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid global expansion of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in the 21st century (1), international interest

in the Korean language has grown rapidly. Korean is no longer used exclusively by native speakers but has become a transnational language actively employed in digital spaces, such as online communities and comment sections surrounding Korean cultural content (2). Among the linguistic features attracting particular attention, the Korean honorific system stands out as especially distinctive. Unlike languages such as English or Chinese, where politeness is primarily conveyed through pragmatic tone or indirectness, Korean encodes respect and social relations directly into its grammatical and lexical system

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through systematic honorific markers (3, 4).

Rooted in Confucian traditions, Korean honorifics have historically played a central role in structuring hierarchical relationships, particularly in institutional contexts such as schools and workplaces (5). Within these settings, honorific speech functions as a linguistic mechanism for maintaining order, authority, and role differentiation. However, the family setting presents a fundamentally different communicative environment. Unlike formal institutions, families are not oriented toward hierarchy as an end in itself, but toward emotional cohesion, mutual support, and long-term relational stability.

As a result, honorific practices within families vary widely. In some households, children are expected to consistently use honorific speech toward parents and elders as an expression of respect and filial duty. In others, parents explicitly encourage the use of informal speech to promote intimacy, equality, and open communication. Neither practice is inherently superior; rather, both reflect differing cultural values and parental worldviews regarding respect, authority, and emotional closeness.

Scholars have long emphasized that Korean honorifics function not merely as grammatical forms, but as social tools for negotiating hierarchy, relational distance, and interpersonal norms (5, 6). Traditional sociolinguistic perspectives associate honorific speech within the family with the preservation of respect and harmony between generations, viewing linguistic deference as a stabilizing force that reinforces collective cohesion (7).

At the same time, the sociolinguistic landscape of Korean families has undergone substantial change. Studies have documented a gradual decline in rigid honorific speech usage among younger generations, even in interactions with grandparents, which were once governed by the strictest linguistic norms (8). These shifts have been attributed to broader social transformations, including modernization, the transition toward nuclear family structures, increased exposure to global media, and the growing influence of egalitarian values within the private sphere.

Beyond sociolinguistics, psychological research provides important insights into how honorific speech may influence relational dynamics. Although direct studies on intergenerational family relationships remain limited, parallel research in romantic relationships offers relevant implications. Choi and Jung (9) found that the use of honorific speech during romantic conflicts was associated with lower anger, greater cognitive reappraisal, and higher relationship satisfaction. Their

mediation analysis suggested that honorific speech facilitates emotional self-regulation by inducing psychological distance, thereby reducing impulsive emotional expression.

Related psychological research has similarly shown that linguistic distancing can dampen emotional reactivity and promote reflective processing (10). In the Korean cultural context, honorifics align with long-standing emotional display rules that emphasize restraint and respect in hierarchical relationships (11, 12). Within families, consistent honorific use may function as a buffer during conflict by signaling continued respect despite disagreement, thereby preventing escalation. Conversely, unexpected shifts into informal speech during tense interactions may be interpreted as challenges to authority or breaches of respect, particularly by older family members.

Despite these theoretical and empirical insights, a clear gap remains in the literature. Much of the existing research on honorific speech and relational outcomes focuses on romantic partners, where power relations are assumed to be relatively equal, rather than on intergenerational family relationships, where hierarchy is structurally embedded. Empirical studies examining how honorific norms operate within contemporary Korean households—particularly those negotiating between traditional authority and modern egalitarian values—are scarce. Furthermore, some findings suggest that relaxed speech norms may, in certain contexts, enhance intimacy rather than undermine harmony (13), indicating that the relationship between honorific use and family well-being is likely non-linear and highly context-dependent.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the relationship between honorific speech use and family harmony in contemporary Korean households. By integrating sociolinguistic perspectives with social psychological theory and survey data from actual language users, this research examines whether and how honorific speech within the family is associated with perceived relationship quality, communication effectiveness, and emotional cohesion. Through this approach, the study aims to clarify the role of linguistic formality in shaping family harmony in a rapidly changing cultural context.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Study Design

To investigate the relationship between honorific speech and family harmony, this study employed a

quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This approach was selected to efficiently gather self-reported data from a broad sample of the target population, allowing for an analysis of the relationship between linguistic factors and the emotional responses within a household. The survey instrument was developed by synthesizing conceptual frameworks and measurement approaches drawn from existing literature on family communication, parenting styles, and sociolinguistic norms, and was adapted to reflect the specific cultural and linguistic context of Korean honorific speech usage.

Participants

The target population for this research was ‘young people’ in South Korea, defined according to World Health Organization (WHO) standards as individuals aged between 10 to 24. The sample consisted of 210 participants (n = 210) residing in South Korea. In terms of gender composition, 66.7% (n = 140) identified as female and 33.3% (n = 70) as male. The age distribution was heavily concentrated in the mid-to-late adolescent range (15–19 years), accounting for 92.9% of the sample. Early adolescents (10–14 years) and young adults (20–24 years) represented 2.9% and 4.3% of the total, respectively. All participants were students currently enrolled in middle school, high school, or university. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling through online platforms and a specific high school in South Korea. While the geographic background was not explicitly tracked for every respondent, the recruitment through a standardized secondary school suggests a predominantly suburban sample. Participation was voluntary, and no personally identifiable information was collected (Table 1).

Measures

The first section assessed the independent variable, the use of honorific speech, using a scale measuring the frequency and consistency of honorific use towards parents and other adults. The second section measured the dependent variable which is family harmony, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). This scale was designed to quantify the participants’ subjective perception of family harmony.

The first question, “I get along well with my parents,” was designed as a direct question assessing the respondent’s experience of their own family harmony, rather than being framed as an indirect question. Because this question asks respondents to make a direct evaluation of family harmony, it allows respondents to understand what it means to measure, thus increasing accuracy and reliability (14). The second question, “I respect my parents,” along with question one, was designed from the point of view of the adolescent, which would be conceptualized as a unidirectional relationship originating from the adolescent towards the parents. This reflects that a part of a successful family relationship involves a certain amount of mutuality—it’s not just that parents are showing their respect for a child, but also that a child expresses their respect in return (15). The third question, “I feel recognized by my parents,” reverses the order, assessing the relationship from the parental perspective towards the adolescent. While question 2 asked how well a child respects a parent, question 3 asked how well a parent respects a child from a different wording perspective. Taken together, a series of questions were used in this study that aimed to test how well respect is reciprocal between a parent and a child. There are twelve questions in total that are

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n=210).

Characteristics	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	140	66.7%
	Male	70	33.3%
Age	10-14	6	2.9%
	15-19	195	92.9%
	20-24	9	4.3%
Education	Secondary/Higher Education	210	100%
Geography	Predominantly suburban	—	—

divided into four different topic areas: reciprocal respect, communication, conflict resolution and recovery, and support and reassurance, with the first three questions falling under reciprocal respect.

Items 4 through 6 relate to communication quality and quantity between parents and children. Item 4, "I frequently see and talk with my parents," was used to examine communication frequency. Although communication technology has been widespread, evidence from previous literature suggests that face-to-face communication has a distinctiveness in quality that differentiates it from other types of communication, hence requiring it to be distinctively identified in a survey (16). Item 5, "I frequently communicate with my parents," was used as a means of taking into consideration different residential conditions among most contemporary adolescents, for example, those staying in college dorms or those in extra-curricular activities, where a low score in Item 4 might indicate a lack of proximity rather than a lack of closeness (17). Item 6, "My family communicates well with one another," changes the emphasis from quantity to quality. A family can communicate frequently, but even then, communication can be ineffective and ridden with conflict. Therefore, this particular item was used as a test of personal perception of effective communication, allowing subjects to determine if communication in their family promotes understanding rather than merely happening a lot (18).

Questions 7 to 9 aimed to analyze the resolution of conflicts and recovery of relationships between parents and children. The seventh question, "After conflicts, I reconcile with my parents quickly," was used to measure avoidance patterns after conflicts. Avoidant relationships may result in putting off reconciliation, or pretending that the conflict was never there in the first place (19). Quick reconciliation is a sign of a healthy relationship as it demonstrates emotional maturity and helps preserve the emotional bond between family members. The eighth question, "My opinions are often ignored when there is a disagreement," was asked to measure the respect that the children felt their parents gave them. In Confucianist societies, respect towards elders is highlighted, but this often leads to the neglect of mutual respect or the justification of an elder looking down on those deemed younger than them (20). This aligns with the concept of "Authoritarian Filial Piety," where the focus is on obedience and hierarchy rather than the "Reciprocal Filial Piety" found in emotionally bonded relationships (21). A high score in this category would indicate that parents in these families respond authoritatively in conflicting

situations, often putting down opinions of their children simply because they are their children. A low score, on the other hand, would signify the mutual respect between parents and children, indicating a higher level of family harmony. The ninth item, "My family resolves problems through discussion together," is placed to gain a sense of cohesion and cooperation in families, which are crucial for harmony. This question serves as a gauge for 'communicative openness' within the household. A high agreement rate here suggests that the family values procedural justice where the child's voice is heard, and not asking for mere compliance. Consequently, this item distinguishes between families that enforce peace through silence or authority versus those that achieve genuine harmony through active negotiation and shared decision-making. It tests the hypothesis that true family cohesion relies not just on the absence of conflict, but on the presence of family harmony.

The purpose of questions 10 through 12 was to assess the assistance and support provided to children by their parents. Item 10, "I feel I can count on my parents for emotional support," was designed to evaluate the degree of secure attachment the adolescent feels towards the parents. In a culture heavily influenced by formality, there is a valid concern that children may respect their parents but not feel emotionally safe with them (21). A positive response here counters the notion of cold authority, suggesting that the vertical structure of honorific speech does not preclude emotional safety, but reinforces the parents' role as a consistent source of support. Question 11, "The members of our family share our daily activities and worries comfortably," shifts the focus from crisis support to routine communicative openness. While the previous item measures reliability during major emotional events, this question assesses the atmosphere of the daily household. It assesses whether the use of honorific speech creates a perceived lack of spontaneity where only important matters are discussed, or if it allows for the casual, trivial sharing that creates healthy bonds between family members. A high score for this question would indicate that formal speech does not act as a filter that blocks the natural flow of daily life, proving that structure and comfort are not mutually exclusive. Finally, the twelfth item, "My parents use a tone of empathy and consideration while conversing with me," was crucial for examining the reciprocity of respect. Since honorifics are typically an upward obligation, as mentioned above, there is a risk of the relationship feeling one-sided. This question measures whether parents reciprocate the linguistic deference they receive with

affective deference, using a tone that respects the child’s personhood even if the parent uses informal speech. This item tests the hypothesis that family harmony relies less on the grammatical symmetry of speech and more on the emotional symmetry of the interaction; essentially, it asks whether the parents’ attitude justifies the children’s honorifics.

Data Collection and Quality Control

The survey was developed and hosted using Google Forms. Data collection was conducted over a fourteen-day period, during which participants were briefed on the study’s purpose and provided informed consent. To protect respondent privacy, no personally identifiable information was collected.

Recruitment was carried out through targeted social media outreach, specifically via KakaoTalk student groups and Instagram, to reach the desired adolescent demographic. Upon the closing of the survey, a manual screening of all 210 submissions was performed to ensure data integrity. This process involved reviewing responses for completeness and checking for ‘straight-lining,’ which is the repetitive selection of identical numerical responses, or nonsensical open-ended entries. No responses were excluded during this screening, as all participants provided complete and coherent data that met the study’s inclusion criteria.

The finalized data were compiled and analyzed using Google Sheets. The analysis focused on descriptive statistics to summarize participant characteristics and comparative analysis to evaluate the relationship between honorific speech use and family harmony.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted under the institutional supervision of faculty at the Hankuk Academy of Foreign Studies. The research protocol and survey instrument were reviewed by a faculty advisor to ensure they met ethical standards for research involving human participants. Given that the study utilized an anonymous survey posing minimal risk and collected no personally identifiable information, it was conducted in accordance with the criteria for IRB exemption for educational research. For participants under the age of 18, recruitment relied on the existing age-verification and parental-oversight terms of the social media platforms used to distribute the surveys. All data were analyzed in aggregate to ensure participant confidentiality and prevent the identification of any individual respondent.

RESULTS

Honorific Speech Use at Home

A substantial majority of respondents reported using honorific speech when addressing elder family members. Specifically, 71.9% indicated that they use honorific speech toward parents, grandparents, or guardians, exceeding the conventional threshold for a supermajority (66.7%). As shown in Figure 1, honorific speech frequency was skewed toward regular rather than occasional use.

Among honorific users, the most common response categories were “always” (31.2%) and “often” (30.6%), together accounting for over 60% of respondents, whereas less frequent use (“sometimes” and “rarely”) comprised a smaller share. Taken together, these results indicate that honorific speech is not only widely adopted but also consistently maintained within family interactions.

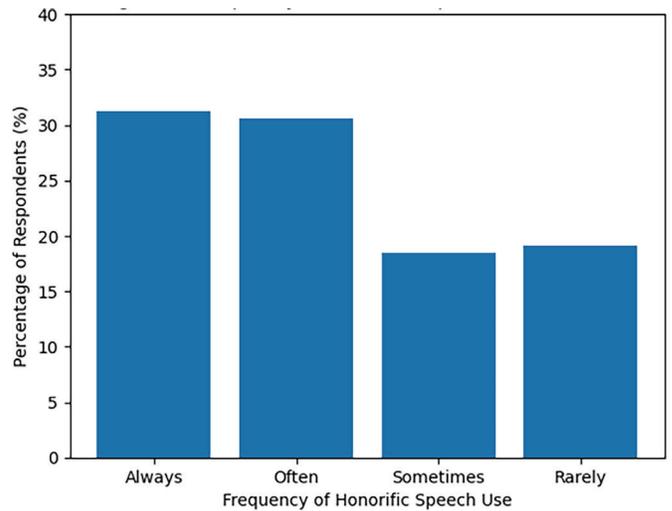


Figure 1. Frequency of Honorific Speech Use at Home. Distribution of respondents’ self-reported frequency of honorific speech use when addressing elder family members. The x-axis indicates frequency categories (“Always,” “Often,” “Sometimes,” “Rarely”), and the y-axis represents the percentage of respondents (%). All labels and values are presented in English.

Family Harmony and Parent–Child Relationships

Family harmony was assessed using a 12-item Likert-scale battery measuring relational quality, communication, conflict resolution, and emotional support (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Item

Q8 (“My opinions are often ignored when there is a disagreement”) was reverse-coded prior to analysis so that higher values consistently reflected higher perceived family harmony. Reverse coding was performed using the transformation $6 - \text{original score}$.

To reduce repetitive narrative reporting, Figure 2 summarizes the proportion of respondents endorsing each family-harmony item at an agreement level (≥ 4). Across nearly all items, responses were strongly skewed toward agreement, indicating generally positive parent-child relationships. High levels of agreement were particularly evident for respect toward parents, emotional support, and conflict resolution.

For quantitative analysis, a composite family harmony score was calculated by averaging responses across all 12 items following reverse coding. This composite measure demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .916$), indicating that the items reliably captured a unified construct of perceived family harmony.

were defined as respondents who reported using honorific speech “always” or “often” ($n = 98$), whereas low honorific users included those who reported using honorifics “sometimes” or “rarely” ($n = 59$).

An independent-samples t-test comparing composite family harmony scores revealed that high honorific users reported slightly higher perceived family harmony ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.77$) than low honorific users ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.71$). However, this difference was not statistically significant, $t(155) = 0.53$, $p = 0.60$ (Table 2).

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test for Family Harmony by Honorific Usage. Note: *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *df* = degrees of freedom. Significance level $\alpha = 0.05$.

Group	n	M	SD	t	df	p
High Honorific Use	98	4.06	0.77	0.53	155	0.60
Low Honorific Use	59	4.00	0.71			

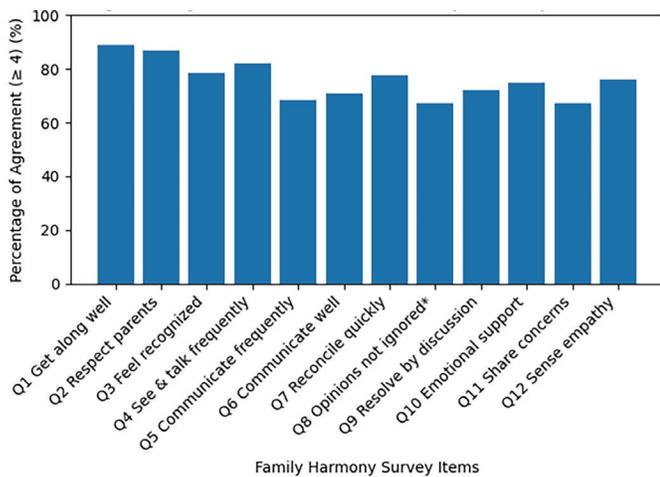


Figure 2. Agreement Levels Across Family Harmony Indicators. Percentage of respondents selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” for each family-harmony item. The x-axis lists survey items (Q1–Q12), and the y-axis indicates the percentage of agreement (%). Item Q8 was reverse-coded prior to analysis. All axis labels, units, and textual elements are presented in English.

Honorific Use Frequency and Composite Family Harmony

To further examine the relationship between honorific use and perceived family harmony, participants were divided into two groups based on their reported frequency of honorific speech. High honorific users

These findings indicate that although frequent honorific use is descriptively associated with higher perceived family harmony, the magnitude of this difference is modest. Accordingly, the results support an associational, rather than causal, interpretation of the relationship between honorific speech use and family harmony.

Perceived Relationship Between Honorific Use and Family Harmony

In a final subjective item, participants were asked whether honorific speech contributes to family harmony. In addition to fixed-response options, 204 respondents provided open-ended comments elaborating on their views. These qualitative responses were not subjected to a formal qualitative coding or thematic analysis; instead, they are presented as illustrative examples to contextualize the quantitative findings.

To ensure transparency, quotations referenced in the manuscript were selected based on recurrence and frequency of themes, rather than representativeness or analytical weighting. The most frequently mentioned perspectives emphasized contextual factors such as family culture, communication style, and tone, with several respondents noting that respect may be conveyed without honorifics and that the quality of interaction may outweigh linguistic formality alone. These recurring remarks suggest that honorific speech is often interpreted flexibly within families and may function differently

depending on relational norms and situational context.

Importantly, these open-ended responses are not treated as systematic qualitative evidence but as supplementary reflections that help illustrate how adolescents interpret honorific use in everyday family interactions. When considered alongside the quantitative results—namely, the widespread use of honorific speech (Figure 1), the high composite family harmony scores, and the absence of a statistically significant difference between high and low honorific users—the findings collectively point to a positive but context-dependent association between honorific use and perceived family harmony, while stopping short of establishing causality.

DISCUSSION

The Correlation Between Linguistic Formality and Family Harmony

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationship between the use of honorific speech and the perception of family harmony among Korean adolescents. The results indicate a significant supermajority (71.9%) of participants use honorifics with elder family members, a finding that coincides with high scores across family harmony indices, which included measures of respect, recognition, and reconciliation. This correlation challenges the prevalent modern narrative that equates formality with emotional coldness. Contrary to the assumption that linguistic formality might create emotional distance or rigidity, these findings suggest that honorific speech does not preclude intimacy. Rather, it appears to facilitate a structural framework where respect and affection can coexist.

The data imply that the use of honorifics establishes a stable ‘relational floor’, a baseline of mutual regard that persists even when emotions run high. The fact that a substantial majority of respondents reported resolving problems through discussion suggests that linguistic formality may encourage a more measured, deliberative communication style during conflicts. Instead of shutting down communication, the formal register may help prevent the escalation of casual disagreements into disrespectful arguments. In this sense, honorific speech may function less as a barrier to intimacy and more as a structural constraint that maintains respectful boundaries during family interactions.

Parenting Styles and the Function of Honorifics

To understand why honorifics correlate with harmony, it is useful to view these linguistic norms

through the lens of Baumrind’s parenting styles (22). While strict honorific enforcement is often associated with authoritarian parenting—characterized by high demands and low responsiveness—the high harmony scores observed in this study are more consistent with an authoritative model. Authoritative parenting combines clear expectations with warmth and open communication, allowing boundaries to be maintained without emotional distance.

Within such households, honorifics likely function not as a tool of suppression or dominance, but as a mechanism for establishing healthy relational boundaries. Language delineates roles without severing emotional ties, preserving the parent’s role as a guide rather than a peer. In contrast, in permissive or uninvolved households where informal speech is employed without established norms, blurred linguistic boundaries may coincide with blurred behavioral boundaries. If a child addresses a parent in the same manner as a peer, authority distinctions may weaken, potentially complicating discipline and guidance. Thus, the present findings suggest that honorifics in harmonious families operate as markers of mutual respect rather than rigid vertical hierarchy.

The Intimacy Paradox: Informal Speech Versus Respect

Qualitative responses revealed a notable counterargument: some participants perceived informal speech as fostering greater closeness and ease. This tension reflects what may be termed an ‘intimacy paradox’—the cultural trade-off between respect, structurally reinforced by honorifics, and intimacy, often signaled through the relaxation of linguistic formality (14). For many adolescents, informal speech feels emotionally closer because it reduces cognitive and social constraints.

However, while informal speech can promote immediate comfort, it also carries the risk of devolving into disrespect during moments of conflict. The findings suggest that families maintaining honorifics may benefit from a linguistic buffer that is both grammatical and psychological. During disagreements, the requirement to use polite verb endings imposes a brief cognitive pause, encouraging emotional regulation and discouraging impulsive escalation. This mechanism may help explain the high reconciliation rates observed in the data. In this sense, grammatical structure serves as a mechanism for emotional regulation, slowing the progression from disagreement to relational damage.

Role of Tone and Context

Participants also emphasized that communication approach and tone matter more than honorific speech alone. Honorific speech should be viewed as a facilitator rather than the primary determinant of family harmony. Formal language delivered with sarcasm or emotional coldness may be more damaging than warm informal speech. Thus, honorifics should be viewed as facilitators that establish a respectful baseline, whose effectiveness depends on the speaker's empathetic intent and contextual sensitivity.

Limitations of the Present Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several important limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience sampling and the specific demographic skew of the participants limit the generalizability of the findings. The sample was predominantly female (66.7%) and overwhelmingly concentrated in the 15–19 age group (92.9%). Consequently, the results may more accurately reflect the perspectives of high school-aged females in suburban settings rather than the full developmental spectrum of 'young people' (ages 10–24) or the male experience in Korean households. Furthermore, participants were recruited through specific digital platforms, namely KakaoTalk student groups and Instagram, which may overrepresent adolescents who are more digitally active or willing to engage in self-reflection about family relationships.

Second, the study did not utilize automated response-time screening or embedded attention-check questions during data collection. While a manual review of the 210 submissions showed high levels of data coherence, the lack of objective engagement-tracking measures remains a limitation in verifying the depth of participant attention.

Third, the study relies exclusively on adolescent self-reports, capturing perceptions of family harmony from a single perspective. While adolescents' subjective experiences are central to understanding family dynamics, they may not fully reflect parental intentions or interpretations of honorific speech. Relatedly, the absence of parental perspectives prevents assessment of whether perceptions of harmony and respect are reciprocal across generations.

Fourth, the cross-sectional and correlational nature of the data precludes causal inference. Although honorific speech use is associated with higher perceived family harmony, the findings cannot determine whether

honorifics actively promote harmony, or whether harmonious families are simply more likely to maintain honorific norms. Bidirectional or third-variable explanations therefore remain possible.

Finally, the operationalization of "elder family members" included parents, grandparents, and extended family, which may obscure relational differences among these groups. Interactions with grandparents are often primarily respectful, whereas parent–child relationships involve daily negotiation, discipline, and emotional exchange.

Future Research and Application

Future research should address these limitations by employing more diverse sampling strategies, incorporating parental reports, and adopting longitudinal or experimental designs to better assess causality. Distinguishing between habitual versus situational honorific use, as well as differentiating honorific practices toward parents versus other elders, may also yield more nuanced insights. Families that flexibly alternate between informal speech and honorifics may represent an optimal balance between intimacy and respect, a hypothesis that warrants further empirical investigation.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that linguistic formality, when paired with warmth and empathy, may serve as a constructive tool for managing boundaries and conflict in family relationships. Rather than an archaic remnant of hierarchy, honorifics may offer a culturally grounded mechanism for fostering stability and harmony amid the challenges of adolescent development and family change.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of honorific speech within Korean family settings, focusing on how linguistic formality relates to adolescents' perceptions of family harmony. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory and social psychological perspectives, the findings demonstrate that honorific use remains widespread among Korean adolescents and is positively associated with perceived respect, emotional support, and constructive conflict resolution within the family. Importantly, the results challenge the common assumption that linguistic formality necessarily undermines intimacy. Instead, honorific speech appears to function as a relational framework that allows respect and emotional closeness to coexist.

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest

that honorifics can serve as a communicative resource rather than a constraint in family interactions. When paired with empathetic tone and open communication, linguistic formality may help maintain clear relational boundaries while preventing conflicts from escalating into disrespectful exchanges. For parents and educators, this implies that discouraging honorific use in the name of closeness may not always be beneficial; instead, guiding adolescents to use honorifics flexibly and contextually may foster both respect and emotional stability within the household.

At the same time, the study underscores that honorific speech alone does not guarantee family harmony. Qualitative comments and quantitative results alike indicate that tone, intent, and broader communication style play a critical role in shaping relational outcomes. Informal speech may enhance emotional ease in certain contexts, while honorifics may provide a stabilizing buffer during moments of tension. These findings point to the importance of context-sensitive language practices, rather than rigid adherence to or rejection of formality.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The use of convenience sampling and reliance on adolescent self-reports limit the generalizability of the findings and prevent assessment of reciprocal perceptions from parents. In addition, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and the grouping of parents, grandparents, and other elders under a single category may obscure important relational differences. These constraints highlight the need for caution in interpreting the observed associations.

Future research would benefit from incorporating parental perspectives, employing longitudinal or experimental designs, and distinguishing honorific practices toward different family members. Further work might also examine situational switching between honorific and informal speech to determine whether flexibility, rather than consistency alone, best predicts healthy family relationships. By addressing these avenues, future studies can deepen understanding of how linguistic norms interact with evolving family dynamics.

In sum, this study contributes to the growing literature on Korean honorifics by demonstrating that linguistic formality within the family is not merely a remnant of hierarchy, but a dynamic communicative tool. When used with sensitivity and mutual respect, honorific speech may support harmony in one of the most intimate and influential human relationships—the family.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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