



Korean speakers' perception of (im)politeness across speech acts of agreement, compliment, disagreement and criticism^{*}

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Lee, Narah. 2024. Korean speaker's perception of (im)politeness across speech acts of agreement, compliment, disagreement and criticism. *Linguistic Research* 41(Special Edition): 185-207. The present research hypothesises that speech acts can serve as a fundamental device of (im)politeness, potentially outweighing the significant contribution of honorifics, including speech levels. Specifically, it argues that agreeing with interlocutors and paying them compliments are closely related to the realisation and perception of politeness in Korean speech. Although the literature notes the deep engagement of speech acts in Korean (im)politeness, scholars have primarily focused on 'polite refusal' or 'polite request' as speech acts that explicitly threaten the hearer's 'face' (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). However, other speech acts, such as agreement, disagreement, complimenting and criticism, can also significantly affect the perception of (im)politeness across the spectrum of linguistic behaviours. Through a survey asking native Korean speakers to assess the degree of (im)politeness perceived from different utterances, the current study explores how several factors, including addressee, modality, speech level and speech acts, are complicatedly but distinctly involved in Korean speakers' perceptions of (im)politeness. While the results confirm the impact of honorifics and 'negative face' on the speakers' assessment of (im)politeness, they also indicate that positive politeness together with negative politeness needs to be more actively included in the discussion regarding how (im)politeness is perceived in actual speech practices. This comprehensive approach aims to capture the full spectrum of linguistic behaviours observed in actual speech practices, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of (im)politeness in Korean speech. (The University of Queensland)

Keywords (im)politeness, speech levels, honorifics, (in)directness, dis/agreement, compliment, criticism

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1. Introduction

With regard to speaking politely in Korean, it is commonly advised to use the polite sentence-final particle *-a/eyo* or the deferential sentence-final particle *-pnita* when addressing older interlocutors. Taking into account the relative age of interlocutors is crucial in conversations to uphold the social convention of politeness, known as *kongson*. This consideration is explicitly marked in grammatical elements, such as the extensive honorifics, which include sentence-final forms and terms of address (Cho 1980; Lee 1989; Brown 2015).

Because grammatical and sociolinguistic studies of speech levels, terms of address and other morpho-syntactic honorification have taken a central role in the literature on politeness research in the Korean language (e.g. Sohn 1999; Eun and Strauss 2004; Lee 2006, 2022; Brown 2011, 2013, 2015), the study of politeness in Korean is often referred to as ‘honorific grammar’ (Kim 2011: 178). However, speech levels and honorifics alone do not fully represent the perception and expression of (im)politeness in Korean. Although grammatical honorification is a necessary condition for politeness, it is not a sufficient condition (Cho 1986; Kim 2009). An utterance with an appropriate speech level and honorifics can still sound impolite if the speech act conveys an unfavourable attitude towards the interlocutor (Cho 1986).

Parallel to this, Korean politeness research has also focused on potentially ‘face-threatening’ speech acts such as requests, refusals and apologies, often applying or adapting Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) politeness theory (e.g. Byon 2004, 2006; Koo 2004; Jeon 2007; Kim 2008; Hatfield and Hahn 2011; Ahn 2015; Moon 2017). These speech acts are examined as face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) in which (im)politeness is clearly discernible in the linguistic performance. Previous studies have offered insights into how cultures shape language patterns in requests, refusals and apologies to reduce face threats and appeal to ‘negative face’.¹ By examining a wider range of speech acts, including those related to positive politeness, we can better understand how (im)politeness functions across linguistic behaviours, informed by language users’ sociopragmatic knowledge. This research aims to shed light on a more comprehensive view of (im)politeness in various speech acts by integrating Korean honorific grammar with both positive and negative politeness.

¹ See Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) for more on positive politeness and negative politeness based on the notions of ‘positive face’ and ‘negative face’.

2. Linguistic politeness in Korean

Politeness research has evolved significantly since Lakoff's (1973) rules of politeness, which built on Grice's (1967) rules of conversation. Early studies sought universal theories based on researchers' analyses of utterances ('first wave'); however, recent approaches have shifted focus to examine participants' understanding and social theorisation ('second wave') (Haugh and Watanabe 2017). Although no single definitive theory of (im)politeness exists, common themes persist across various models, including giving options, avoiding conflicts, seeking agreement and showing consideration for other speakers (Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987; Sifianou 1992).

In Korean linguistics, most studies on politeness (*kongson*) have focused on 'honorific grammar' or *kyengepep* (Kim 2011: 178). Sohn (1999) noted that the complexity of Korean in choosing appropriate reference forms and speech levels, based on social relationships, age, gender and the formality of the settings, makes it one of the most intricate languages for interaction. This system, essentially 'grammaticalizations of age stages' (Hijirida and Sohn 1986: 385), has been central to politeness research from morpho-semantic (e.g. Strauss and Eun 2005; Kim 2012), sociolinguistic (e.g. Lee 2006; Cho 2011; Lee et al. 2017) and pedagogical perspectives (e.g. Brown 2010; Jeong and Lee 2022). The literature generally assumes that honorifics are fundamental to linguistic politeness in Korean. Yu (2003) asserted that deferential language (*contaysmal*) is primary and obligatory, while 'stylistic' politeness strategies are optional and secondary.

Studies taking the aforementioned pragmatic view of politeness theories and speech acts have often been separate from those focusing on 'honorific grammar'. Research on speech acts in Korean has predominantly examined requests, refusals and apologies. For requests, Byon (2004, 2006) compared Korean learners with native speakers and explored the relationship between indirectness and politeness. Jeon (2007) analysed request strategies in television dramas, and Yu (2011) investigated cross-linguistic politeness in indirect requests. Regarding refusals, Ahn (2015) studied strategies across gender and age groups. For apologies, Kim (2008) compared Korean and Australian English speakers' strategies, and Hatfield and Hahn (2011) integrated multiple politeness theories, including 'face' (Brown and Levinson 1987) and relational approaches (Locher and Watts 2005; Arundale 2006; Haugh 2007).

Some studies have comparatively addressed the two points of view on politeness in Korean speech in a broader context. Cho (1980, 1986) argued that the use of honorifics does not guarantee politeness, which involves respecting the interlocutor while lowering oneself, aligning with Lakoff's (1973) principles of politeness. Scholars examining discourse-level politeness (e.g. Koo 2004; Hur 2010; Kim 2013; Lee 2022) have agreed that honorifics or indirectness do not ensure pragmatic politeness. Further, many have argued for a separate examination of honorification and politeness, since the use of honorifics often depends more on social norms or conversational settings than the speaker's 'face' (e.g. Hwang 1990; Yoon et al. 2014). Hwang (1990: 53) particularly distinguished politeness as psychological, as emphasised in traditional societies (e.g. Korean honorifics), rather than deferential, as a social code in more egalitarian societies. Similarly, Lee (2022: 387) stressed the role of 'language culture' in determining politeness in interactions.

Even though research on Korean politeness often separates honorification from pragmatic and discursive qualities, speakers likely integrate these aspects simultaneously based on 'consideration' for their interlocutors. Honorification is a criterion of politeness, with age as a prime factor in Korean (Hur 2009). However, appropriate honorific use is context dependent; using honorifics when speaking to younger speakers or close friends may convey humour or sarcasm, while using fewer honorifics when speaking to older, but familiar, colleagues may not be perceived as impolite (Brown 2013; Kim 2013). This study examines how Korean speakers perceive politeness in utterances, combining various speech levels and speech acts, including those affecting both negative face (e.g. disagreement, criticism) and positive face (e.g. agreement, compliment). By integrating negative and positive politeness, I aim to comprehensively understand how speakers determine politeness in conversations, recognising that being polite fundamentally involves seeking agreement and avoiding conflicts.

3. Data and method

This study employed an online survey as its primary research method to investigate the perception of (im)politeness in Korean speech. Native Korean speakers were presented with various utterances that systematically varied in speech levels,

indirectness modality, speech acts and addressee characteristics, and they were asked to evaluate the (im)politeness of each utterance. Based on this survey, the following research questions are addressed: (1) To what extent do speech levels, indirectness modality, speech acts and addressee characteristics individually and collectively influence native Korean speakers' perceptions of (im)politeness? (2) Which factor has the most significant impact on native Korean speakers' evaluation of (im)politeness in utterances? (3) How do the interactions between these factors affect perceived (im)politeness?

3.1 The participants

The total number of participants was 273. There were 167 females, 99 males and 7 respondents who did not want to specify their gender. The distribution of the participants' age bands is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Age distribution of survey participants

Age band	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	Total
Number of participants	89	85	67	21	11	273
Ratio	33%	31%	24%	8%	4%	100%

3.2 The questionnaires

The survey comprised six sections: one for demographic information, four containing eight politeness assessment questions each, and one for participants' final comments. The 32 questions relating to the degree of politeness were presented in dialogue format and rated on a Likert scale from 1 ('very impolite') to 10 ('very polite').² In each dialogue, two speakers discuss a topic. One of the speakers prompts a reaction from the other, featuring a speech act, a sentence-final and an auxiliary modality marker of indirectness. This reaction is the target utterance for the politeness assessment.³

2 The full set of survey questionnaire stimuli is appended at the end of the paper.

3 Indirectness is included in the survey as another critical factor in evaluating (im)politeness. It is recognised as another strong indicator of increasing politeness (Lee 2005; An 2013), which is expressed through conjunctural modality markers (e.g. *-n kes kath-*, *-keyss-* and *-l kes-*) in Korean.

The categories of politeness variables are as follows:

- speech acts: agreement, disagreement, compliment, criticism
- sentence-finals (speech levels): *-pnita* (deferential), *-a/eyo* (polite), *-a/e* (casual)
- modality marker: affixation of *-n kes kath-* ‘seemingly; likely’ or no affixation.

There were four different addressees of the target utterances given in the contexts teacher, friend, senior at work and senior at university. These addressees were selected to represent possible relationships, of varying age gaps and social dynamics, with the speaker. This was intended to help participants easily identify the situations and assess the degree of politeness based on the variables presented in the utterances. One of the questions, in which a student responds to their teacher’s statement, is shown as an example in Table 2.

Table 2. Example survey question

Context description	A teacher and a student are discussing the global popularity of Korean culture. Please choose a degree of politeness for each utterance provided in response to the statement below.
Context statement (teacher)	‘Korean culture has been highly successful in making new trends in the global context, and K-pop is at the centre of its success.’
[Target utterance] Response to the statement (student)	‘선생님 말씀이 정말 훌륭합니다.’ <i>Sensayngnim malssum-i cengmal hwullyunghasi-pnita</i> Teacher saying (hon)-TOP really brilliant-SE (deferential) ‘What you (‘Teacher’) are saying is brilliant.’
Question	How polite or impolite is the speaker in the dialogue?
Participant’s response	Likert scale: 1 (very impolite) to 10 (very polite)

In the example in Table 2, the target utterance includes ‘compliment’, does not use the modality marker *-n kes kath-* and employs the deferential sentence-final *-pnita*. Although all four speech acts and modality auxiliary options were applied across the contexts for four addressees, sentence-finals were selectively applied to maintain realism and coherence: *-pnita* to teacher, *-a/e* to friend, *-a/e* to senior at work and *-a/eyo* to senior at university.

4. Results

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of target utterances aligned according to the averaged degree of politeness as collected in the survey, from the most polite at the top to the least polite at the bottom.⁴ An utterance to Teacher (in purple) records the highest politeness degree (8.8), while another utterance to Teacher is located at the bottom as the least polite utterance (3.9). It is noticeable that both utterances employ the deferential sentence-final *-pnita* (SE1) and no indirectness modality marker (MD2).

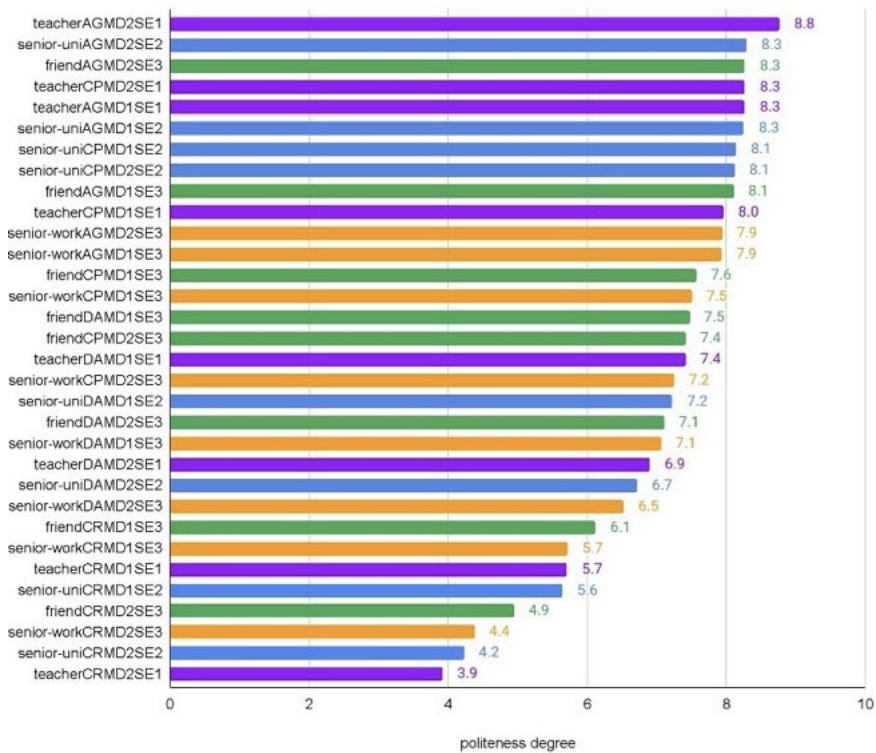


Figure 1. The overall distribution of utterances by the degree of politeness

4 Each bar in the figure represents a combination of addressee + speech act + modality (directness) + sentence ending'. For example, teacher AGMD2SE1 stands for the setting of speaking to a teacher with agreement (AG), no indirect modality marker *-n kes kath-* (MD2) and the highest speech level *-pnita* (SE1). Abbreviations are as follows: AG=agreement, CP=compliment, DA=disagreement, CR=criticism, MD1=use of indirectness modality marker, MD2=no use of indirectness modality marker, SE1=the highest speech level (*-pnita*), SE2=polite speech level (*-a/eyo*) and SE3=informal speech level (*-a/e*).

The only difference between the most polite and the least polite utterances is the speech act. That is, agreement (AG) with Teacher with a deferential sentence-final and no modality marker is considered the most polite, whereas criticism (CR) of Teacher with the same grammatical utterance configuration is identified as the least polite utterance. Moreover, other combinations of addressee, speech act, sentence-final and indirectness modality are observed in between. With other components jumbled in the order of politeness degree, only speech act shows a relatively clear pattern in the arrangement whereby AG and CP are in the top half being the most polite, DA is located in the third quartile and CR is close to the least polite at the bottom of the figure. In the following sections, the results are analysed in detail by examining the effects of each variable on the perception of politeness to address the research questions.

4.1 Speech level effect: *-a/e* to senior at work vs. *-a/eyo* to senior at university

Seniors, or *senpay*, are typically considered superior in Korean culture, and corresponding honorifics, including polite sentence-finals, are expected to be used in conversations with them. A senior at university in Korea refers to a student who entered the same university relatively earlier than the speaker and is normally older than the speaker. Similarly, seniors at work are colleagues who started working at the same company or in the same industry earlier than the speaker, but the relative ages might be less of a concern in this case. Considering the rigidity of social hierarchy in workplaces compared with the relationships among university students, we can anticipate that speakers tend to adhere to the linguistic rules of politeness more strictly when speaking to seniors at work than to seniors at university.

In the survey, utterances for two senior addressees, at university and at work, were provided with sentence-finals, as opposed to the expectation. That is, the utterances for the senior at university (Senior-U) were composed with the polite sentence-final *-a/eyo* (SE2), while the utterances for the senior at work (Senior-W) were composed with the plain sentence-final *-a/e* (SE3). This was done to observe a clear comparison between the two sentence-finals affecting the perception of politeness where sentence-finals for the two addressees as expected according to the 'honorific grammar' may not provide the distinguishable effects of such uses of

sentence-finals, since it is simply natural for Korean speakers.

The results revealing the effects of the two speech levels for Senior-W and Senior-U are presented in Figure 2. Although the overall tendency in the politeness degree is maintained (i.e. AG is perceived as the most polite, CP follows as the second most polite and CR is ranked as the least polite speech act for both addressees of Senior-U and Senior-W), the utterances for Senior-U with SE2 (*-a/eyo*) mark slightly higher in politeness than those for Senior-W with SE3 (*-a/e*), except in the cases of CR.

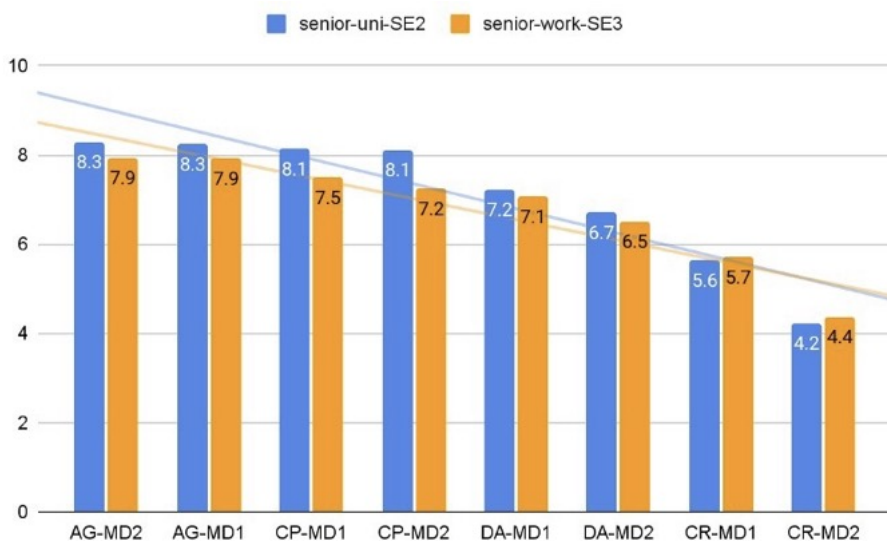


Figure 2. Speaking to senior at work and senior at university with different SEs

The impact of sentence-finals on the politeness degree is found to be distinct for different speech acts. The differences between the two sentence-finals for each combination of speech act and modality are greater for CP⁵ and AG⁶ than for DA⁷, with the degree of politeness being higher when using the polite sentence-final form *-a/eyo* (SE2) than when using the plain form *-a/e* (SE3). Regarding CR, the difference in the politeness degrees between the sentence-finals is insignificant,⁸ similar to DA;

5 0.6 for MD1 ($t(271) = 6.268$; $p < 0.001$) and 0.9 for MD2 ($t(271) = 7.799$; $p < 0.001$).

6 0.4 for MD1 ($t(271) = 3.740$; $p < 0.001$) and 0.4 for MD2 ($t(271) = 3.832$; $p < 0.001$).

7 0.1 for MD1 ($t(271) = 1.572$; $p = 0.117$) and 0.2 for MD2 ($t(271) = 1.626$; $p = 0.105$).

8 0.1 for MD1 ($t(271) = -0.550$; $p = 0.583$) and 0.2 for MD2 ($t(271) = -1.314$; $p = 0.190$).

however, intriguingly, the degree of politeness is reversed for the sentence-finals in this case. That is, with the same modality, a sentence criticising one's senior with the honorific sentence-final *-yo* attached can be less polite, or more impolite, than without it, as opposed to cases of agreeing, complimenting and disagreeing.⁹

4.2 Addressee effect: Compliment for a teacher v. compliment for a friend

When sentence-finals are identical for different addressees, such as using the plain sentence-final *-a/e* (SE3) for Friend and Senior-W, the degree of (im)politeness is differently perceived by addressees for the same utterance, as shown in Figure 3.

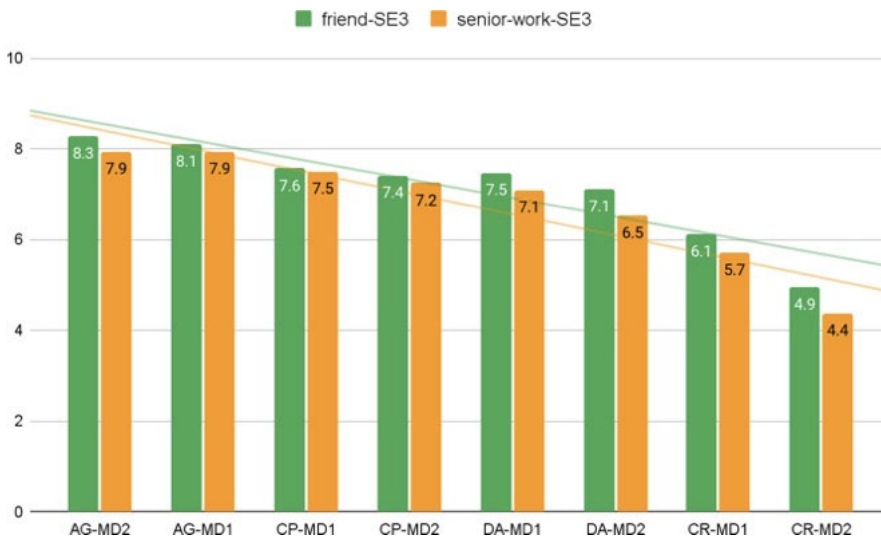


Figure 3. Speaking to friend and senior at work with the same SE

When the age gap between the speakers grows or the social relationship shifts, the differences in the perception of politeness display more distinct patterns, as shown in Figure 4 in which politeness degrees perceived for Friend and Teacher are compared.

⁹ Lower case is used to refer to the generic terms of speech acts, while the acronyms in upper case are used for indexing the four speech acts of AG, DA, CP and CR as survey variables in this paper.

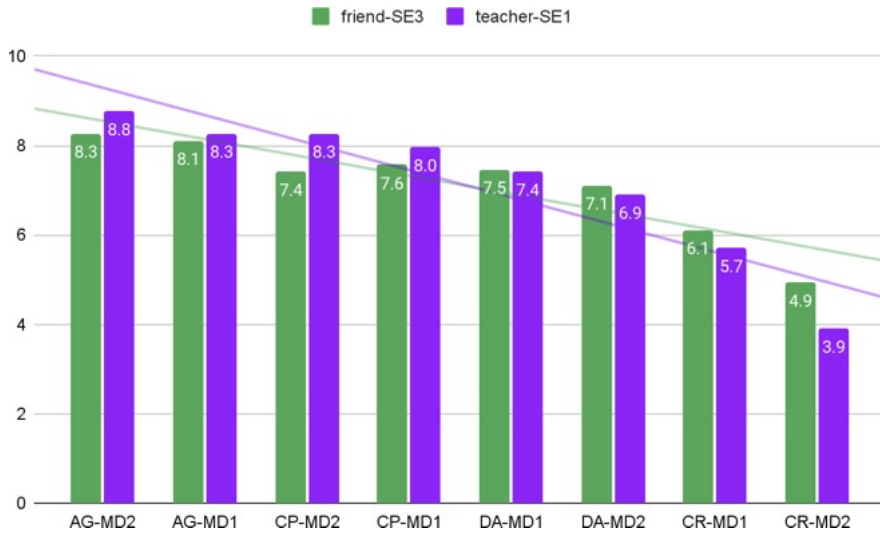


Figure 4. Speaking to friend and teacher

For AG with MD2 (without *-n kes kath-*), the politeness degree is significantly higher for Teacher (8.8) than for Friend (8.3) where the polite sentence-final *-a/eyo* (SE2) is used for Teacher and the plain sentence-final *-a/e* (SE3) is used for Friend ($t(271) = -5.982$; $p < 0.001$). For CP, regardless of the modality, politeness degrees are higher for Teacher than for Friend.¹⁰ In the case of CR, for both MD1 and MD2, utterances for Teacher are perceived as less polite than for Friend.¹¹ It is also notable that MD2 (without *-n kes kath-*) is perceived as less polite than MD1 (*-n kes kath-* affixed) for CR ($t(271) = 15.198$; $p < 0.001$), whereas the effect of modality is the opposite for AG, for both Friend and Teacher. In short, direct AG without *-n kes kath-* (MD2) is more likely to be perceived as polite when said to teacher than friend, and CP in any modality is also perceived as more polite to Teacher than Friend. On the contrary, CR, whether with MD1 (indirect) or MD2 (direct), is perceived as less polite towards Teacher than towards Friend.

Regarding the least age difference among addressees (i.e. speaking to Friend and to Senior-U), the overall results resemble the comparison between Friend-SE3 and Teacher-SE1 (Figure 3), rather than being similar to the case of Friend-SE3 and

10 $t(271) = -3.079$; $p = 0.002$ for MD1 and $t(271) = -6.378$; $p < 0.001$ for MD2.

11 $t(271) = 3.088$; $p = 0.002$ for MD1 and $t(271) = 7.647$; $p < 0.001$ for MD2.

Senior-W-SE3 (Figure 4), as shown in Figure 5.

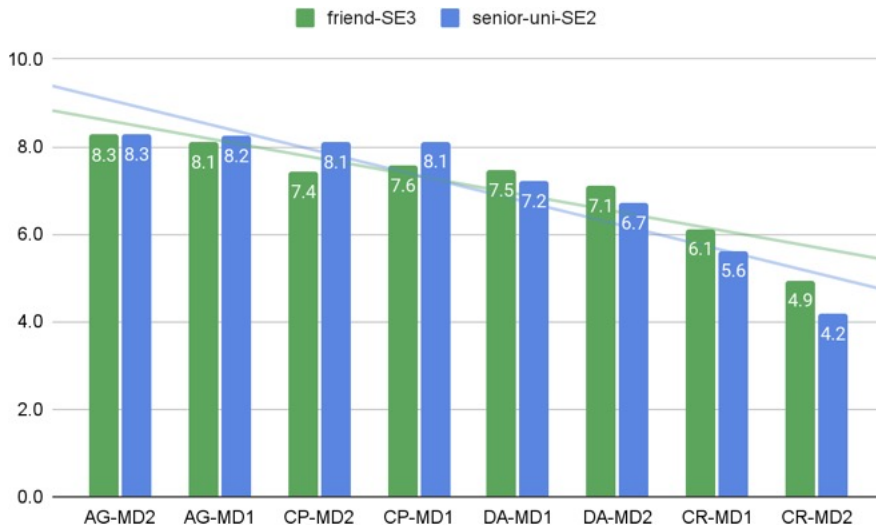


Figure 5. Speaking to friend and senior at university

Specifically, the gap between the highest politeness degree and the lowest is distinctively larger for Senior-U compared with the case of Friend. Similar to the results of Friend v. Teacher (Figure 4), the trendlines that are created by the difference between the highest and lowest politeness degree cross over between Friend and Senior-U in Figure 5. The slope of the trendline for Senior-U is steeper than that for Friend since the highest of Senior-U is higher than the highest of Friend, and the lowest of Senior-U is lower than the lowest of Friend. The similarity between Figures 4 and 5 may be caused by the differences in the sentence-finals in both figures, unlike in Figure 3 where the same sentence-final, SE3, is applied to Friend and Senior-W. The slopes of the Senior-W trendline in Figure 3 appear more slanted than those of Teacher and Senior-U in Figures 4 and 5, respectively, and nearly parallel to the trendline of Friend. In fact, the difference between the highest and lowest politeness degree for an addressee increases according to the level of sentence-finals. The addressee is definitely a valid factor in the tendency, but when compared within the seniors' group (i.e. Senior-W, Senior-U and Teacher), the sentence-finals make a clear difference to the results.

4.3 Modality effect: Impoliteness of direct disagreement and criticism

Since there are clear differences observed between the two groups of speech acts, namely AG/CP and DA/CR, in terms of the effects of modality, they are presented in two separate figures, Figure 6 and Figure 7. First, in Figure 6, relatively similar distributions of politeness degree are found between MD1 (affixed with the indirect modality marker *-n kes kath-* 'seemingly') and MD2 (without *-n kes kath-*) in AG and CP for each addressee. For Teacher, the variations in MD1 and MD2 make significant differences in the perception of politeness for both AG ($t(271) = -5.576$; $p < 0.001$) and CP ($t(271) = -2.856$; $p = 0.005$), with higher politeness degrees on MD2 utterances (without the indirect modality marker). That is, as for AG and CP for Teacher, it is more polite to make them direct than indirect. For Friend, while AG is perceived as slightly more polite when direct (i.e. MD2, ($t(271) = -2.264$, $p = 0.024$)), CP shows the reverse results of MD2 ('direct'), being less polite than MD1 ('indirect'), although the statistical significance is marginal ($t(271) = 1.832$, $p = 0.068$). In the case of Senior-W and Senior-U, the politeness degrees for AG and CP do not change whether using the indirect modality infix *-n kes kath-* (MD1) or not (MD2), except for CP for Senior-W, where the use of *-n kes kath-* (MD1) is perceived as more polite ($t(271) = 2.969$, $p = 0.003$).

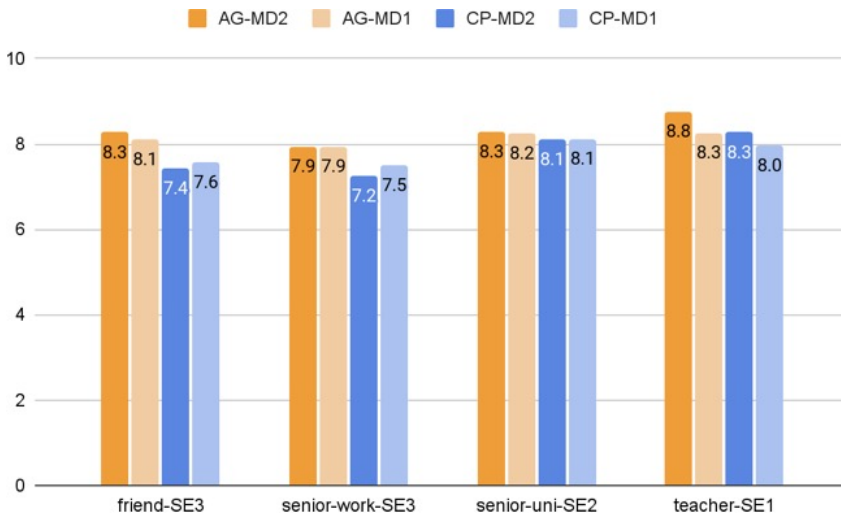


Figure 6. Modality effects in agreement (AG) and compliment (CP)

Conversely, the politeness degrees appear to differ between MD1 and MD2 for all addressees in DA and CR, as shown in Figure 7. It is noticeable that, for the two negative speech acts, MD1 (indirect with *-n kes kath-*) is perceived as more polite than MD2 (direct without *-n kes kath-*) across all addresses and speech levels,¹² which is opposite to most cases of AG and CP, where direct utterances are more politely received than indirect ones.

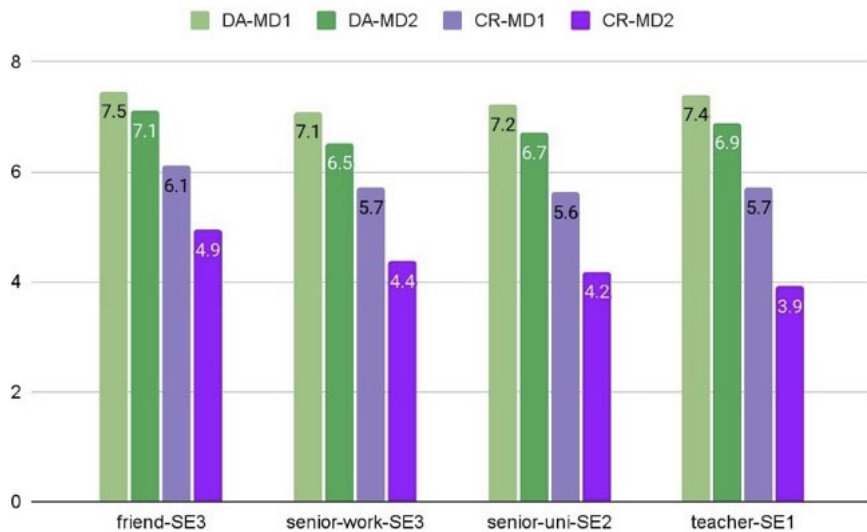


Figure 7. Modality effects in disagreement (DA) and criticism (CR)

Therefore, whoever the addressee is, indirect DA and CR are less impolite than their direct counterparts. This partly supports the findings of Byon (2006) who revealed that indirect requests are preferred when the request benefits the addressee, the speaker has more power than the addressee, and/or the speaker and addressee are close. Moreover, the difference in the politeness perception between MD1 and MD2 appears to be larger for CR than for DA. Teacher-SE1 shows a particularly larger gap between MD1 and MD2 (1.8), followed by Senior-U-SE2 (1.4), Senior-SE3 (1.3) and Friend-SE3 (1.2).

¹² Friend-DA ($t(271) = 3.696$, $p < 0.001$), Friend-CR ($t(271) = 10.418$, $p < 0.001$), Senior-W-DA ($t(271) = 5.508$, $p < 0.001$), Senior-W-CR ($t(271) = 13.883$, $p < 0.001$), Senior-U-DA ($t(271) = 5.034$, $p < 0.001$), Senior-U-CR ($t(271) = 14.623$, $p < 0.001$), Teacher-DA ($t(271) = 4.450$; $p < 0.001$), Teacher-CR ($t(271) = 115.198$; $p < 0.001$).

4.4 (Im)politeness in speech acts

In the analyses regarding addressee and modality as factors affecting the perception of (im)politeness in the previous sections, we noted that speech acts greatly contribute to how Korean speakers perceive an utterance in terms of politeness in comparison with speech levels, addresses and modality. When the values for politeness degree from the results are aligned from high to low on the Y-axis, the four speech acts are presented in descending order of politeness degree from positive to negative on the X-axis, as shown in Figure 8: AG (M = 8.23), CP (M = 7.78), DA (M = 7.05) and CR (M = 5.08).¹³

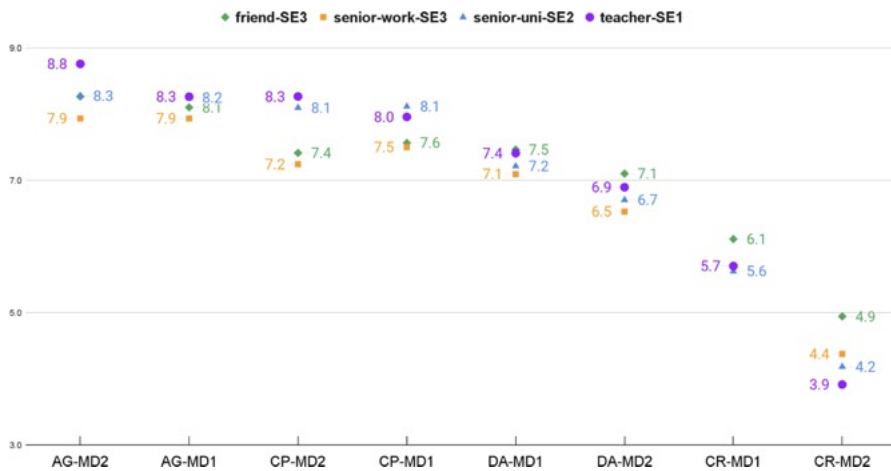


Figure 8. Perception of (im)politeness across four speech acts

Based on people's desire to be acknowledged for their positive attributes and not for their negative attributes, speech acts can affect the management of rapport (Spencer-Oatey 2005, 2010). Whether 'managed' or not, the four speech acts of agreement, disagreement, compliment and criticism, and the politeness degrees recognised for them, may validate the claim that the orientation towards or against rapport is manifested in the perception of (im)politeness by Korean speakers.

Although crudely categorised as positive or negative, AG and DA tend to be perceived as more polite or less impolite, respectively, than CP and CR in each

¹³ F = 944.760, p < 0.001, N = 2176

category. This is attributed to the notion that the characteristics of complimenting and criticising are considered face-threatening. Criticising is inherently a face-threatening act, but complimenting is more often considered a positive ‘face-enhancing’ act since it has mostly positive effects on interpersonal relationships. However, it may be regarded as face-threatening when a compliment is too personal (Brown and Levinson 1987). While maintaining the evaluation of a compliment as a possible face-threatening act, the reason could be different in the Korean context compared with other East Asian languages such as Chinese (Gu 1990) and Japanese (Matsumoto 1988; Ide 1989), where politeness involves less privacy for speakers than in Western cultures.

Additionally, it is worth noting that an informal sentence-ending (SE3; green and yellow dots in Figure 8) is perceived as less polite in positive speech acts and less impolite in negative speech acts. One rough conclusion to this is that sentence formation with a speech act and a sentence-ending, such as a compliment with an informal sentence-ending or a criticism with a polite sentence-ending, invokes a pragmatic effect, such as mocking or sarcasm, which reflects a sense of impoliteness in speakers.

5. Discussion

In the survey’s final question, the participants’ comments on (im)politeness provided key insights into their metalinguistic understanding of the concept in Korean speech. Many respondents associated the modality particle *-n kes kath-* (‘seemingly’) with politeness, stating, ‘I don’t think it’s polite to state my opinion precisely and clearly’.¹⁴ However, some held the opposite view, considering directness more polite, ‘I think it’s polite to state my opinion clearly to the other person’s opinion’. Speech acts were also identified as a primary element of (im)politeness. Respondents noted, ‘I don’t feel impolite when I disagree with the other person, but strongly disagreeing seems disrespectful’, and ‘Disagreeing with someone unconditionally feels rude’. Honorifics and address terms were mentioned, although descriptions were straightforward, ‘I felt *na* “I” was not polite. Korean speakers use *ce* “I (hon.)” instead when speaking to

¹⁴ The survey was responded to in Korean, and the responses here have been translated to English by the author.

a superior'.

These comments, along with the quantitative analysis, confirm that (im)politeness is not inherent in any single linguistic form or act (Eelen 2001; Watts 2003), although certain patterns and correlations emerged. One respondent shared their thought process after evaluating the utterances:

In Korea, politeness and impoliteness are applied differently depending on the relationship between the other person and me. During the survey, I was constantly thinking, 'What is politeness and impoliteness?' and 'Where does this anxiety of saying the same thing to this person but feeling impolite to that person come from?' I think it is a typical characteristic of Koreans that they feel polite or impolite depending on whether they agree or disagree, without regard to the tone of voice. For instance, one might say 'Are you refuting my words?' (I think it stems from the superiority and inferiority relationship based on age and social position.) And I personally dislike the expression 'I think' or 'it seems', but I can't help but use it every day. I may pretend to be unsure of my words for fear of offending the other party, or I feel like I have to say that I agree even though I don't really agree, so I say 'I think it's so- I think it's right'. In a way, I feel a little cowardly.

This comment vividly captures a Korean speaker's perspective on expressing politeness. It highlights politeness as rooted in relational quality and emphasises the importance of empathy in interactions. It also critiques the tendency for indirectness in speech, often perceived as polite, yet sometimes interpreted as hesitancy. Across the comments, *concwung* 'respect' and *kongkam* 'empathy' emerged as prominent, indicating a consensus on these values in perceptions of politeness, despite varying expressions and strategies.

6. Concluding remarks

This study examined the perception of (im)politeness in Korean, focusing on how speech levels, indirectness modality, speech acts, and addressee characteristics influence these perceptions, which factor has the most significant impact, and how these factors

interact. The survey analysis showed that all four factors significantly influence the perception of (im)politeness, but their effects vary depending on the given context. Speech acts emerged as the most influential factor in general, followed by, in descending order of politeness, Agreement, Compliment, Disagreement and Criticism. Complex interactions were observed among the factors, with addressee characteristics amplifying the impact of speech acts, and the influence of modality varying with different speech acts and addressees. Complementing these quantitative findings, the qualitative analysis of the participants' comments provided insights into speakers' metalinguistic understanding of (im)politeness. The respondents recognised the role of modality, speech acts and honorifics in politeness, although opinions sometimes diverged. Notably, the concepts of 'respect' and 'empathy' consistently emerged, underlining the relational and empathetic aspects of politeness in Korean speech, specifically expressed with positive speech acts such as agreement and compliment in the survey responses.

These findings underscore that honorifics alone do not dictate politeness, challenging previous notions and emphasising the need for a holistic evaluation. This approach, examining speech levels, indirectness modality, speech acts and addressee characteristics, provides insights into how Korean speakers perceive and evaluate (im)politeness. By combining quantitative analysis with the participants' metalinguistic reflections, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between linguistic features and social factors in the perception of (im)politeness in Korean speech. Although this research provides valuable insights, its limitations include the focus on only a few speech acts and the use of brief dialogues for evaluations. Future studies should incorporate more in-depth interviews or open-ended surveys to better capture real-life speech situations.

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Appendix: Survey questionnaire stimuli

Target utterances:

	Teacher (SE1)	Senior at university (SE2)	Friend (SE3)	Senior at work (SE3)
Agreement (+indirect)	"선생님 말씀을 듣고 보니 저도 그렇게 생각하는 것 같습니다." I think my thoughts are the same after hearing what you (teacher) said.	"선배 이야기를 듣고 보니 나도 그렇게 생각하는 것 같아요." I think my thoughts are the same after hearing what you (senior) said.	"네 말을 듣고 보니 나도 그렇게 생각하는 것 같아." I think my thoughts are the same after hearing what you said.	"선배 이야기를 듣고 보니 나도 그렇게 생각하는 것 같아." I think my thoughts are the same after hearing what you (senior) said.
Agreement (-indirect)	"선생님 말씀을 듣고 보니 저도 그렇게 생각합니다." My thoughts are the same after hearing what you (teacher) said.	"선배 이야기를 듣고 보니 나도 그렇게 생각해요." My thoughts are the same after hearing what you (senior) said.	"네 말을 듣고 보니 나도 그렇게 생각해." My thoughts are the same after hearing what you said.	"선배 이야기를 듣고 보니 나도 그렇게 생각해." My thoughts are the same after hearing what you (senior) said.
Disagreement (+indirect)	"선생님 말씀을 듣고 보니 저는 그렇게 생각하지 않는 것 같습니다." I think my thoughts aren't the same after hearing what you (teacher) said.	"선배 이야기를 듣고 보니 나는 그렇게 생각하지 않는 것 같아요." I think my thoughts aren't the same after hearing what you (senior) said.	"네 말을 듣고 보니 나는 그렇게 생각하지 않는 것 같아." I think my thoughts aren't the same after hearing what you said.	"선배 이야기를 듣고 보니 나는 그렇게 생각하지 않는 것 같아." I think my thoughts aren't the same after hearing what you (senior) said.
Disagreement (-indirect)	"선생님 말씀을 듣고 보니 저는 그렇게 생각하지 않습니다." My thoughts aren't the same after hearing what you (teacher) said.	"선배 이야기를 듣고 보니 나는 그렇게 생각하지 않아요." My thoughts aren't the same after hearing what you (senior) said.	"네 말을 듣고 보니 나는 그렇게 생각하지 않아." My thoughts aren't the same after hearing what you said.	"선배 이야기를 듣고 보니 나는 그렇게 생각하지 않아." My thoughts aren't the same after hearing what you (senior) said.

	Teacher (SE1)	Senior at university (SE2)	Friend (SE3)	Senior at work (SE3)
Compliment (+/indirect)	"선생님 말씀이 정말 훌륭한 것 같습니다." I think your (teacher's) idea is brilliant.	"선배 생각이 정말 훌륭한 것 같아요." I think your (senior's) idea is brilliant.	"네 얘기가 정말 훌륭한 것 같아." I think your idea is brilliant.	"선배 생각이 정말 훌륭한 것 같아." I think your (senior's) idea is brilliant.
Compliment (-/indirect)	"선생님 말씀이 정말 훌륭하십니다." Your (teacher's) idea is brilliant.	"선배 생각이 정말 훌륭해요." Your (senior's) idea is brilliant.	"네 얘기가 정말 훌륭해." Your idea is brilliant.	"선배 생각이 정말 훌륭해." Your (senior's) idea is brilliant.
Criticism (+/indirect)	"선생님 말씀이 말이 안되는 것 같습니다." I think your (teacher's) idea is absurd.	"선배 생각이 말이 안 되는 것 같아요." I think your (senior's) idea is absurd.	"네 얘기가 말이 안되는 것 같아." I think your idea is absurd.	"선배 생각이 말이 안 되는 것 같아." I think your (senior's) idea is absurd.
Criticism (-/indirect)	"선생님 말씀이 말이 안됩니다." Your (teacher's) idea is absurd.	"선배 생각이 말이 안 돼요." Your (senior's) idea is absurd.	"네 얘기가 말이 안돼." Your idea is absurd.	"선배 생각이 말이 안돼." Your (senior's) idea is absurd.

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