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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: EXAMINING TRANSLATION GAPS BETWEEN KOREAN AND ENGLISH

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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: EXAMINING TRANSLATION GAPS BETWEEN
KOREAN AND ENGLISH

By

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ABSTRACT

In recent days, we experience varying media entertainment presenting different languages and cultures through the assistance of subtitles. In particular, the rise of Korean dramas and films are attributed to the expansion of a more global audience with the help of English translations. While this enables viewers to interact with Korean culture and language, studies reveal that English translations frequently overlook nuances of the Korean language, producing inaccurate or misleading interpretations. Specifically, I look into what levels of formalities and social hierarchy standards in Korean society are revealed through its language but often left out of English version translations, and how this provides an analysis of power dynamics and cultural implications found in both Korean and American society. Through case studies and literature searches of different examples of Korean media and their related English subtitle translations, I make a comparison between the two societies and their language, and ultimately highlight the differences that provide translation challenges along with its possible implications. As Korean culture becomes a widely recognized and valued phenomenon, a deeper analysis into how its language translates onto a more global audience will allow viewers to gain a deeper understanding of how to communicate, socialize and empathize with Korean society and communities.

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Introduction

In recent years, the rise in Korean culture and media has popularized Korean film, and in turn, broadened the scope of their audience. A customary way to reach this extended audience has been through the use of subtitle translations, where one language is translated into another. While this has created opportunities for many viewers to interact with and perceive Korean culture and language, research indicates translations contain inaccurate or misleading interpretations of the Korean language. This often leads to the omission of social hierarchy standards and variations in social relationships that warrant different types of language use. My research aims to specifically bridge the gap between Korean and English translation discrepancies and the cultural understanding that stems from the reflection of these languages.

Literature Review

Language is often a major indicator in the representation of social positionings, relations and hierarchy systems (Alisoy, 2024). Because these social positions, status markers and hierarchical rank are affiliated with cultural values, the use of language can reveal deeper implications within a society's cultural viewpoint and perspective. Therefore, examining how language operates within these contexts provides valuable insight into the power dynamics at play, illustrating how linguistic choices not only reflect cultural ideologies but reinforce social structures. However, examining this issue raises questions about how language use reflects respective language ideologies (Feng, 2008), and whether their appropriate modes are communicated in translations. This holds particular relevance as linguistic ideologies of a language often reflect and adhere to certain cultural values, views and beliefs of a society. Differences in a culture's language system can reveal stark variations in the reactions, interpretations and implications insinuated. This same notion can be applied to the conversation surrounding the Korean language when directly

compared with the English language, specifically through the lens of whether the ideologies of the Korean language and culture are communicated adequately in English translations.

The pragmatics of the Korean and English language present striking dissimilarities, with the presence of honorifics and intersubjectification in the Korean language the most evident (Cho, 2022). This connotes a shift towards a more pronounced awareness of the hearer's position and status when communicating, where their social status and identity is prioritized. Similarly, within the Korean language, there is also a larger emphasis on the speaker-addressee perspective, a language approach that dictates speech styles based on the social relationship of individuals you are speaking to. For instance, generally, if a speaker addresses a hearer that is older than them, the speaker will choose to address the hearer with honorifics, language markers used for formal speech. However, if the speaker and addressee are acquainted and sustain a close friendship, these honorifics may not be used, and instead the speaker may use *banmal*, language markers indicating casual speech. The focus on relationships and interpersonal communication makes the Korean language system intricate due to the varying grammatical and discourse functions; these distinctions are found most commonly in the different suffixes and "sentence-enders" in the Korean language.

Korean honorifics are linguistic markers that relay social positions and status between two or more speakers. Commonly recognized in verb endings, these markers vary by situation and can be categorized into two different compartments: hearer honorifics and referent honorifics. Within hearer honorifics, there are several subcategories that can be applied to almost every utterance, regardless of any mentionings of a hearer in the conversation or statement (Brown & Yeon, 2015). Each subcategory refers to different contextual scenarios depending on the relationship between two speakers, "used when addressing strangers, non-intimates and

superiors” (Brown & Yeon, 2015, p. 305). Referent honorifics, although similar in the way they indicate assorted social positionings, are forms that specifically refer to a sentence referent. Like hearer honorifics, there are several categories to referent honorifics, depending on the status and social position of the referent, such as a child, doctor, or grandparent. These honorifics may be used simultaneously, and serve parallel purposes in defining hierarchical and social status.

Changes are made to both the speaker and hearer’s speech patterns to reflect their respective stature. In contrast to honorifics, the Korean language also utilizes *banmal* or non-honorific speech that signifies more intimate and casual speech. These markers occupy the same word positionings as honorifics, typically appearing in verb endings or sentence-final particles, though not limited to these. These forms often express familiarity and comfort within relationships, also signaling one’s social status as an equal, friend or in some cases, as a superior belittling the hearer.

Based on the specific nuances between honorifics and *banmal*, one might predict a rigidity in the use of these formalities. However, these usage patterns are often flexible, with speakers frequently shifting between different speech styles (Brown & Yeon, 2015), underlying deliberate intentions. Though there are varying shifts in these speech styles, an upgrading from *banmal* to honorific and downgrading from honorific to *banmal*, often strikes as the most jarring. As these shifts occur, ulterior motives or other purposes for a shift usually are apparent, where the use of honorifics or non-honorifics takes another form than what is normally or regularly intended. Within instances where non-honorific speech is upgraded to honorific, the shift often feels sarcastic or like an insincere form of politeness (Brown & Yeon, 2015), and in other cases, a proactive attempt to enforce unnatural and unnecessary respect or courtesy. Conversely, across manifestations where honorific speech is downgraded to non-honorific speech, this shift may be

used to express greater intimacy or familiarity, or to showcase a conscious effort to be impolite (Brown & Yeon, 2015). In either case, any speech style shifting is seen to be purposeful, apparent and jarring to all parties involved, including external third parties such as audiences. These shifts provide disruptive suggestions for particularly the addressees involved, where these modifications usually conflict with standard relationships based on social positions.

In contrast, the English language generally focuses solely on the intended meaning of what the speaker is saying, rather than how it is spoken and addressed to the addressee (Cutting, 2002). This system prioritizes the content of one's statement, without much inclusion of adjustments according to different receivers in conversations. As long as there is mutual understanding, relevance and reference between two speakers, their linguistic practice is deemed a success (Cutting, 2002). Honorifics or other excessive formalities are not always necessary nor are they an explicit part of English pragmatics. Although the English language also possesses certain variations in honorifics, such as "sir," "ma'am" or "doctor," these markers are mostly used in specific situations or regions, significantly depending on the setting and purpose of a given context (AL-Rawi & Al-Assam, 2014). The use of honorifics are determined by when it is appropriate to use them, where specific addresses such as "doctor," are only reserved for individuals with that specific title. Additionally, they do not require grammatical changes based on social positionings of addressees; they utilize syntactic or lexical strategies to employ these markers rather than morphological changes (i.e., adding the marker "Dr." before an individual's last name). English honorifics act as additional markers rather than necessary and culturally essential language factors, where statements would still be socially acceptable and culturally correct without the use of honorifics. This indicates that honorific markers in the English

language are not culturally significant and rather, operate more as a social component of language. These are often shown through pragmatic strategies, with politeness acting as their main use for employing honorifics (AL-Rawi & Al-Assam, 2014). While this language utilizes honorifics as a means to achieving politeness in different contexts, this is seen to be different from the fundamental anchor honorifics act as in the Korean language, beyond social acceptance and affirmation. This supports the notion that “in English, intimacy overrules rank or social status,” (Hijirida & Sohn, 2009, p. 389), suggesting that formality is ranked lower as a priority within topics of power and communication. While honorifics can still be used in the English language, the purpose and intention with which speakers use these markers are ultimately for connection and empathy, rather than social order or stratification.

Drawing on previous research and background information, the pragmatic and linguistic differences between Korean and English provide an account of many observable translation challenges found in Korean films and corresponding English subtitle translations. Past research has noted possible reasons for mistranslations such as cultural substitution, direct translation, omission and transliteration (Andrianaki, 2021), incorporating the discussion of honorifics in order to assess specific mistranslations. Another study investigated the idea of “invisibles,” where the aforementioned honorifics are “invisible” in translations due to incompatible aspects of the two languages (Kiaer & Kim, 2021). Throughout my research, I intend to build upon this specific topic of invisibles, assessing how the omission of culturally significant linguistic markers proves to be detrimental and problematic in providing accurate subtitle translations. In continuation of this, I explore how these implications contribute to the idea of Orientalism, perpetuating a Western perspective of Eastern culture and language. Through an analysis of translation

practices, I address how generalizations or mistranslations adopt an Orientalistic approach in furthering hegemonic narratives that privilege Western cultural dominance and marginalize Eastern perspectives. (Said, 2005). Though past research studies have been conducted, there still remains a sparse and insufficient amount of groundwork surrounding the topic of subtitle translations within Korean film. Additionally, although both Andrianaki (2021) and Kiaer & Kim (2021) explore crucial areas of Korean culture and language in relation to how this is then translated into the English language, their implications remain broad. Building upon these findings, my research will specifically look into how these mistranslations surrounding honorifics and “invisibles” affect power dynamics found in particular relationships and characters. I will also explore how these findings continuously and consistently influence our differing perspective on Korean and American society and their own respective ideas on the idea of power.

Methodology

Throughout my analysis and research, I selected three different scenes from each film, focusing on contrasting power dynamics that aligned with my chosen relationships: *High Status vs. Low Status*, *Dominant vs. Submissive* and *Man vs. Woman*. I began the analysis process by organizing the original dialogue and subtitle translations into separate charts. Within these charts, I dissected the scene by individual lines, comparing each original dialogue with its counterpart translation. This involved a comparative analysis of different suffixes or phrasings depending on the presence of honorifics or non-honorifics, and a parallel assessment with the corresponding English subtitle translations. In order to pinpoint these divergences, markings were included to show the contrast, such as highlights, underlines and italicizations, and these lines were placed adjacently within their charts. Alongside this, the most apparent implications and distinctions were noted in a separate column, emphasizing the use of honorifics in Korean dialogue and the lack of this found

in translations. After a loose assessment of the differences, an interlinear glossing was conducted, providing a literal translation for the original lines in the film. The process was composed of three varying lines: the first representing the original dialogue written and spoken in Korean, the second line representing a general and broad morpheme-by-morpheme breakdown and the third line presenting an idiomatic, cohesive sentence of the second line. Examining the structuring of the lines allowed for a deeper evaluation of the differences found in the subtitle translations, and helped identify where certain mistranslations commonly occurred.

Interlinear Glossing Example:

i.

나	여기	왜...	뭐	땀	에	들어	왔	는지	그	거	만	얘	기	좀	해	줘	요.	예?"
I-informal-1sg-pres	here	why		entered		only-that	tell	(to do)-formal	okay?									
																imperative	formal	

‘Just tell me why I’m here please.’

Analysis

As mentioned previously, stark differences are found between English and Korean pragmatics as well as their general linguistic features. These differences thus lead to distinct contrasts and variability in the translations from original Korean dialogue to English subtitle translations found in Korean film. More specifically, and as stated in Kiaer & Kim (2022), a considerable issue leading to inconsistencies in translations stems from the concept of “invisibles,” which refers to the omission of cultural linguistic elements, including address-specific Korean honorifics. Also noted earlier, honorifics in the Korean language act as varying linguistic forms that showcase courtesy, respect and most importantly, social status in communication. Commonly used and seen in everyday conversations in Korean society, this display of social hierarchy and status has

no true equivalent in American culture or English language; if this construct does exist, it is never as explicit or embedded as the honorifics found in Korean communities. As the use of honorifics implies one's rank in society, different relationships and conversations echo different variations of language formalities. This introduces the discussion of power dynamics and its associated language that shifts within varying social positions, circumstances and status. Different dynamics often reflect adjustments in the use of honorifics that English subtitle translations are unable to accurately translate. Further examining this concern, this disparity is further emphasized through two films, *Oldboy* and *Parasite*, in which three distinct power dynamics are analyzed through the lens of language use: *Man vs. Woman*, *High Status vs. Low Status*, and *Dominant vs. Submissive*. Using these examples, my analysis of the two films underscores the importance of recognizing the “invisibles” omitted from subtitle translations. Additionally, my research further highlights how these translation inaccuracies affect cultural understandings of power dynamics and shape Western perspectives on Orientalism and foreign cultures.

Oldboy

Across the film, *Oldboy* presents the three aforementioned power dynamics within their respective scenes, with each segment or scenario reflecting a variation in language use and honorifics.

Scene 1: 6:07-7:01

i.

<u>나</u>	<u>여기 왜... 뭐 땀에 들어왔는지</u>	<u>그거만</u>	<u>얘기좀 해줘요.</u>	예?”
<u>I-informal-1sg-pres</u>	<u>here</u>	<u>why</u>	<u>entered</u>	<u>only-that</u>
			<u>tell</u>	<u>(to do)-formal</u>
				<u>okay?</u>
				<u>imperative</u>
				<u>formal</u>

‘Just tell me why I’m here please.’

ii.

아저씨 잠깐만 이리 와봐요.

Sir wait-informal here come-formal

‘Sir wait come here.’

High Status vs. Low Status

In Scene 1, the main character, introduced as Dae-su, pleads with a member of a mysterious corporation or organization that has abducted him, for information on where he is. Within this scene, honorifics are used to reflect the power dynamic between an undisclosed individual of higher status and Dae-su, who is in a significantly lower status. The scene displays a combination of both casual and formal language (1.i.), a critical component that details the type of relationship the characters hold and the severity of Dae-su’s situation. Throughout the scene, what seems to be a simple exchange of Dae-su asking for answers reveals bigger implications that add dimension to the film. For instance, as Dae-su’s character starts off his question, he intentionally utilizes a casual tone while ending that same question with honorifics (1.i.; 나->예?). This format applies to his second statement, where he begins his query and plea with a casual tone, but always ends with a formal tone. The shift and combination of honorifics and *banmal* suggest an attempt to befriend or establish a closer relationship with the stranger, as a means to escape his situation. Concurrently, he maintains a consistent line of formality by using honorifics, respecting the stranger’s status, honoring their lack of relationship, and feeding his counterpart’s pride for leverage. However, examining the English subtitles, its translations do not address any shift in formality, and in one instance, translates honorifics as politeness (1.i.; ‘please’ vs. ‘예’). In other cases, the formality is redacted (1.ii.). The scene displays two strains

of inaccurate translations, where formality is directly mistranslated for politeness, whereas in other lines, the distinction between honorific language and *banmal* is completely erased. Both instances eliminate a pertinent and specific cultural nuance in the Korean language, and instill the assumption that language spoken does not play a prominent role in the establishment of culture and society. Moreover, the translations blend the Korean language into one that mirrors a similar interpersonal communication as the English language. In these cases, translation phrases such as “please” and “sir” connote politeness rather than hierarchical formality. Although these terms suggest a more formal register in comparison to regular conversational verbiage, these expressions do not capture the switch in informal vs. formal tone, an integral linguistic element of the Korean language. Within the implications given, it can be seen why inaccurate translations are inherently problematic when they do not convey the full essence of what the original language connotes.

Scene 2: 31:02-31:26

i.

<u>내가</u>	<u>요</u>	<u>여기까지</u>	<u>데꾸와서</u>	<u>판 소리 하니까</u>
<u>I-informal-1sg</u>	<u>formal suffix</u>	<u>back here</u>	<u>brought</u>	<u>then turned you down</u>

‘I brought you back here and then turned you down,’

ii.

<u>화 내는거 이해해</u>	<u>요.</u>	<u>인정해.</u>
<u>can see why you’re angry</u>	<u>formal suffix</u>	<u>(I) really can-informal</u>

‘I can see why you’re angry. I really can.’

iii.

나도 요 아저씨 마음에 들어서 데꾸온고 맞거든요.
I-informal-1sg-pres formal suffix you like brought here because-formal
‘You know I brought you here because I like you...’

iv.

근데 아저씨 내 이름도 모르잖아요.
But you my-informal-1sg-pres name (even) don’t know-formal
‘...But you don’t even know my name.’

Man vs. Woman

Across Scene 2, a conversation occurs between Dae-su and his newfound but much younger, love interest known as Mi-do. In the scene, Mi-do explains to Dae-su her mutual attraction to him and affirms her feelings for him, using a blend of both casual and formal language (2.ii., 2.iii., 2.iv.). Though the use of both casual and formal language is similar to the first scene, the context and intention with which the character uses her language is different. Generally, formality including honorifics is frequently implemented in scenarios when there is a gender and age imbalance. In this instance, the use of honorifics is based on both imbalances: Dae-su, a man significantly older than Mi-do, a younger woman, never uses honorifics, while Mi-do employs a blend of casual and formal language (2.ii.). Though they are not intimately acquainted yet, they are accustomed to one another, showcased by Mi-do’s casual verbiage; this highlights her comfortability with Dae-su, contrasting the conversation between Dae-su and the stranger in Scene 1. However, Mi-do’s casual language is joined by occasional formality, still instilling standard respect and courtesy according to social and cultural norms in Korean society.

Additionally, her informal language hints at the possibility of foreshadowing the characters' social positioning in the film. Although Dae-su is factually higher on the social ladder due to his age and gender, both characters are revealed to be hypnotized and unconsciously controlled in their decisions at this point in the film - they are equal in power in the sense that both characters are manipulated in the same game. Based on this analysis, the substance and undertones language presents are apparent in *Oldboy*. Establishing the two characters' connection and intimate relationship is crucial to the film's climax, and Mi-do's manner of speaking towards Dae-su demonstrates how language functions as a key component in achieving this throughout the film. In the Korean language, the use of both casual and formal language implies a notable change in the two characters' power dynamic. As their language is heavily situated around a rigid social hierarchy, any change outside of this structure is prominent and meaningful. Because of the English language's more fluid and permissive system of honorifics, the subtitle translations in this scene render the societal significance of language, and its role in shifting power dynamics, largely invisible. The erasure of any variance in honorifics and *banmal* downplays the intimacy between the two characters and obscures the significance of Mi-do's informal speech, which reflects their evolving dynamic. This removes a crucial aspect that indicates a shift in power dynamics, thereby diminishing the role that language can play in shaping and reflecting these changes. The failure of English subtitle translations to accurately convey the characters' conversational dialogue and, by extension, their relationship, overlooks the complex power dynamics on which *Oldboy*'s plot is built on.

Scene 3: 1:43:36-1:43:53

i.

우진아. 우진씨 내가 잘못했다.

‘Woo-jin! Please sir I made a mistake...’

내가 그 말 취소한다.

‘...Please forget what I said...’

취소해. 어르신. 회장님. 우진아. 우리 동창이잖아. 어?"

‘...Sir! Woojin! We’re Evergreen Old Boys, remember?’

Towards the end of the film's climax in Scene 3, Dae-su pleads with his antagonist, Woo-jin, to preserve Mi-do's oblivion when Dae-su's love interest is revealed to be his daughter. In this encounter, Dae-su's tone rapidly shifts from informal to formal, and casual to regimented, as his "methods" in enticing Woo-jin changes (3.i.-ii.). Throughout his confrontation, Dae-su employs both ends of their linguistic social extreme, where *banmal* is used to establish a sense of relatability to Woo-jin (3.ii.), while honorifics are used in the next phrase in attempting to appeal to Woo-jin's ego and dominance (3.iii.). Within 3.iii., Dae-su's verbiage is important as it directly goes against the social norms and cultural boundaries in everyday conversations, particularly given that he is older than Woo-jin. His language choices exhibit forced humility and a deliberate self-deprecation as he simultaneously attempts to establish connection with and show respect for

Woo-jin, underscoring his love for Mi-do. The rapid tone shift adds to his psychologically wired mental state, and reflects a shift in power dynamics where Dae-su's language was aggressive and belligerent until this point. The sudden changes in his linguistic manners communicates rising tension and despair, as well as creates a jarring quality that is absent in the English subtitle translations. Before this point, the evolving power dynamic between Woo-jin and Dae-su had been characterized by cycles of provocation and retaliation. Dae-su's use of honorifics in order to lower himself comes across as a detrimental blow to his character, emphasizing his devastation and loss. His language not only provides a haunting sentiment that the translations do not capture, but spotlights his desperation to ignore the reality that his pursuit for revenge has been for nothing. The invisibilization of honorifics and *banmal* once again erases the shift in power dynamics and flattens the linguistic nuances. This results in misinterpretations of the characters, where their choices or mental state are not accurately portrayed. Along with the "invisibles" in these translations, certain wordings seem blatantly inaccurate (3.iii.), or simplifies specific terms into one. Although terms like "어르신" and "회장님" are both translated as "sir," Dae-su's word choices purposefully lower his own position in deference towards Woo-jin, whereas the term "sir" implies a more casual wording conveying general politeness. Additionally, the two terms carry slightly different meanings, where "어르신" is generally used for individuals particularly older than the other, and "회장님" refers to the highest chairman or president position of an esteemed company or organization. These words connote an extreme level of respect and courtesy for the addressee, one that "sir" does not hold up to. These mistranslations trivialize both Dae-su's personal pain and the shift in their power dynamic as the simplification of language leads to a glossing of cultural nuances. By failing to retain specific cultural elements,

the subtitles do not accurately convey the scene or the film as a whole, diminishing the effect of one of the film's essential moments.

Parasite

Similar to *Oldboy*, Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* also offers parallel scenes displaying the three power dynamics in novel ways compared to the first film.

Scene 1: 1:30:38-1:30:24

i.

제가 며칠전에 건강검진 받으러 병원에 갔다가요...
I-formal-1sg-pres couple days ago health check-up to receive hospital went-formal

‘I went there for a health checkup a few days ago.’

ii.

어. 이분이 뒤에 보이더라 말입니다...
Yes-informal. her-1sg-past behind saw formal suffix

‘I saw her behind my back.’

iii.

어디 통화하고 있는거네 지금?
Somewhere calling is (she)-informal right now?

‘Is she talking on the phone?’

iv.

제가 들을라고 들은게 아니라
I-formal-1sg-pres overheard hear not (to)

‘Well..I didn’t mean to overhear but’

High Status vs. Low Status

The first scene provides a glimpse into the working relationship between Ki-taek, the head of the Kim family, and Yeon-kyo, the wife of the family Ki-taek is employed under. Within their conversation, Ki-taek adopts a completely formal tone as he informs Yeon-kyo of a previous interaction he has had with her maid. His language reflects his position, a main indicator of their position in their power dynamic of an employer and employee (1.i.). On the other hand, Yeon-kyo replies to Ki-taek casually, using *banmal* (1.iii.). This detail is crucial to the relationship the two characters hold, where if circumstances were outside of a work setting, Ki-taek's age would deem him to have higher status than Yeon-kyo. However, English subtitle translations fail to convey this distinction, giving the impression that they occupy the same social status or rank; the translations make it unclear whether their relationship reflects friendship, collegiality or mere acquaintance. Additionally, in one instance, the translations omit Yeon-kyo's response to Ki-taek (1.ii.), where she responds with "ㅇ," usually meaning "Yes" or "Yeah," in an informal tone. This phrase further establishes their relationship, where Yeon-kyo is comfortable speaking casually with Ki-taek as his employer. In this scenario, purposefully using formal language towards the wife reveals Ki-taek's ulterior motive: to establish a respectable and trusted relationship with his employee, in order to have his family members hired into his workplace as well. As noted, the English subtitle translations fail to clarify the nature of their working relationship. Because there is no distinction between the use of honorifics and *banmal*, the implied dynamic between the two characters is flat and eliminates the layered interpretation of both characters' intentions. Although the two characters appear to share a friendly relationship, the translation misses the varying use of honorifics and *banmal* necessary in showcasing underlying social customs. The absence in the contrast between honorifics and

banmal minimizes the substantial gap in their social status, and within this, misinterprets their power dynamics as more balanced or equal than they actually are. Because the exploration of power dynamics is an important topic within the film, overlooking the language difference in the way the two characters speak undermines the overall theme of the film.

Scene 2: 45:09-44:55

i.

저 텐트 저거 빗물 안새겠지? 아우 저거 미제 텐트잖아요. 괜찮습니다.

That tent that rain leak-informal Oh that from US tent-formal It's fine-formal

‘Is that tent going to leak? We ordered it from the US. It’ll be fine.’

ii.

우리 아예 그냥 쇼파에서 잘까? 응?

We entirely just on sofa sleep-informal what?-informal

‘Should we just sleep here? What?’

iii.

여기 텐트 보이니까. 어 그래 그래.

From here tent see-informal oh ok-informal ok-informal

‘We can see the tent from here? Good idea.’

iv.

그게 속 편하겠다. 그지? 다송이 보면서 자요.

That will mind ease-informal right-informal Da-Song while seeing sleep-formal

‘We won’t have to worry so much. Right? Let’s sleep near Da-Song.’

Man vs. Woman

In Scene 2, Yeon-kyo's dialogue towards her husband Dong-ik demonstrates another instance of using a combination of casual and formal language when discussing their sleeping arrangement for the night. During their interaction, Yeon-kyo's tonal responses to Dong-ik's comments shifts and alternates consistently, and ultimately ends her replies formally (2.iv.). Throughout their exchange, Dong-ik's style of language remains consistent and casual, while Yeon-kyo uses a mix of formal and informal language use. At one point in the scene, the wife goes as far as responding with the phrase “팬참습니다,” using a higher degree of honorifics than what is normally seen in recent days (2.i.). The varying language seen in the original dialogue offers insight into the type of relationship the couple has, and the kind of power dynamic they maintain between themselves. We can speculate Dong-ik's principal figure and his position as the head of the household based on the language being used. Moreover, their communication implies a lack of depth and superficiality in their relationship, with many of their interactions seeming transactional or surface-level. Their relationship is formal, hierarchical and emotionally shallow - and their linguistic choices reflect this. This layered interpretation is not translated within English subtitles, once again portraying the two characters as equals when speaking. It also leads into the dismissal of gender disparity within Korean society, where the use of honorifics and formalities are emphasized in conversations. Honorifics are commonly seen in the beginnings of romantic relationships, indicating mutual respect and adherence to social customs, though this practice is less common in younger generations. Because linguistic choices offer a deeper analysis into the relationship between Yeon-kyo and Dong-sik, inaccurate translations portray an inaccurate depiction of the impact this detail brings to the plot of the film. Their language use, and therefore their relationship dynamic, foreshadows the fragility that leads to the dismantling

of their family structure. The lack of distinction in subtitle translations removes the essence of the couple's dynamic, as the majority of their connection is shown only through their language.

Scene 3: 1:04:26-1:03:46

i.

그쳐 충석이 언니? 내 이름은 어떻게 알아?

Right, Choong-sook sis? My-informal-1sg-pres name how know-informal

‘Right, Choong-sook? How do you know my name?’

ii.

아 예, 사실 막내 다송이 하고는 아직 문자를 하거든요.

Oh, yes-formal actually, youngest Da-Song with still texting (to do)-formal

‘Oh, actually, I’m still texting with Da-Song.’

iii.

오늘 식구들 캠핑 가는거 알고서 일부러 집으로 온거예요.

Today family camping going knew purposefully to-house came-formal

‘I knew they were going camping today. That’s why I came today.’

iv.

언니랑 단 둘이 얘기좀 하고 싶어서.

To sister just two(us) speak (to do) wanted-informal

‘I wanted to speak to you alone.’

v.

걱정마세요, 충석이 언니.

Don’t worry-formal Choong-sook. sister

‘Don’t worry Choong-sook.’

vi.

내가 집 앞 cctv도 썩둑 잘라냈거든

I-informal-1sg-pres house by CCTV cables snip cut-informal

‘I cut the CCTV cables by the house.’

vii.

나 여기 온거 아무도 몰라요. 나 잘했죠 언니?

I’m-informal here come nobody knows-formal I-informal did good sis

‘Nobody knows I’m here now. Pretty clever, right, sis?’

Dominant vs. Submissive

From the number of scenes discussed before, scene 3 in *Parasite* utilizes the most prominent blend of formal and informal language, exhibited in Moon-gwang’s dialogue. Throughout Scene 3, Moon-gwang attempts to appease Choong-sook into keeping her secret using specific language tactics. Moon-gwang begins her dialogue formally, addressing Choong-sook respectfully and aligning with regular social norms (3i.-ii.). However as the scene progresses, she begins to shift towards a friendlier tone, using *banmal* when addressing herself (3.iii.-iv.) while addressing the recipient as “언니,” which subtitles translate as “sis.” Both language tactics act as apparent methods to palliate her situation and Choong-sook’s attitude towards her, and creates an obvious power dynamic between the two characters. The word choice of “언니” is particularly overlooked, as the term is generally only reserved for casual and intimate relations, which in the case of scene 3, the characters do not share. The social hierarchy implemented into Korean society and culture emphasizes the intimacy of this word, where “언니” implies a level of trust and mutual connection that purposefully oversteps social boundaries and hierarchy. The

translation of “sis,” although implying a level of closeness, lacks the same impact because it does not follow suit with the switch in informal and formal speech, and is not necessarily exclusive to hierarchical relationships. Alongside this verbiage, the use of casual language reinforces Moon-gwang’s desperation in leveling her status to Choong-sook in an effort to establish security in their relationship. Oppositely, Choong-sook’s cold demeanor is amplified by her use of *banmal*, where her dominant position allows her access to a casual tone, an assertion of power also relayed to Moon-gwang. Language use, more prominently than other examples, is imperative in this scene as it reflects not only the social positionings that drive the plot of this film, but adds insight into the characters’ positions. These choices are invisible in the subtitle translations, where neither character’s language choices are differentiated between the other (3.i.-ii.). The tone of these translations remain constant where the displayment of power dynamics cannot necessarily be seen through language. Certain translations, such as “언니” to “sis,” are not adequate substitutes without the inclusion of a switch between honorifics and *banmal* due to the hierarchical implications and significance of the Korean language.

As seen throughout the films *Oldboy* and *Parasite*, “invisibles” carry a crucial role in interpreting power dynamics, and their omission in translations removes important implications brought forth by language. In films that center on power dynamics, the analyzed scenes demonstrate how the absence of “invisibles” results in a loss of nuance present in the original text and film, including motives, relationships, and cultural standards. Often, the omission of these linguistic choices and invisible honorifics dilute the complexity and sophistication of Korean film, and reflects a Western perspective or perception of other cultures. This is emphasized and led by a stark contrast between American and Korean society’s opposing perspective on power dynamics.

Implications and Findings

As previously mentioned, research states that “in English, intimacy overrules rank or social status,” (Hijirida & Sohn, 2009, p. 389) highlighting a cultural tendency to prioritize closeness over formal hierarchy in communication. This affirms the view that American society favors the use of casual or informal tones to reflect the concept of “intimacy” in language, and looks at formality as a form of barrier to this connectedness they value in relationships. From this finding, the lack of “invisibles” in English translations could be explained by the fundamental idea that these pragmatic markers or honorifics, are viewed as an impediment to their intimacy, and a minor factor contributing to their idea of power dynamics. Ultimately, American society simply does not prioritize power dynamics in the same manner as Korean society. Furthermore, it has been found that American society values individualism over collectivism (Hijirida & Sohn, 2009), reinforcing the idea that less personal interactions are upheld, leading to a lack of customized linguistic practices like honorifics. With this, American society is often seen to endorse an egalitarian system, consolidating the idea that every individual should be of equal social status (Hijirida & Sohn, 2009); this would explain a more fluid or broad language structure found in subtitle translations. Though there is a difference in the way they view power dynamics, this leading perspective in America contributes to a monocultural view of the world, where their own perspective is instilled when representing films that showcase Korean culture and an opposing view of power dynamics. Translations often lack the nuances established by linguistic markers such as honorifics, thus resulting in a monolithic view of a language and culture. More specifically, when looking at the English translations of the Korean language, the erasure of the power dynamics conveyed in Korean can prompt an interpretation of the culture that is rooted in Orientalism. This assumption stems from the idea that more often than not, English subtitle

translations generalize the original dialogue, removing essential and foundational components of Korean language, like honorifics, that illustrate varying power dynamics. The erasure of language leads to an erasure of culture, defining Korean culture to be a replicated image of the English language, thus American culture. While the chosen films specifically prompt running questions about Korean society and its hierarchy, the translations' simplification presents an adherence to American customs and personal ideology of power dynamics. Because honorifics - and their implications for illustrating power dynamics in films - play an important role in the Korean language, their absence in translations can contribute to Orientalism and the assertion of Western cultural dominance. Implementing a cross-cultural perspective can help establish a more neutral view of other cultures and raise awareness of the values and standards present in different societies, including Korean culture.

Conclusion

I have analyzed the nuances of the Korean language often mistranslated in English subtitles, in context of the development of power dynamics and portrayal of varying relationships found in Korean films. Employing the two global films, *Oldboy* and *Parasite*, the research investigates how language reflects interpersonal communication, and the possibility and ability for these nuances to be cross-culturally translated into another language. Utilizing these findings, the research also looks into how the open accessibility of subtitle translations mold and shape the perception of foreign cultures, and may feed into the existing conversation surrounding Orientalism.

While more exploration is required to fully understand the depth and complexities pertaining to the topic of translation issues, my research acts as a starting point in beginning to understand the specific implications stemming from linguistic nuances. Moreover, my study

considers not only how these differences shape cultural understanding but also how underlying language systems provide insight into the ways societies function more broadly.

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