

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Undergraduate Research Journal

Title

Cross-cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps between Korean and English

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1dd8545b>

Journal

UC Riverside Undergraduate Research Journal, 20(1)

Author

Park, Elizabeth

Publication Date

2026-10-10

DOI

10.5070/RJ5.64066

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Cross-Cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps Between Korean and English

Elizabeth Park, Department of Comparative Literature and Languages
Emily Graham, Ph.D; Department of Comparative Literature and Languages

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly global society, varying media entertainment presents different languages and cultures through the assistance of subtitles. In particular, Korean films have become popular in English-speaking countries through the prevalence of English subtitles. 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. Through the examination of language and power dynamics in the Korean film, *Parasite*, this research explores power dynamics and cultural implications revealed through the Korean language by the use of honorifics. However, in English language subtitles, these crucial elements of the Korean language are almost completely absent. This analysis, then, presents an argument for how broad and inaccurate translations often erase central elements of a culture and further lend to misconceptions of non-Anglocentric societies.

KEYWORDS: language, translations, honorifics, film

FACULTY MENTOR - Dr. Emily Graham, Department of Comparative Literature and Languages



Emily Graham is Assistant Professor of Linguistics, and her primary research interests lie in psycholinguistics and phonetics. She has conducted research on sentence-level processing, specifically how we link pronouns to their antecedents as well as the neurophysiological processing of determiner phrases.



ELIZABETH PARK

Elizabeth Park is a recent graduate from the University of California, Riverside with a Bachelor's degree in Linguistics. Her work focuses on cross-cultural communication, analyzing translation gaps between the Korean and English languages. This research was completed as a capstone project under the guidance of Dr. Emily Graham in the Comparative Literature and Languages Department. Elizabeth hopes to further explore language and communication studies alongside plans to apply to a graduate program in Speech-Language Pathology.

Cross-Cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps Between Korean and English

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In recent years, the rise of Korean culture and media has popularized Korean films, which in turn have increased their global exposure and broadened their viewership. A common way to reach this extended audience has been through subtitle translations, where one language is translated into another. While this has created opportunities for many viewers to engage with Korean culture and language, research indicates that many translations contain inaccurate or misleading interpretations of the Korean language. Subtitles often omit the role of social hierarchy standards and variations in social relationships that warrant different types of language use.

Using Bong Joon Ho's 2019 film *Parasite*, my research aims to specifically bridge the gap between Korean and English translation discrepancies and the cultural understandings that stem from the reflection of these languages. 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 insights into the power dynamics at play, illustrating how linguistic choices not only reflect cultural ideologies but also reinforce social hierarchies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Examining this issue raises questions about how language use reflects respective language ideologies (Feng, 2008) and if appropriate language modes are communicated in translations. The role of translations in conveying linguistic ideologies holds particular relevance as the linguistic ideologies of a language often reflect and adhere to certain cultural values, views and beliefs. Differences in a culture's language system can reveal stark variations in reactions, interpretations, and implications. When comparing Korean and English, it is important to examine if the ideologies of the Korean language and culture are communicated adequately in English translations.

The pragmatics of the Korean and English languages present striking dissimilarities, especially the use of honorifics and intersubjectification in the Korean language (Cho, 2022). Prioritizing social status and identity encourages a shift towards a more pronounced awareness of the hearer's position and status when communicating with others. Similarly, Korean strongly emphasizes the speaker-addressee's perspective, a language approach that dictates speech styles based on the social relationship of the individuals. For example, if a speaker is addressing a hearer who is older, they will generally choose to use honorifics and language markers used in formal speech. However, if the speaker and addressee have a close friendship, these honorifics may not be used, and instead the speaker may use *banmal*, language markers indicating casual speech. This 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 used in verb endings, these markers, such as -요 (-yo), -입니다 (-imnida,) or -에요 (ehyo), vary by situation and can be categorized into two different categories: hearer honorifics and referent honorifics. Within hearer honorifics, there are several subcategories that can be applied to almost every utterance, regardless of the content of the individual statement or larger conversation (Brown & Yeon, 2015). Each subcategory refers to different contextual scenarios depending on the relationship between two speakers, such as ones "used when addressing strangers, non-intimates and superiors" (Brown & Yeon, 2015, p. 305). Referent honorifics, although similar in the way they indicate relative social positionings, are forms that specifically refer to a sentence referent.

Like hearer honorifics, there are several categories of referent honorifics that depend 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's and hearer's speech patterns to reflect their respective status. In addition

Cross-Cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps Between Korean and English

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. These forms often express familiarity and comfort within relationships and signal one's social status as an equal, friend, or, in some cases, can be used by a superior to belittle 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 to reflect varying intentions (Brown & Yeon, 2015). Although there are many uses of this shift in speech styles, upgrading from *banmal* to honorific or downgrading from honorific to *banmal* are often the most jarring to listeners. As these shifts occur, ulterior motives or other purposes for a shift usually become apparent. In instances where non-honorific speech is upgraded to honorific, the shift may be perceived as sarcastic or like an insincere form of politeness (Brown & Yeon, 2015) or as a proactive attempt to enforce unnatural and unnecessary respect or courtesy. Conversely, shifting from honorific to non-honorific speech 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 as purposeful, apparent, and jarring to all parties involved, including external third parties such as audiences. These shifts are especially disruptive for the addressee, as these modifications usually conflict with standard relationships based on social positions.

In contrast, the English language generally focuses 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 and generally is not adjusted for 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 does possess certain variations in honorifics, such as "sir," "ma'am," or "doctor,"

these markers are mostly used in specific situations or regions and vary significantly depending on the setting and purpose of a given context (AL-Rawi & Al-Assam, 2014).

The use of honorifics is 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 the social positioning 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 the English language utilizes honorifics as a means of achieving politeness in different contexts, this is different from how the fundamental anchor honorifics act in the Korean language. 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 for social order or stratification.

The pragmatic and linguistic differences between Korean and English provide an important context for the many observable translation challenges found in Korean films and their corresponding English subtitle translations. Previous research has noted possible reasons for mistranslations, such as cultural substitution, direct translation, omission, and transliteration (Andrianaki, 2021). Many of these analyses have discussed honorifics in order to assess specific mistranslations. More specifically, Kiaer & Kim (2022) note that a common source of translation inconsistency is the concept of "invisibles," which refers to the omission

Cross-Cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps Between Korean and English

of cultural linguistic elements, including address-specific Korean honorifics. Commonly used and heard in everyday conversations in Korean society, this display of social hierarchy and status has no true equivalent in American culture or the English language. Thus, if this construct does exist in the English translations, it is never as explicit or embedded as the honorifics found in Korean. Different dynamics often reflect adjustments in the use of honorifics that English subtitle translations are unable to accurately translate.

I intend to build upon this concept of “invisibles” to assess how the omission of culturally significant linguistic markers proves to be detrimental and problematic in providing accurate subtitle translations. I also explore how these findings continuously and consistently influence our differing perspective on Korean and American society and their own respective ideas on the notion of power. Through an analysis of translation practices, I address how mistranslations may misconstrue or generalize specific cultures due to a lack of nuance in subtitle translations. Though past research studies such as Andrianaki (2021) and Kiaer & Kim (2021) have been conducted, there still remains a sparse and insufficient amount of scholarly attention to subtitle translations within Korean film. Although both Andrianaki (2021) and Kiaer & Kim (2021) explore crucial areas of Korean culture and language in relation to how they are translated into the English language, their implications remain broad. Building upon these findings, my research specifically examines how mistranslations surrounding honorifics and “invisibles” affect power dynamics found in particular relationships and characters.

METHODOLOGY

For my analysis, I selected two scenes from *Parasite* that highlight contrasting power dynamics, resulting in notable changes in linguistic choices: *High Status vs. Low Status* and *Dominant vs. Submissive*. These scenes were chosen based on the presence of distinctive power dynamics pertinent to the film’s story, which made notable changes that drove the story forward. I began the analysis process by organizing the original dialogue and Netflix-provided subtitle translations into separate charts. Within these charts, I dissected the

scene by individual lines, comparing each original Korean dialogue with its counterpart English translation. This involved a comparative analysis of different suffixes or phrasings depending on the presence of honorifics or non-honorifics in Korean, and a parallel assessment of the corresponding English subtitle translations. Markings, such as highlights, underlines, and italicizations, were used to pinpoint divergences.

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 in the translation. 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 representing a general and broad morpheme-by-morpheme breakdown, and the third presenting an idiomatic, cohesive phrasing of the content of the second line. Examining the structure of the lines allowed for a deeper evaluation of the differences found in the subtitle translations and helped identify where certain mistranslations commonly occurred. Because of its focus on textual and contextual interpretation, the methodology is primarily qualitative rather than a quantitative measurement of differences. As a result, the findings are based on an interpretive analysis that may not be generalizable across the entire film or other translations more broadly. Additionally, the analysis may be influenced by the researcher’s interpretation bias, as the identification of mistranslations or power dynamics partially relies on personal interpretation. Consequently, alternative readings or conclusions could be drawn by other researchers.

ANALYSIS

As mentioned previously, stark differences are found between English and Korean pragmatics as well as their general linguistic features. This disparity is further highlighted in the film *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*.

Cross-Cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps Between Korean and English

Using these examples, my analysis of *Parasite* underscores the importance of recognizing the “invisibles” omitted from subtitle translations, further affecting cultural understandings of power dynamics and shaping Western perspectives of foreign cultures. In the following scene, the character Ki-taek addresses his employer, Yeon-kyo, and reflects a variation in language use and honorifics.

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

i. 제가 며칠 전에 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...

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?’

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 that employs Ki-taek. During their conversation, Ki-taek adopts a 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 the 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 between the two characters; if they were to converse outside of a work setting, Ki-taek’s age would deem him to have a higher status than Yeon-kyo.

However, English subtitle translations fail to convey this distinction, giving the impression that the characters occupy the same social status or rank; the translations make it

unclear if 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 “어,” 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. 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 the underlying social customs.

The absence of the contrast between honorifics and *banmal* minimizes the substantial gap in the characters’ social statuses, and 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. For example, in another sequence, Moon-gwang and Choong-sook meet in a tense confrontation where Moon-gwang’s ongoing deception is revealed. The following dialogue represents their conversation after their unexpected encounter.

Scene 2: 45:09-44:55

i. 그쳐 충석이 언니? 네 이름은 어떻게 알아?

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

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

Cross-Cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps Between Korean and English

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.’

Dominant vs. Submissive

Scene 2 in *Parasite* utilizes the most prominent blend of formal and informal language, exhibited in Moon-gwang’s dialogue. Throughout Scene 2, Moon-gwang attempts to appease Choong-sook to keep her secret using specific language tactics. Moon-gwang begins her dialogue formally, addressing Choong-sook respectfully and aligning with regular social norms (2i.-ii.). However, as the scene progresses, she begins to shift towards a friendlier tone, using *banmal* when referring to herself (2.iii.-iv.) and addressing the recipient as “언니,” which the subtitle translates as “sis.” Both language tactics act as apparent methods to ameliorate her situation and Choong-sook’s attitude towards her, and create an obvious power dynamic between the two characters.

The use of “언니” is particularly overlooked, as the term is generally only reserved for casual and intimate relations, which, in scene 2, the characters do not share. The social hierarchy of 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’s use of “sis,” although implying a level of closeness, lacks the same impact

because it does not follow the switch between informal and formal speech, and is not necessarily exclusive to hierarchical relationships. The use of casual language also reinforces Moon-gwang’s desperation by leveling her status to Choong-sook in an effort to establish security in their relationship. Conversely, 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 is imperative in this scene as it reflects not only the social positioning that drives the film’s plot but also adds insight into the characters’ positions. These choices are invisible in the subtitle translations, where neither character’s language choices are differentiated from the other’s (2.i.- ii.). 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 implied in the Korean.

CONCLUSION

Thematically, *Parasite* shows how these “invisibles” play a crucial role in interpreting power dynamics, and their omission in translations removes important implications brought forth by language. In a film that centers on power dynamics, these 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 may reduce the complexity and sophistication of Korean film, and potentially reflect a Western perspective or perception of other cultures. This is emphasized by the stark contrast between American and Korean societies’ perspectives on power dynamics.

Research has noted that “in English, intimacy overrules rank or social status” (Hijirida & Sohn, 2009, p. 389), which highlights a cultural tendency to prioritize closeness over formal hierarchy in communications. The prioritization of relationships shown in the scenes analyzed above suggests that the subtitle translations prioritize conversational intimacy over formal hierarchy, reflecting linguistic conventions more commonly associated with English communication styles. While the original dialogue in Scene 1 includes a distinction in honorifics and *banmal* between

Cross-Cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps Between Korean and English

Ki-taek (employee) and Yeon-kyo (employer), the subtitles do not provide the same markers. In a scenario that includes both cordiality and social constraints, the Korean language prioritizes the latter, while the translations prioritize the former. The lack of “invisibles” in English translations could be explained by the fundamental idea that these pragmatic markers or honorifics may be viewed as an impediment to the characters’ intimacy and play a minor role in their power dynamics.

The analysis of these scenes suggests that English subtitle translations may place less emphasis on hierarchical distinctions compared to the original Korean dialogue. Past research notes that English communication often prioritizes individualism and intimacy over collectivism (Hijirida & Sohn, 2009), which may explain the decreased emphasis on interpersonal interactions, leading to a lack of customized linguistic practices seen in the subtitle translations. American society is often associated with more egalitarian social values, emphasizing the idea that every individual should be of equal social status (Hijirida & Sohn, 2009). This attitude may help explain why English subtitle translations tend to adopt broader or more fluid language structures than the original Korean. Translation choices that reflect English-speaking cultural norms, even in films that showcase Korean culture and its related power dynamics, may potentially shape how international audiences interpret these relationships. Ultimately, translations often lack the nuances established by linguistic markers such as honorifics, possibly indicating a reductive view of a language and culture. 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.

While *Parasite* specifically prompts ongoing questions about Korean society and its hierarchy, the translations’ simplification presents an adherence to American customs and personal ideologies 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 may contribute to an assertion of Western cultural influence. 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. Although this research focuses primarily on linguistic nuances and honorific usage within specific scenes from *Parasite*, future research could expand to examine other factors that influence subtitle translation choices, such as subtitle length or readability for audiences. In addition, studies specifically on audience reception could provide insight into how viewers are directly affected or influenced by the omission of honorifics and if these changes affect their understanding of Korean social hierarchy and cultural context. While more exploration is required to fully understand the depth and complexities pertaining to the topic of subtitle translations, this research acts as a starting point to understand the specific implications stemming from linguistic nuances.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my warmest gratitude and appreciation to my faculty mentor, Dr. Emily Graham, without whom this project would not have been possible. Her invaluable guidance has been instrumental in the shaping and completion of this project. I would also like to thank my parents for instilling a deep-rooted love for our cultural identity and heritage that has provided the foundation for this project. They are the cornerstone of everything I am.

Cross-Cultural Communication: Examining Translation Gaps Between Korean and English

REFERENCES

- Alisoy, H. (2024). *Stratification of language in society*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10507792>
- AL-Rawi, S.S., & Al-Assam, D.A.A. (2018). A pragmatic study of English honorifics forms. *Journal of the College of Languages*, (38), 1-27.
- Andrianaki E. (2021, December 21). *An analysis of the translation of culture-specific concepts in the subtitles of Parasite and Squid Game*. (Publication No: 202EGG06) [Thesis, Ewha Womans University].
- Brown, L., & Yeon, J. (Eds.). (2015). *The handbook of Korean linguistics*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Cho, S., & Whitman, J. (Eds.). (2022). Semantics and pragmatics. In *The Cambridge handbook of Korean linguistics* (pp. 487–656). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108292351>
- Cutting, J. (2002). *Pragmatics and Discourse: A resource book for students*. Routledge. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/keris/Doc?id=10016807&page=1>
- Feng, H. (2009). Different languages, different cultures, different language ideologies, different linguistic models. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 4(2), 151–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447140802283191>
- Hijirida, K., & Sohn, H. (1986). Cross-cultural patterns of honorifics and sociolinguistic sensitivity to honorific variables: Evidence from English, Japanese, and Korean. *Paper in Linguistics*, 19(3), 365–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351818609389264>
- Kiaer, J., & Kim, L. (2021). *Soft power of the Korean wave: Parasite, BTS and drama*. Routledge.
- Kiaer, J., & Kim, L. (2022). Understanding Korean film: A cross-cultural perspective. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003089896>