Spotlight and handover: Register socialization in Korean child-directed speech

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Background

Becoming an expert language user entails learning **registers**: not just *what* is said, but *how*, depending on addressee and context. Children reliably match **social registers** (infant-directed speech, casual, formal) with **typical addressees** (baby, little girl, teacher) by age 5[1].

Emergent register knowledge links to **social biases**: children prefer register-competent speakers as early as age 4[2], and rate register-accurate speakers as more credible at age 7[3].

How is early language and social input structured to support emergent social register knowledge?

Korean honorific register framework

High-resolution register framework that **grammatically** encodes one's relative social positioning across almost every utterance. Two main speech registers: honorific register *contaymal* ("respect-speech") and non-honorific register *panmal* ("half-speech")[4].

Regular usage and position as **obligatory, agglutinated verbal suffix** (e.g., -요) provides salient and reliable register signal far beyond optional stylistic cues (e.g., "please," indirect questions, prosody, pitch).

Study 1 (cross-sectional): Honorifics in the spotlight 🔍

CHILDES Ko corpus[5]:

Naturalistic "home" recordings (audio only)

Age groups: 8, 13, 27 mo **Avg rec. duration** = 46.87 mins

N = 30 (10 per age group) (*SD* = 3.44)

Speech act coding:

Utterance-level speech act coding using Inventory of Communicative Acts - Abridged (**INCA-A**)[6]:

line_num	spkr	INCA-A	transcription
375	MOT	RQ	제일 큰 것부터 껴 볼까요 그럼? most big-ATTR thing-from put.on try-SUPP.SUGQ-**HON** then Then shall we try on the biggest one first?
380	CHI	ST	엄마 안 돼. mom not allowed We can't Mom.
384	MOT	YQ	안 돼요? not allowed-**HON** We can't?
389	MOT	ST	할 수 있어요. do-FUT.ATTR ability exist-**HON** We can.

CDS register usage is *dynamic*, not static

Honorifics in CDS is *regular*,

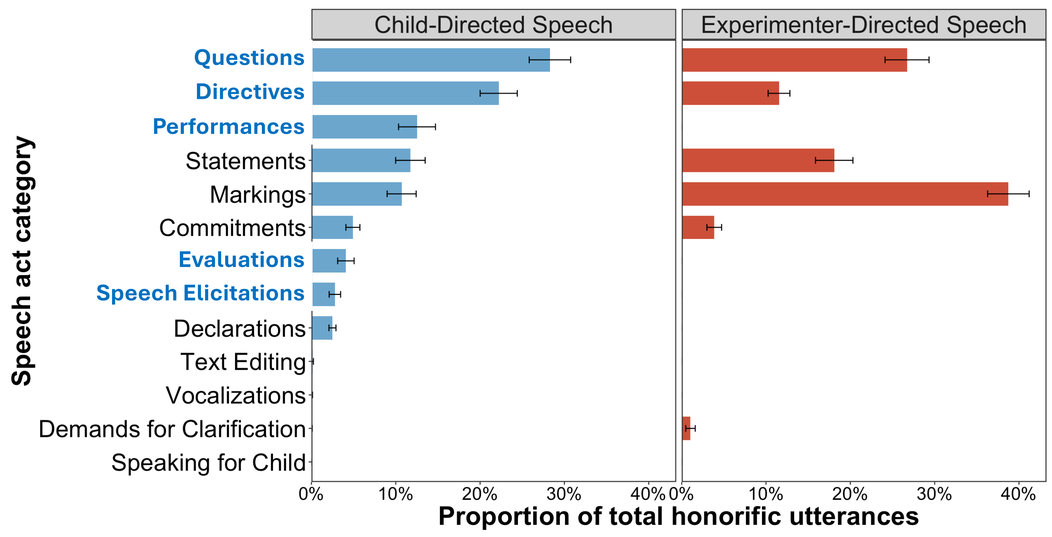
age group (months)	mean utts/min (sd)	mean num unique speech acts (sd)	prop. honorific utts
8	38.3 (9.4)	29.9 (4.60)	0.085 (0.044)
13	39.6 (5.7)	33.4 (3.87)	0.090 (0.057)
27	39.1 (3.2)	38.5 (3.14)	0.132 (0.087)

more than a marker of *social distance*,

Honorifics were used significantly more often to children *(M* = 11.4%*)* than to other family members, despite them all being socially *close*.
(t(28) = 3.16, p < 0.005; experimenter-directed speech prop. = 78.6%)

and more than a general marker of *linguistic input*.

Honorifics in **CDS** help regulate children's behavior and spotlight the register's social functions, a role distinct from the addressee-dependent default in **adult-directed speech**.



Building **familiarity with politeness constructs** through **Questions**...

이거 뭐-예요
this-thing what-COP-**HON**
'What is this?'

뭐 하-고 놀-고 싶-어요
what do-CONN play-CONN want-**HON**
'What do you want to do (play)?'

...**behavior management** with **Directives** and **Evaluations**...

일-어나-세요 이제 조끼 벗-고
rise-up-**HON** now vest take.off-CONN
'Please get up now and take off your vest.'

에이 아파요 이렇게 하-면
INTERJ hurt-**HON** thus-ADV do-if
'Ouch, it hurts if (you) do it like this.'

...and **modeling** through **Performances** and **Speech Elicitations**.

똑똑 문 열-어 주-세요
ONOM door open-CONN give-**HON**-REQ
'Knock knock, please open the door.'

안녕히 계세요 하-해
well stay-**HON** do-IMP
'Say, "Goodbye!"'

Study 2 (longitudinal): Pragmatic handover 🤝

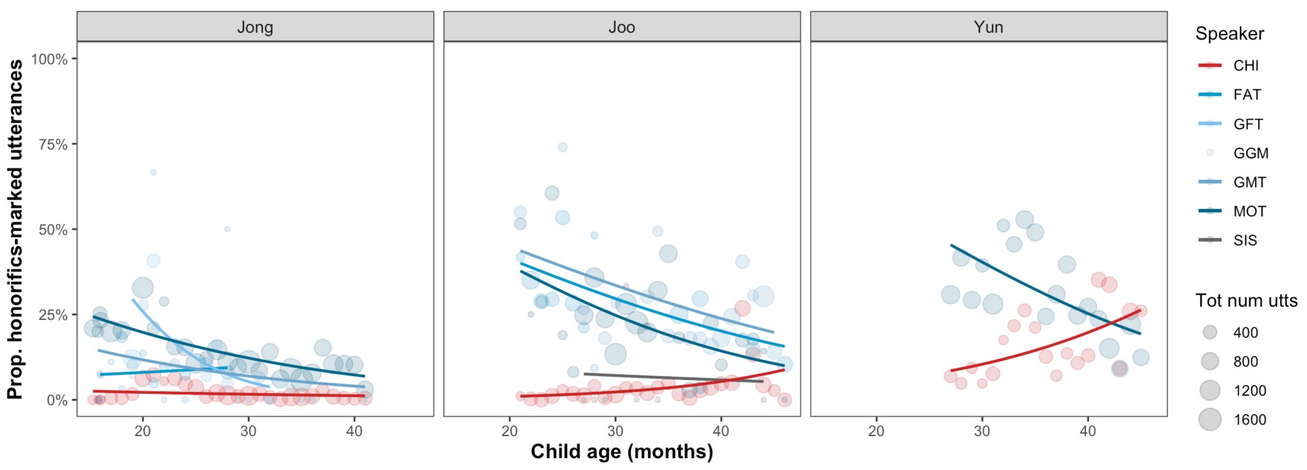
CHILDES Ryu corpus[6]:

child	age range (months)	total length
JONG	15-41	31hr 37min
JOO	21-46	29hr 2min
YUN	27-45	20hr 36min

Longitudinal, naturalistic recordings of three children and their primary caregivers (103,000+ spontaneous utterances).

Caregiver honorifics usage *decreases*
(β = −0.045, z = −34.31, p < .001)

Child honorific usage *increases*
(net slope β = +0.059, p <.001)



Discussion

By synthesizing cross-sectional and longitudinal data, we see that **register input** is shaped by **deliberate pedagogical intent**.

Well beyond an addressee-dependent default, Study 1 reframes honorific register usage in early input as a tool for **didactically spotlighting** its social functions. Study 2 shows the **handover**: as children gain register competence, caregivers fade out this didactic register usage. Variation in baselines across families suggests caregivers' **language ideology shape children's register input**.

Data and scripts

Cross-sectional **Longitudinal**

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References

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