

“Henrik, du kunne vel ikke lige lukke vinduet?”:

How to be polite in Denmark and Korea
– a comparison

Robert Zola Christensen*

It is a well-known fact that when we in Korea find elaborate polite conjugations, that structure and determine everyday interaction, the Danes, on the other side of the Globe, have a habit of saying ‘you’ (‘du’) in almost every context. We are dealing with an Asian language ruled by a high level of honorific phrases and a Scandinavian language characterized by its more unpolished and straightforward interaction. However, this article will argue that Danish has a very different, but not less important, way of expressing politeness using other features of the language. The overall dissimilarity is: that where Korean has fixed forms, and a formal protocol ready to use, Danish is more dynamic and adjustable, applying (among other things) discourse particles to zoom in on the suitable level of politeness required in the actual situation. The two ways of using the language, as we shall see, simultaneously reflect the differentiations

* Department of Scandinavian Languages and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, Korea. Språk och Literaturcentrum, Lund University, Sweden.

between the two societies and cultures.

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1. Background and study

A few years ago, I was in Denmark attending a meeting at Copenhagen University. Present were researchers from the local department of Scandinavian Languages and visitors from the neighboring department in Lund, Sweden. One of the Danes turned to one of my Swedish colleagues, who was sitting next to the Window: “Henrik, du kunne vel ikke lige lukke vinduet”. (Henrik, could you close the window, please?)

On the other side of the Globe half a year later at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, I find myself in a very similar situation, a semi-formal meeting among scholars, and close and near-close colleagues. To get the window shut one of the participants said: 교수님, 창문 좀 닫아 주실 수 없으세요? Here the title, professor is placed up front, even with the honorific Suffix 님(nim), attached.

As we can see, we find two very different ways of phrasing essentially the same speech act with the same purpose. These two, authentic and parallel examples, demonstrate the well-known fact that when we in Korea find elaborate polite conjugations, Danes have a habit of saying ‘you’ (‘du’) in almost every context. It is often said that Danish even does not have a word for “please” (we do, as we shall see in the following). We are dealing with an Asian language ruled by a high level of honorific phrases and a Scandinavian language characterized by its candid and unpolished, straightforward interaction.

This is true – and not true at the same time. In this article, I will argue that Danish has a very different but not less complex and elaborated way of expressing politeness. And if you, language-wise, put good manners aside in your interaction with Danes, you will unquestionably get in trouble. There are powerful unwritten rules in Danish that will earn you silent disapproval if you do not follow them carefully. The overall dissimilarity is: that where Korean has fixed forms, and a formal protocol ready to use, Danish is much more dynamic and adjustable, applying (among other things) discourse particles to zoom in on the suitable level of politeness required in the actual situation. The two ways of using the language, simultaneously reflect the differentiations between the two societies and cultures.

2. Theoretical approach

Theoretically, this article places itself within the field of pragmatics, the study of language in use, and also, contributes to the discipline of cultural semantics, which can be seen as a branch of linguistics, that investigates the relationship between meaning and culture/society in discourse (e. g. Farese, 2018). Cultural semantics focuses on meanings expressed in human interaction in different "cultural scripts", in this case, though, not two cultures interacting with each other, but two cultures in similar contexts using the language in different ways but more or less with the same purpose.

The more specific and instrumental theoretical approaches will be dealt with and presented in the discussion and analysis sections below, discourse analysis, face-preserving strategy, politeness schemes, and more.



3. Interaction in Denmark and Korea

Denmark, along with other Nordic countries, makes up a special group or ‘family’ of democratic, welfare societies characterized by informal structures and relaxed cultures based on equality (e. g. Edling, 2019). In general, we do not put too much emphasis on formal manners. Not surprisingly, this way of living reflects how you are supposed to address yourself to other people. Without any hesitation not only do you say “du” to the boss or manager you also call her by her first name. Teachers, too, are mostly on a first-name basis with their pupils and students. In Scandinavia, it is quite common for my students to say “Hej Robert” when they enter the classroom. Add to this that most Danish children grow up in families where showing respect for parents or older members of the family is uncommon or at least less distinct compared to Asia. In Korea, on the other hand, vocabulary and grammar are even in the private’s sphere based on the level of politeness you are obliged to express. You have to be aware of how you address yourself to an older sister, brother, or another member of your closest family. As a boy, for example, you should call your elderly sister 누나 nuna, and if you are a girl 언니 eonni. So, additionally, a gender approach is involved in a way we these days strive to abandon in Scandinavia. A traditional gender pronoun is considered old school and, by many, even seen as inappropriate.

Compared to Danish, Korean is a very receiver-oriented language. The conjugation of the verb system is not entirely, but to a large extent, honorific suffixes are added to the verb stem.

Let us look at an example. To eat in Korean is *먹다*. Most cultures around the world enjoy a good meal, and in Korean, it is even to the extent you say *밥 먹었어요?* (“Did you eat?”) for “How are you?”. When you are at home behind closed doors with your best friends, your kids, parents, and partner you may ask: *곧 먹어*, meaning. ‘We are going to eat soon’. Which is formally low. Now, if you are out after work, you would rather say *곧먹어요*, which is an informal high way of phrasing it and the most common way of phrasing it. For formal high, for example, a business meeting followed by dinner, you should choose this form: *곧 먹습니다* surrounded by a lot of supporting politeness markers. And that is not even all. Too old, very respected people, and in case you want to express admiration you can use this fraise *곧드세요*.

In all these contexts, the Danish equivalent would quite naturally be *Vi spiser snart*.

As the examples show, the type of Korean you speak constantly changes depending on the situation, the status, gender, and age of the people involved in the conversation. This means you need to know the age, gender, and profession of the people you interact with. In general, this is not important in Denmark, and, by the way, you should never ask how old your interlocutor is, it is considered rude. You should also refrain from asking people about their income, title, and even their gender for that matter. Fundamentally, in Denmark, you want to be seen as an individual, taken for who you are as a person, and not what you do for a living or the role you have in society or the family. That is why, unlike in Korea, you normally introduce yourself by announcing your name first of all, which labels you as a particular person. Exactly as we saw in our opening example, in Danish, the name came up front, and in Korean, it was the title.

In Denmark, formality can even be seen as unfriendliness and stiffness. I have seen it many times: An eager foreigner coming to Denmark tries very hard to be polite and do just the right thing but, sadly enough, due to a lack of pragmatic competence, the effort ends up having the opposite effect. In general, Danes don't like flattery, bowing, scraping, or any other exaggerated forms of social recognition (van Bakel, 2022). Danes tend to see them as superficial and artificial.

There are reasons for these differences we see between Korea and Denmark. From a historical perspective, Korean culture is built on a foundation of Confucianism: which places high importance on social status and age. How much respect the listener deserves and expect is a question in every conversation in Korea, and it infuses the whole society and culture in every aspect. Add to that, there is a ritual pre-patterned comportment along with the language strategies: bowing as a traditional way to greet, the eldest person at the table is served first, and when you hand over an item you do it with two hands.

In Scandinavia, especially in Denmark, we do not have the same ceremonial behavior and etiquette. In Denmark, the casual frame of interaction goes back to the Agricultural movement of 19. Century, The Folk High Schools and H. F. S. Grundtvig where the peasants got a proud and strong identity. We could also mention the period of Social Democratic government (beginning of the early 1930s), the foundation of the welfare society, where the same thing happened to the working class. Later on, during the student revolution and flower power movement in the late 1960s, the tendency to question all sorts of hierarchies grew even stronger. So, in today's Denmark, the social pyramid is not (that) marked, and language rather glues people together across boundaries instead of deploying distance. It sounds very relaxed, progressive, and positive, but at the same time, compared to other parts of the world, Danes can appear very disrespectful and impolite. However,

we do not have to travel to Asia and Korea to find countries where politeness and showing respect are appreciated and common on a whole other scale than in Denmark. In Europe, we only have to go to Germany, France, and Italy.

To summarize: In Denmark, we have an informal and relaxed culture, hierarchies are largely invisible and not important in conversations. Consequently, you do not usually show verbal respect to people merely because they are placed higher on the social scale than yourself. But at the same time, which people tend to forget, it also means, that it is important to treat people you consider below yourself in a dignified manner. Being abrupt or dismissive to administrative staff and service personnel is considered extremely rude in Denmark. You should always treat the cleaning man or lady with the same respect that you treat the boss.

4. Politeness in Danish conversation

In any kind of oral interaction, there are two forces at play at the same time. On one hand, you want to be understood and get an outcome of your speech act. In our initial example: You want the window to be closed. On the other hand, telling other human people what to do, you have to be aware not to impose yourself and be too demanding. There is, in other words, always a mutual awareness of 'face' sensitivity at stake.

This old school pragmatic theory, based on H. P. Grice (efficiency maxims (Grice, 1975)), and Erving Goffman (face-to-face behavior (1967)), is still valid, relevant, and will do for our purpose (Brown & Levinson, 1987).¹⁾ The essence is: Do don't say more than is necessary to make sure the message is

1) Brown & Levinson (1987) which continues a work started by the two with the article "Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena" from 1978, has become the *main oeuvre* and is widely accepted as the classic treatment on politeness in communication.

clear and you get the result you want. But, at the same time: Say as much as required, and use the face-preserving strategy needed, to stay on good terms with your recipient.

This can be seen as a universal principle of human interaction and nature, and it is reflected in societies everywhere, no matter their cultural and socioeconomic differences. But different culture handle it differently.

As stated earlier, unlike in Korean, Danish does not have an arsenal of already prefixed phrases. What do we do then to show etiquette and avoid offending others?

Let's take a look at our example one more time: "Henrik, du kunne vel ikke lige lukke vinduet".

To begin with, we find the use of three discourses particles as implicatures of politeness: *ikke*, *lige*, *vel*. They actually do not, semantically, add any content to the meaning but they are on the other hand not just fillers. They are used to soften the phrase. The word *lige* ['li:ə] is in a sense a counterpart to the English *please*, having the same pragmatic function in certain contexts: *Kan du ikke lige? Gider du lige lade være med at larme? Lige* is a high-frequency word used extensively in everyday spoken interaction (Levisen & Waters, 2015). Notice; that the *lige* particle does not exist in other Scandinavian languages.

Vel ['vel] does literary mean 'well', but functions as an appeal meaning 'probably' in this context, expressing a causes assumption. In general, by their variety of subtle meanings, dialogical particles regulate the dialogue, and their function should not be underestimated.

Any request is a face-threatening act for the speaker, there is always a chance the recipient could turn down the proposal. Using a negative as *ikke* (not) is a way to embed the proposition and ask more indirectly (Heinemann, 2015). Putting anything in the negative form makes it more polite in Danish (and other European languages for that matter). The basic request could be

expressed more explicitly and with great force in the form of a regular command: *Luk vinduet!* But that would decrease the politeness level dramatically. I have seen that very often in Denmark, as well. Non-native speakers pick up the fact that Danish people usually do not sugar-coat our expressions with needless formality so they focus on the semantically heavy words, nouns, verbs, and adjectives, but miss out on the subtle but very important particles. Here our approach to the discourse markers is the linguistic context they occur, the meaning they carry, and the function they play.

Also, instead of using imperative as a grammatical category, you should go for interrogative sentences, which is one of the most common strategies congruent with the principle of politeness: *Gider du ikke godt fjerne din bil?* (could you please move your car?) *Vil du ikke lige hente børnene?* (could you please pick up the kids?) *Kan du nå mælken?* (could you pass me the milk, please?) On top of that, as we see in the examples, you can toss in some modal verbs like *gide*, *ville*, *kunne*, which make the actual action indefinite, not a real action, which makes it somewhat downplayed.

And you can downplay it even more by rephrasing the content as an implied request form, that does not even mention what it is all about: “Er her ikke lidt koldt herinde? (Isn’t it a bit chilly in here?). In this case, we are asking for agreement and consensus, that invites to the addressee to close the window, and at the same time it pretends to give a way ‘out’.

In most contexts like this, the formulation is conventionalized to an extent that there can be no doubt about what is intended, but for foreigners, there is always the risk, that what is said is taken for granted: *Yes it is a bit chilly, and so what?*

Finally, you can combine the above strategies with past tense: *Du kunne vel ikke lige give mig smørret?* *Du skulle vel ikke kunne hente bilen?* It is not simple past tense *per se*: The tense applied when asking such questions is

rather a conditional sentence, which is used to speculate about what *could* happen, and what *might* have happened. When you are asking someone to do something for you, the conditional is used because it has not been done (yet), and you cannot be sure whether it will be executed or not. It is something you *wish* would happen with your recipient as a kind helper.

If you stick to the present tense, I would advise you to add “være sød at” (be kind to). This construction is classed among the formulas of a higher degree of politeness and often presupposes a certain distance between the interlocutors. You would not use it in interaction with family, friends, and close colleagues. In these contexts, when social and status distance between the interlocutors is less important, you would rather apply “gide”.

All these cautious approaches above are an appeal to the addressee’s willingness to act, but Danish does, however, also have some fixed phrases.

If we list the most important:

Tak [tag] means *thank you*. *Tak for mad!* (Said to the host after a meal), *tak for sidst!* (Said when you bump into someone you recently spent time with), *tak for i dag!* (Said when you’re leaving), *tak fordi du kunne komme* (thank you for coming), *tak fordi jeg måtte komme* (a reply to the former). And to emphasize we add *mange* and *tusinde* to the *tak*: *mange tak*, *tusinde tak* (many thanks), and two more: *Tak skal du have!* (thanks a lot), *selv tak!* (you’re welcome!). Finally, if you put a *tak* at the end of the sentence it is equivalent to the English please: *En kop kaffe, tak!* (a cup of coffee, please). As shown *tak* is used all the time in natural conversation.

Another Danish version of please is “vær venlig at” meaning “could you be kind to” followed by a verb expressing the first part of what you want the person to do: *Du kunne vel ikke være så venlig at åbne vinduet?* It is an counterpart to the French “s’il vous plait”, the German “bitte”, and the Korean verb ending: -주세요, but “vær venlig at” is a bit *altmodisch*, and we do not use it that frequently.

Undskyld [ʊnsgylʔ] (I am sorry) is often the word to use to get someone's attention in a polite way: *Undskyld, gider du ikke lige åbne vinduet, Undskyld, ved du hvor meget klokken er?*

It also has to be said, that Korean does have a few discourse particles, like *좀*, the short form of *조금* (a little), added when you want to make a question more passive: *물 좀주세요* (some water, please). In recent time, we also see, that younger Koreans, due to the profound influence of the United States, tends to use still fewer politeness strategies and old-fashioned forms and speak more freely, or carelessly, depending on how you see it. Also, it is a result of greater social equality, in general, in Korea's modern society and it reflects middle-class advancement.

5. Final word

A first glance, comparing Danish and Korean, you should think, and you hear that a lot, it is so difficult to learn and master all the layers of honorific phrases in Korean, but on the other hand, once you are familiar with the codex, you are dealing with (fairly) well-defined guidelines you just (sic!) have to apply. In Denmark, you have to make them up from time to time in the pragmatic context. You have, in a sense, to have to play it by ear and create the right politeness level intuitively every time you open your mouth. My advice would be, that you stay very observant of the small nuances in any conversation you participate in. It is pretty much *learning by doing*, so listen carefully to how the native Danes speak and imitate. It is a true task.

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<국문 요약>

“헨리, 창문을 열어줄 수 있을까요?”

덴마크와 한국의 공손 전략의 비교

Robert Zola Christensen

한국에서는 일상적인 대화에서 구조화되고 정해진 공손한 극존칭을 사용하여 말하는 반면에, 지구 반대편의 덴마크 사람들은 거의 모든 상황에서 ‘너’라고 말하는 습관이 있다는 것은 매우 잘 알려진 사실이다. 본 연구는 극존칭의 존댓말이 주로 사용되는 아시아 언어와 그보다 조금은 무례하고 솔직하게 대화하는 특징이 있는 스칸디나비아 언어에 대해서 다루고자 한다. 특히, 본 연구는 덴마크어에는 언어의 다른 기능들을 활용하여 공손함을 표현하는, 못지않게 중요한 다른 방식이 있다는 것에 대해서 논하고자 한다. 구체적으로, 한국어는 정형화되어 있고 사용 가능한 공식적인 프로토콜을 가지고 있지만, 덴마크어는 더ダイナ믹하고 변화 가능하며 실제상황에서 필요한 공손함의 적절한 수준에 맞게 구어체 보조어를 적용하고 있다. 이처럼 공손어를 사용하는 두 가지 서로 다른 방법은 두 사회의 문화 간 차이를 동시에 반영한다.

주제어: 화용론, 문화적 의미론, 담화분석, 언어비교, 공손전략

성명: 로베르트 졸라 크리스텐센(Robert Zola Christensen)

소속: 한국외국어대학교

E-mail: robert@rzc@dk

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