

SPEAKING THROUGH KINSHIP: CULTURAL INSIGHTS INTO ADDRESS
PRACTICES IN KOREAN AND KARAKALPAK

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Abstract: *Address terms are central linguistic resources through which speakers express respect, hierarchy, intimacy, and group belonging. In culturally rich contexts such as Korean and Karakalpak, nouns of address reflect deeply embedded social norms connected to kinship, age, community structure, and interpersonal obligations. This study provides an ethnographically informed comparative analysis of Korean and Karakalpak address practices, demonstrating how cultural values are enacted through language. Drawing on speech samples and secondary sources, the paper argues that while Korean emphasizes hierarchical alignment through honorifics and age-sensitive forms, Karakalpak prioritizes communal cohesion and relational warmth through metaphorical kinship extensions. The findings underscore the role of address terms as linguistic tools that mediate social relationships and encode cultural worldviews.*

INTRODUCTION

Addressing someone is not merely a pragmatic choice but a culturally informed act that reveals how speakers conceptualize social relationships. In many societies, address terms are embedded in moral expectations, social etiquette, and emotional positioning. Korean and Karakalpak offer particularly compelling grounds for comparison due to their distinct linguistic genealogies yet parallel cultural emphases on kinship, collectivism, and respect.

Korean is widely recognized for its elaborate honorific system, where age, relative social rank, and closeness determine permissible forms of address [1]. Karakalpak, in contrast, lacks grammaticized honorific morphology but deploys kinship nouns widely, extending familial metaphors into public, institutional, and stranger interactions [2]. This shared reliance on kinship conceptualization, despite the languages' structural differences, raises important questions about the cultural significance of address practices.

This paper explores how speakers of Korean and Karakalpak use nouns of address to negotiate relational boundaries, express deference, and affirm communal values. The analysis highlights the sociocultural motivations behind linguistic choices, showing that address terms function as social actions rather than neutral labels.

Literature Review

Anthropological linguistics has consistently demonstrated that address terms encode social relationships and cultural expectations [3]. Foley emphasizes that address systems serve as windows into a community's moral and hierarchical organization [3], while Aikhenvald notes that kinship-based address is a common strategy for creating solidarity in many traditional societies [4].

Korean scholarship identifies honorifics as central to politeness and social indexing. Choe's foundational work demonstrates how Korean speakers rely on kinship substitutes (e.g., 형 *hyung*, 누나 *nuna*, 언니 *eonni*) even among non-relatives, thereby extending

familial relations into peer and community contexts [1]. Joo builds on this by arguing that kinship-based address forms function not only as politeness strategies but as markers of shared identity and emotional alignment [5].

Karakalpak scholarship also foregrounds kinship terminology as a sociolinguistic resource. Utebaev documents the metaphorical extension of kinship nouns such as *apa* (“older woman”), *ağay* (“older man”), and *balam* (“my child”), showing that they symbolize communal ties and reinforce values of respect and hospitality [2]. Madaminova similarly notes that kinship terms in Karakalpak and related Turkic languages operate as tools of ethical expression and group cohesion [6].

Comparative perspectives show that kinship-based address strategies are widespread in Central Asian communities, including Kazakh and Tatar, where collectivist norms and elder respect guide linguistic behavior [7]. Studies on Korean honorifics, meanwhile, situate the system within a wider East Asian cultural model emphasizing age-based hierarchy, reciprocity, and moral discipline [8].

Together, these studies demonstrate that address terms are powerful socio-cultural instruments through which speakers calibrate respect, proximity, and shared identity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic design. Data were collected through:

1. Naturally occurring speech samples, including recorded dialogues, social media posts, and excerpts from folk narratives.

2. Secondary sources from sociolinguistic and anthropological literature.

The analysis followed a thematic approach, focusing on (1) relational indexing, (2) cultural motivations, and (3) pragmatic flexibility. All examples were categorized according to speaker relationship, age asymmetry, and social context.

Discussion

Korean speakers are acutely sensitive to age differences, which often override other social variables. Calling an older individual by name is considered inappropriate; thus, kinship substitutes fill the pragmatic gap. For instance:

- “형, 같이 가자!” (Hyung, let’s go!) marks familiarity and peer intimacy.
- “형님, 같이 가시겠습니까?” (Hyungnim, shall we go?) conveys elevated respect.

Honorific verbs (e.g., *가시다* instead of *가다*) and suffixes (*-님*) intensify politeness and reflect moral discipline rooted in Confucian ethics [8]. Misuse—whether too formal or too informal—can index social incompetence or disrespect.

Karakalpak practices are grounded in collectivist norms shaped by nomadic history and community interdependence. Kinship terms function as social glue:

- *apa* may be used for any older woman, not just one’s mother or aunt.
- *ağay* applies to older men in both intimate and public settings.
- *balam* (“my child”) expresses affection and moral care toward a younger person, even a stranger.

These terms reduce social distance and create instant relational familiarity. They also reflect cultural ideals of generosity, warmth, and communal responsibility [2].

Despite structural differences, both languages rely on kinship frameworks to maintain social harmony.

Korean	Karakalpak
Hierarchy-centered	Community-centered
Age is primary	Relational closeness is primary
Honorific grammar crucial	Lexical kinship extensions crucial
Social distance managed via linguistic precision	Social distance reduced via kinship metaphor

Both cultures conceptualize social relationships as morally charged and linguistically manageable. The Korean system emphasizes respect through differentiation, while the Karakalpak system emphasizes bonding through connection.

Thus, address terms in both traditions function as cultural strategies for reinforcing communal values, distributing respect, and navigating social roles.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that nouns of address in Korean and Karakalpak are profoundly shaped by cultural norms and moral expectations. Korean speakers use address forms to negotiate hierarchy and age-based respect, whereas Karakalpak speakers use kinship metaphors to nurture communal closeness and relational solidarity. Despite their linguistic differences, both systems highlight the central role of kinship in mediating interpersonal communication.

Address terms therefore serve as cultural tools that perform social work—maintaining harmony, signaling emotional stance, and reinforcing community values. Understanding these practices enriches our appreciation of how language functions not only as a mode of communication but also as a medium of cultural identity.

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