

Influence of Interpersonal Variables during Utterance Comprehension: A Neurophysiological Investigation with the Korean Honorific System

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This study investigated the influence of social information about interlocutors, which can be extracted from terms of addressee, on the comprehension of the following utterance with a neurophysiological method. In verbal communication, the use of an address term functions to indicate the relative status of the addressee as well as social distance between the conversation partners. Based on the social information the expectation of the level of politeness and corresponding linguistic forms for following utterances can be established. In our ERP experiment Korean participants performed an acceptability task with single utterances that began with a term of address and ended with a sentence-final verb. In Korean, which has advanced linguistic devices for politeness, the use of an honorific form of the verb is expected for politeness purpose when the addressee possesses a relatively higher status than the speaker. The pragmatic agreement between the honorific form of the verb and the social status of the addressee yields critical conditions in this study, status-match vs. status mismatch. More importantly, we manipulated the social distance information (i.e., close vs. distant) between the conversation partners by different types of address terms used in private relationship or official relationship. Behavioral data indicated that the misuse of verb honorific form is more or less acceptable when a close social distance between the speaker and the addressee has been expected from the address term of an interlocutor. From the ERP data, we expected the N400 effect when the social status information implied by an address term mismatched the use of an honorific form of a critical verb, which was observed as previous ERP studies with the Chinese honorific system (Jiang et al., 2013). Critically, we hypothesized that the N400 effect from the mismatch of honorific forms would be variable in terms of the social distance between interlocutors. The ERP results supported our hypotheses (Figure 1). The N400 was significantly observed for the status-mismatch (e.g., “Boss, I’ve finished_{less respectful} the work.”) as compared to the status-match condition. However, the N400 effect disappeared when the addressee is a figure in a close relationship (e.g., “Father, I’ve finished_{less respectful} the work.”). The current ERP evidence suggests that the listener build expectation about the politeness of the upcoming utterance based on the social status as well as distance information reflected on the term of addressee.

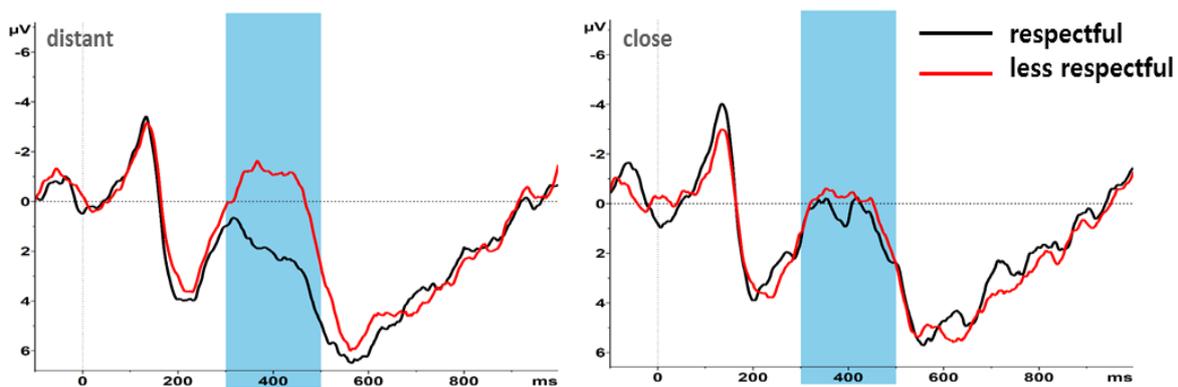


Figure 1. Grand average waveforms at Cz electrode showing more negative-going waves over 300-500 ms window for the status-mismatch compared with the status-match condition. Note that the N400 effect size varied as a function of social distance information.

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Jiang, X. M., Li, Y., & Zhou, X. L. (2013). Is it over-respectful or disrespectful? Differential patterns of brain activity in perceiving pragmatic violation of social status information during utterance comprehension. *Neuropsychologia*, 51(11), 2210–2223.