

Towards a cross-linguistic scale for pragmatics of deference and closeness

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Abstract: Social status and relationships affect language production. Consider the converse: can socio-cultural information be inferred from linguistic evidence? Specific phenomena naturally vary by language, so an intermediate variable, language use, abstracts over diverse phenomena such as formal/informal pronouns (Russian *vy*), indirect/direct phrasing (English), or related features (e.g. Navajo fourth person, Faltz 1998 p. 32).

Typical scales for socio-cultural analysis use labels or natural numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) as in *teineigo*, *sonkeigo*, and *kenjogo* for Japanese *keigo* (Wetzel 2004, p. 4). Labels do not translate well, but neither do natural numbers: The bottom level "1" in each language may describe dissimilar situations; the middle level in one language may be "3" but in another "2". What scale might work cross-linguistically? We introduce a scale with "zero" as a neutral level, developed for closeness and deference in Tamil, Korean, and Russian. We also examine French, Hindi, and English examples.