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Politeness in speech, a nuanced and culturally embedded aspect of human communication, undergoes intriguing transformations across different generations. In this study, we delve into the intriguing realm of polite speech production and perception among Thai speakers spanning three generations: Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1996), and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012). Previous studies [1, 2, 3, 4, 5] have laid the foundation for comprehending polite speech by investigating various acoustic parameters, consistently emphasizing the importance of pitch, alongside other phonetic features, in the manifestation of politeness. To build upon this foundation, our study narrows its focus to the pitch-related parameters that have consistently demonstrated significance in previous research. Specifically, we analyze the average fundamental frequency (F0) as a measure of long-term F0 and the standard deviation of F0 as a measure of F0 variability. We hypothesize that there will be generational differences in polite speech production and perception among Thai speakers. Specifically, we expect to find significant variations in long-term fundamental frequency and F0 variability, across the three generations. By conducting this study, we aim to contribute novel insights to the understanding of polite speech in the context of Thai language and culture.

In the production experiment, 60 participants (equally distributed between males and females, with 20 participants from each generation) engaged in scripted conversations with different addressees (higher status, equal status, and lower status) and performed various speech acts (inquiry, request, persuasion). Every sentence in the script incorporated a polite participle, ensuring a consistent expression of politeness in participants' speech. Using the same script for all participants controlled for variations in lexical tones, allowing for a focused examination of politeness strategies and their impact on acoustic measures. Acoustic analyses measured the mean of F0 (long-term F0) and the standard deviation of F0 (F0 variability), providing insights into the production patterns of polite speech. Participants' ages were verified to ensure accurate generational categorization.

The production experiment, analyzed using multiple linear regression, found that Generation Z speakers had significantly higher long-term F0 compared to Generation X and Y speakers (p < .001). Addressee status did not significantly affect long-term F0 (p = .998). Moreover, the analysis revealed no significant differences in F0 variability across generations (p = .23) and addressee statuses (p = .94). These results strongly support the higher long-term F0 in Generation Z compared to other generations, while addressee status did not have a significant impact on F0 variation. Additionally, there were no significant differences in F0 variability among generations and addressee statuses.

The perception experiment involved 60 participants (equal gender distribution, with 20 participants from each generation) who rated their perceived level of politeness for recorded sentences. Notably, 60% of the participants in the perception experiment were the same individuals who had participated in the production experiment. Stimuli comprised two sets: one tested long-term F0, varying in high, mid, and low levels, and the other tested F0 variability, varying in high, mid, and low levels. Ratings were provided on a 7-point Likert scale, capturing the participants' subjective perception of politeness.

In the perception experiment, logistic mixed-effect models were used to analyze the data. Long-term F0 did not significantly influence perceived politeness. However, generation and gender had significant effects. Generation Y and Z participants rated sentences as more polite compared to Generation X participants, and males perceived sentences as more polite than females. Addressee status significantly impacted perception, with lower addressee status resulting in less perceived politeness (p = .03). F0 variability demonstrated significant effects of generation (p < 0.02) and addressee status (p = .005 for equal status, and p = .01 for lower status). Generation Z participants showed higher sensitivity to F0 variability, and sentences produced for higher addressee status were perceived as more polite when accompanied by higher F0 variability. Interaction effects of F0 variability, generation, gender, and addressee status were also significant (p < 0.05).
These findings highlight evolving polite speech patterns among Thai speakers across generations. Generation Z speakers exhibit a higher pitch in production, though not necessarily aligned with perceived politeness. Generation Z's higher pitch in speech production seems to be a generational marker rather than a deliberate politeness strategy. They consistently use a high pitch regardless of the addressee's status. Notably, the analysis found no significant relationship between long-term F0 and perceived politeness. F0 variability emerges as an important factor influencing politeness perception. Understanding these shifting trends in polite tones is crucial for effective communication and intergenerational understanding in the Thai context. The study also highlights the significance of analyzing pitch characteristics in understanding socio-cultural issues more broadly.

References