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SOCIOLINGUISTIC PARAMETERS OF ASYMMETRIC (BOTTOM-UP) INSTITUTIONAL SYMPATHY EXPRESSION INVOLVING HEADS OF STATE

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Abstract

This article investigates sociolinguistic parameters of asymmetric institutional sympathy - when ordinary citizens or grassroots organizations express condolences to a head of state, reversing conventional top-down flow. Based on 35 cases (letters, petitions, social media threads), three key parameters are identified: distancing with intimization, ritual hyperpoliteness, and compensatory strategies. Reverse hierarchy requires complex linguistic labor to neutralize the threat of a “paternalistic takeover” in sympathy. Asymmetric sympathy expression is analyzed as a sociolinguistically risky act that paradoxically both affirms and violates social hierarchy.

Keywords: Bottom-up sympathy, sociolinguistic asymmetry, head of state, institutional discourse, politeness theory, social hierarchy, face work

Аннотация. Статья посвящена социолингвистическим параметрам асимметричного выражения институциональной симпатии - когда рядовые граждане или низовые организации выражают соболезнования главе государства, а не наоборот. На материале 35 случаев (письма, петиции, комментарии в соцсетях) выделены ключевые параметры: дистанцирование vs. интимизация, эпистемическая осторожность, ритуальная

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гипервежливость и компенсаторные стратегии. Выявлено, что обратная иерархия требует сложной языковой работы по нейтрализации угрозы «патерналистского переворота» в симпатии. Асимметричное выражение симпатии рассматривается как социолингвистически рискованный акт, который парадоксальным образом одновременно утверждает и нарушает социальную иерархию.

Ключевые слова: симпатия снизу вверх, социолингвистическая асимметрия, глава государства, институциональный дискурс, теория вежливости, социальная иерархия, работа с лицом

Introduction

Sympathy, as conventionally understood in both everyday interaction and institutional discourse, flows **downward** along social hierarchies. A person of higher status, greater power, or superior institutional position expresses sympathy to a person of lower status: a manager to an employee, a teacher to a student, a head of state to a disaster victim. This normative flow aligns with politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which posits that acts of condolence involve positive politeness (showing solidarity) and typically emanate from those who can comfortably offer emotional support without threatening their own face.

However, institutional settings occasionally witness the reverse: **bottom-up** or **asymmetric** sympathy expression, in which ordinary citizens, grassroots organizations, or subordinate officials express condolences to a head of state. This may occur after a national tragedy that personally affects the leader (e.g., death of a leader's family member), after the leader suffers a political defeat or personal humiliation, or simply as a ritualized practice in certain political cultures where citizens are expected to demonstrate loyalty through sympathetic address. The reverse flow creates profound sociolinguistic stress. When a citizen writes to a president saying “I am so sorry for your loss,” that utterance simultaneously:

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(a) claims emotional equality (we share grief), (b) risks presumptuousness (how dare you assume you understand the president's feelings), (c) threatens the leader's positive face (need to be seen as strong), and (d) inverts the normal caregiving relationship (subordinate becomes the comforter).

This article asks: **What sociolinguistic parameters distinguish bottom-up institutional sympathy from top-down or peer-to-peer expressions?** Based on a corpus of 35 authentic bottom-up sympathy messages directed at heads of state, I identify four recurrent parameters: distancing vs. intimization, epistemic caution, ritual hyperpoliteness, and compensatory strategies. Together, these parameters constitute a distinctive **sociolinguistic architecture of reverse sympathy** — a set of risk-management devices that enable citizens to offer comfort to the powerful without destabilizing the hierarchy they simultaneously affirm.

Theoretical Framework

Politeness Theory and Face Work

Brown and Levinson's (1987) seminal framework distinguishes **positive politeness** (seeking common ground, showing solidarity) from **negative politeness** (deference, respect for autonomy, apologizing for imposition). Top-down institutional sympathy typically emphasizes positive politeness: the leader says "we are all together in this grief," assuming shared emotional experience. Bottom-up sympathy, by contrast, must navigate a paradox: expressing solidarity (positive politeness) while acknowledging inferior status (negative politeness). The result is a hybrid genre that intensifies both dimensions simultaneously — a phenomenon I term **hyperpoliteness**.

Asymmetry and Institutional Discourse

Institutional discourse research (Drew & Heritage, 1992) has long recognized that asymmetrical power relations are encoded in turn-taking, lexical choices, and

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pragmatic strategies. However, most studies assume asymmetry is static: the powerful person initiates, controls topics, and offers assessments. Bottom-up sympathy represents a temporary **role reversal** in the speech event itself — the subordinate becomes the evaluator of the superior's emotional state. This reversal must be carefully marked as exceptional, temporary, and authorized (explicitly or implicitly) by the superior.

The Concept of Sociolinguistic Parameters

Following Gumperz (1982), I use the term **sociolinguistic parameters** to denote discrete, empirically observable dimensions of linguistic variation that systematically correlate with social structure. Parameters are not binary (present/absent) but scalar (more/less). Each parameter identified below varies in degree across bottom-up sympathy messages depending on factors such as the citizen's social position, the leader's perceived vulnerability, and the medium (written letter vs. online comment).

Methodology

Corpus

The corpus comprises 35 authentic bottom-up institutional sympathy messages directed at heads of state, collected from three sources:

- 1. Written letters** (n=20) — archived in presidential libraries of the United States, Russia, and Turkey, spanning 1990–2020. These were originally mailed by private citizens to the president following a personal or national tragedy.
- 2. Online petitions** (n=10) — from [Change.org](https://www.change.org) and national petition platforms (UK, Canada, Australia), where citizens organized collective expressions of sympathy to prime ministers or governors.
- 3. Social media threads** (n=5 extended threads) — from verified institutional Facebook pages of heads of state (Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria), where citizens posted condolences in comment sections following a leader's personal loss.

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Inclusion criteria: (a) the sympathy message is explicitly addressed to the head of state; (b) the sender is a private citizen or non-state group; (c) the message expresses sorrow, compassion, or consolation for a loss suffered by the leader or the leader's family.

Results: Three Sociolinguistic Parameters

Parameter 1: Distancing vs. Intimization

The first parameter captures the speaker's positioning on a continuum between **distancing** and **intimization**. In top-down sympathy, leaders routinely use intimization: "We are all heartbroken," "I feel your pain." Bottom-up sympathy reveals a more complex pattern.

Distancing strategies include:

1. Use of formal titles and honorifics ("Your Excellency," "Mr. President," "Respected Prime Minister")
2. Avoidance of first-name address
3. Reference to the leader in the third person even when addressing them directly ("The President has shown great strength")
4. **Intimization strategies** include:
5. Plural pronouns ("we," "our") that include both sender and leader as a collective
6. Expressions of shared identity ("as a mother," "as a fellow citizen")
7. Personal anecdotes that mirror the leader's loss

Critically, bottom-up messages oscillate between these poles **within a single text**. A typical letter might begin with distancing (formal address), move into intimization ("I know what it is to lose a child"), and return to distancing ("Your servant in humility"). This oscillation signals that the writer is aware of the hierarchy but is temporarily suspending it for a prosocial purpose.

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Parameter 2: Epistemic Caution

Epistemic caution refers to the degree of certainty or hedging with which the writer claims knowledge of the leader's emotional state. In top-down sympathy, leaders assert epistemic authority: “The nation grieves” (I know because I represent the nation). In bottom-up sympathy, epistemic access is radically limited: a citizen cannot truly know how a head of state feels.

Epistemic caution manifests through:

1. **Hedges** (“perhaps,” “maybe,” “I can only imagine”)
2. **Explicit epistemic disclaimers** (“I do not presume to know your pain”)
3. **Hypothetical framing** (“If I may be so bold as to say”)
4. **Conditional structures** (“Should you find any comfort in these words”)

Example from the corpus (Russian letter to President, after death of his mother):
“Я не смею утверждать, что понимаю Вашу утрату, но если позволите, хочу разделить с Вами тихую печаль.”

(“I dare not claim to understand your loss, but if you permit, I wish to share a quiet sorrow with you”).

Parameter 3: Compensatory Strategies

The fourth parameter involves **material or symbolic offerings** that accompany the sympathy expression, compensating for the “debt” incurred by reversing the expected care flow. Top-down sympathy requires no compensation; the leader gives comfort freely. Bottom-up sympathy, however, often includes:

- a) **Poems, prayers, or original artwork** — symbolic gifts that transform the message from pure condolence into an offering
- b) **Donations** — statements that the writer has donated money to a charity in the leader’s name or in memory of the leader's lost loved one
- c) **Volunteer pledges** — promises of community service “in your honor”
- d) **Collective signatures** — in petitions, the number of co-signers acts as a compensatory resource: 10,000 citizens share this sympathy”

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Discussion: The Paradox of Reverse Sympathy

The four parameters collectively resolve a fundamental paradox. By conventional standards, offering sympathy to a superior is an **impositive act** — it imposes on the leader the obligation to acknowledge the gesture, to manage the citizen's emotions, and to maintain face despite being positioned as vulnerable. Yet sympathy is also a **prosocial act** — it is intended to comfort, not to burden.

Bottom-up sympathy messages resolve this paradox through **simultaneous affirmation and violation** of hierarchy. The writer violates hierarchy by becoming the comforter of the powerful. But through distancing, epistemic caution, hyperpoliteness, and compensation, the writer repeatedly reaffirms that the violation is temporary, exceptional, and ultimately respectful.

This resolution is fragile. Cross-linguistic variation exists: Turkish and Russian letters showed higher hyperpoliteness than English-language petitions, reflecting different cultural norms of hierarchy. Social media comments, interestingly, showed lower epistemic caution and less compensation — possibly because digital platforms flatten hierarchy and create affordances for more direct emotional expression.

Comparison with Top-Down Sympathy

Top-down sympathy requires none of these parameters. A head of state can say directly: “I grieve with you.” No apology, no compensation, no epistemic hedging. The asymmetry is reversed: the powerful person has epistemic authority over collective emotion. The citizen who receives top-down sympathy is not expected to manage the leader's face. This contrast underscores how deeply **sympathy is a power-laden speech act**, not merely an expression of universal human feeling.

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Conclusion

Asymmetric, bottom-up institutional sympathy is a sociolinguistically precarious but systematically patterned communicative genre. The four parameters identified in this article—distancing/intimization oscillation, epistemic caution, ritual hyperpoliteness, and compensatory strategies—constitute a distinctive architecture that enables ordinary citizens to offer comfort to heads of state without destabilizing the hierarchies that separate them. As political communication becomes increasingly digital and informal, these parameters may shift, weaken, or transform. Studying reverse sympathy is not merely an academic exercise; it illuminates how language, power, and emotion intersect in the most fundamental of human acts: caring for another, even when that other sits on a throne.

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