What Korean apologies require of politeness theory

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper examines a corpus of Korean apologies to discover why a person apologizes and why they choose the form of apology that they do. It argues for an abstracted, generalized politeness1 model (Locher and Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003) in which politeness work in Korean is primarily concerned with relationship construction (Arundale, 2006; Haugh, 2007c; Matsumoto, 1988). This will involve both a notion of face, conceived as a psychological, acquired construct, and a set of frames (Terkourafi, 2005) that do not directly reference face. To arrive at this theoretical point, the paper begins by examining the social factors that influence choices in apology forms as predicted by Brown and Levinson (1987). Brown and Levinson's model accurately predicts the relevance of many factors in form selection in Korean, such as relative power, social distance, and the severity of the act. However, the model itself is not an accurate model for Korean even in high abstraction. Instead of choosing a strategy based upon the weight of a face-threatening act, Koreans actively manage and create expectations for behavior in a relationship. Some expectations will resemble classic positive and negative face issues, while others will more directly reference culture-specific roles or common events.

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1. Introduction and research background

1.1. General introduction

This paper has two purposes. First, it presents empirical data on the choices in form that speakers make when apologizing in Korean with a focus upon lexical selection and honorific inflection (sometimes termed speech level, Sohn, 1999). The presentation is based upon a corpus of spontaneous, naturally occurring apologies; supplemented by interviews, press reports, and scripted dramas. Korean apologies in Korean society have been underrepresented in existing research, as most research has focused upon second language contexts (Ahn, 2005; Byon, 2005; Yang, 2002; but see Kim, 2008). Secondly, the paper presents a number of requirements that Korean apologies make of any politeness theory. These include (a) social expectations in both deciding to apologize and deciding on the form of apology, (b) active construction of expectations and relationships by participants, not simply the meeting of external requirements, (c) construction of relationships interaction-by-interaction and over time, (d) construction of relationships between individuals and between groups, and (e) both an ability to reason about politeness in novel situations and to reflexively use acquired frames or norms. To conclude, the paper will sketch an updated theory of politeness that has the potential to handle these requirements.

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As we do not wish to lose the presentation of data on Korean apologies within dense theoretical discussion, the paper is as directly data-driven and self-contained as possible. The theory will be slowly built through the analysis of examples, instead of presenting the entire theory at the beginning and then justifying it with data. The theory will only be as justified as the analysis of the examples. We use the term *politeness* through much of the paper as linguistic politeness is the primary target. However, our data and theoretical exposition have broader implications for facework in general. For this paper, when we use the term "politeness" we have in mind all types of affective aspects of communication.[1]

We will use Brown and Levinson's (1987, henceforth B&L) model, particularly their formula for the calculation of Weight, as the launching pad for the analysis. B&L's model accurately predicts the relevance of many factors in form selection in Korean, such as relative power, social distance, and the severity of the act. This forms a nice starting point as it lets us become familiar with how social situations can affect the manner in which a person speaks in a Korean context. However, one cannot stop at this level of analysis because it fails to show how language use is not simply a reflection of social context but in fact actively constructs the context itself. This essential idea is where our model departs from the classic B&L model.

Instead of choosing an appropriate strategy based upon the weight of a face-threatening act, Koreans actively build and manage expectations for behavior in a relationship. Some expectations will closely resemble classic positive and negative face issues, while others will more directly reference culture-specific roles or common events. When we take the perspective of face-work as an act of creation, the motivations for a particular linguistic act can be as diverse as the variety of social situations and relationships that people wish to create. In any given interaction, the focus of the creation could be on the person in a certain role, on a particular aspect of a person's personality, on the person as an individual, etc., or it could be on the creation of a certain environment, such as a business meeting, a family's home, a relaxed party, etc. An analogy may be dressing up in nice clothes appropriate for an evening at the opera. We wear the nice clothes both because we know there are social expectations, constraints perhaps, requiring this, but we also wear them because it creates the very environment in which we wish to participate. In section 3, we will focus upon the social contexts of apology forms, and, in section 4, we will move towards a discussion of motivations and politeness behavior as a creative act.

1.2. Previous work on Korean apologies

Work to date on Korean politeness, and apologies in particular, has been rather restricted. Almost all work has taken place within a cross-cultural and specifically second language context. Yang (2002) compares L1 Korean to L1 English and Koreans' L2 English, looking at patterns of transfer. Park and Nakano (1999) compared Korean and Japanese learners of English. Ahn (2005) looked at American L1 English learners of Korean. The methodologies of these studies are typically to gather data through devices such as the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) or role-play. Byon (2005) used the DCT to compare L1 Korean and L1 English apologies and discovered a focus on issues of Power in the Korean data versus focus on social Distance in the English data. Kim (2008) performed a semantic analysis of *mianhata*[2] 'sorry' in Korean and *sorry* in English and argued that the Korean term's semantics involved societal and responsibility issues not necessarily present in the latter. There are limitations to the DCT task, of course. DCTs do not provide spontaneous data but more self-reflective expressions. Speech events are provided by the researcher, not naturally encountered. Moreover, DCTs are frequently filled out by college students at the researcher's university, limiting the variation in age and social background of the participants. These issues do not invalidate DCTs; they simply should be complemented by other methodologies.

The purpose of this study then was to concentrate upon naturally occurring L1 Korean apologies in Korean society. Details of the data collection methods are provided in section 2.

1.3. Theoretical objectives and background

One of the things we wish to understand is why an apology occurred at a certain point of interaction. However, as is well known in the philosophy of science literature, the precise meaning of the word "why?" is far from obvious and clear. Answers could occur at many different levels of abstraction and with many different focal points, such as a functional explanation, a neurological explanation, causal explanation, structural, normative, etc.

The answers within politeness theory itself are diverse as well. One critical division (Locher and Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003) has been between politeness1 theories, which are intended to represent the actual participants' understanding and concerns, and politeness2 theories, which are to be the external analyst's take on things. B&L's model is a classic politeness2 approach. The notions employed within the theory, while perhaps having some origin in particular cultures, are technically defined and only have meaning within the theory. In their model, certain acts inherently threaten the positive or negative face of a participant (FTAs). The participant calculates the Weight of a specific FTA based upon the variables of Power, social Distance, and Ranking and then chooses an appropriate politeness strategy for that act's Weight.

More recent approaches, such as Arundale (2006), Haugh (2007c), O'Driscoll (2007a,b), Spencer-Oatey (2007), and Terkourafi (2005, 2007) take a very different approach from B&L (and from each other in various aspects), but are also ultimately interested in finding terms with which one can interpret and predict all face-related activity, not only participant understanding of that activity. Arundale (2006), for instance, works within the framework of interpersonal communication

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[1] We thank an anonymous reviewer for comments on this point.
[2] The Yale romanization for Korean is used throughout this paper.