

## **What Causes Communication Problems Between English Speakers and Korean Speakers?\***

**Kun-Ok Kim**

*Chung-Ang University*

Research on sociology and sociolinguistics has contributed to our understanding of the uses of language in social contexts, through its examination of elements of socialization. Humans are social animals, and language can not be isolated from social context. Not only does social influence affect the development of the cognitive structures and of language (Bernstein and Henderson 1969; Frake 1972; Henderson 1972; Hymes 1972; Ervin-Tripp 1973), but also social conditions influence the use of language (Hymes 1972; Fishman 1967; Labov 1972; Ferguson 1959; Gumperz 1962). Different patterns of social contact lead to the development of different cognitive structures and language use, which in turn yield different ways of interpreting the world as well as the language. In a broad sense, the complexity of language, which is an extension of the complexity of the world, is manifested in the manner of verbal and nonverbal language, and its interpretation is a product of cognitive reactions to the world in general. Individual humans develop not only uniform cognitive structures which can be universally recognized regardless of individual differences, but also specific cognitive structures which can be individually or cross-culturally differentiated. Specificity of the individual's cognitive structure is a manifestation of the individual's response to the stimuli of the world. Such manifestations grow out of differential access to social interactional situations, and in turn are reflected in the individual's use of language.

It is assumed that individuals have developed adequate and basic cognitive abilities needed to function within their culture. Researchers have identified cognitive structures which govern operation on the physical world. These include concepts such as generalization, categorization, specificity, logicity, reversibility, sequentiality, inferrability, flexibility, and creativity, all of which exist as prerequisite components in interpretation of the world and of language (Piaget 1926, 1963, 1979; Dale 1976; Goldstein and Mackenber 1966; Helms and Turner 1981; McGhee 1971; Peel 1960).

The active, strategic ability used in language processing presupposes not only cognitive structures but also communicative components which are assumed to be

present within individual participants. The communicative components are interpreted as the sum of knowledge of a specific language (linguistic competence) and of its use in social context (social competence). Linguistic competence and social competence are often referred to as communicative competence.

A communicative event, verbal or non-verbal, is enacted on the basis of both participants' assumption that much of the language is supplied by linguistically unexpressed elements and knowledge, and that much (if the language that is linguistically expressed does not represent literal or direct meaning). That is, both participants are expected as a social convention, to contribute to a communication on the basis of the reality principle (Clark and Clark 1977) and maxims of cooperativeness (Grice 1975). Participants also interpret a communication with the assumption that the speaker or the writer is referring to a situation or ideas they can make sense of (reality principle). They also interpret a language with the presupposition that the language is something that makes sense and that the speaker or the writer intends the language to be informative, true in its own way, relevant to its purpose, and clear in conveyance of meaning (cooperative principle). Readers or listeners actively involve themselves in language processing by following the implications of speech acts by making inferences about missing links and non-automatic connections, and by filling in gaps or discontinuities in interpretation (Brown and Yule 1983). In addition, language can be properly interpreted with the acknowledgement by participants of the social roles that both participants play in the interactive social situation, and the social skills which enable them to act appropriately in a given communicative context. As a consequence, interpretation of a communicative event is grounded not just in linguistic but in communicative competence, which integrates linguistic, sociocultural, and pragmatic information.

As a whole, successful cross-cultural communication occurs when there is a convergence of the contributions of the participants' communicative competence. Participants in cross-cultural communicative situations, consequently, take different attitudes and viewpoints toward the language involved. In other words, the participants in cross-cultural communication make presuppositions, implications, inferences, and even logical conclusions within the framework that their culture and language designate. Their conflicting attitudes and standpoints may serve as major obstacles to convergent communication and may cause mutual misunderstanding as well. Eventually one can argue that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis gets strong credits on the point that language determines thinking and behavior patterns which can be, in turn, termed as culture.

This paper does not concern the physical, superficial, linguistic differences between the English and Korean languages that can be found in a grammar book or a dictionary. Instead, it will focus on the internal rules and discrepancies of the Korean language which are subtle, intrinsic, and dubious. These rules and discrepancies can be best

acquired by extensive exposure to the Korean language and its socio-cultural contexts rather than by simple instructions.

As briefly shown in the introduction, these discrepancies, socioculturally specific, are the products of the sum of cognitive structures that have been nurtured, patterned, and sharpened. Such discrepancies are the idiosyncrasies of a culture that are shared and cherished among the ingroups, and that are often marked as eccentricities from the outgroup's viewpoints. These discrepancies are the entities of the subconscious level which reflect the ingroup's emotions, value systems, beliefs, and philosophy. These discrepancies allow the ingroups to take sanctions against outgroups, but sometimes lead the ingroups to self-depreciation or even to self-destruction. The discrepancies are often ignored, devalued, or misinterpreted, and thus may result in not only a breakdown in cross-cultural communication, but also an unmanageable end to human relations.

The following interpretation of the Korean language and its generalization of the internal rules and discrepancies is done mainly from the standpoint of a Korean speaker of English. In retrospect, the author now is able to view her native language, Korean, objectively, owing to her contact with the English language and its speakers. In addition, the interpretation of the English language is drawn from the author's experience with the English speakers, primarily with the U.S. citizens.

The Korean language is often referred to as the 'language of self-effacing' (Breunig 1964). In the self-effacing culture, 'to regard the self as the center of things' (Choi 1980) is considered a weakness by society. As a consequence, the first person singular 'I' is regarded and given importance merely as a member of certain societal units, such as nation, association, community, or family. It is thus said that Korean society is a totality in which 'I' is buried within 'we' (O-Young Lee, 1967, cited by Park). A leading Korean journalist, Kyu-Tae Lee says that Korean society and culture are based on we-ism, whereas Western culture is rooted in me-ism. The self-effacing characteristic of the Korean culture is counter-balanced with a distinctive disclosure of deference to elders, and formality to strangers, as well as familiarity to one's juniors. In other words, Koreans' thoughts and language behaviors conform primarily to the wishes of others' and ingroup's opinions. It is essential to understand that a vertical hierarchy, based on age, seniority, rank, prestige, and sex, exists in almost every corner of the Korean society. Kyu-Tae Lee humorously speaks of the fact that there exists a class stratification even in cigarette brands. Regardless of taste or preference, a certain class smokes only a certain brand.

Another aspect of Korean self-effacing culture is the great importance of saving face. In a culture which takes saving one's face at any costs for granted, Koreans refuse to compromise and will rather brood over a distortion of the truth or a severe loss, and drive themselves to scape-goating. To save face, Koreans are inclined to ascribe their success and failure to fate or to their ancestors. Koreans, so finely attuned to the self-

effacing culture, often reveal two different selves: the public self and the private self. Koreans have reinforced, over a long period of time, an art of maximizing the private self and minimizing the public self (Kyu-Tae Lee 1987). For example, there is an old saying that a starving scholar shows up in public, pretending that he has just completed his meal with beef by picking his teeth. According to Kyu-Tae Lee, the adjectives 'reserved', 'evasive,' distant,' 'indifferent' are best-fitted terms for a description of Korean personality. Accordingly Koreans have developed a civilization of concealment like a ceramic art which does not allow seeing through, whereas the Western hemisphere has cultivated a 'glass civilization' (Kyu-Tae Lee 1987). Therefore, the Korean culture, which taboos self-disclosure, has produced an awesome language behavior which relies upon eyes, ears, and senses rather than on mouth.

The following sections show some of the intrinsic and distinctive characteristics of the Korean language which may ultimately result in misconceptions about Korean speakers of English as well as mis-comprehension between English speakers and Korean speakers.

### **Language of Deletion**

Any given information, including pronominal references indicating the participants directly interacting in a discourse can be totally omitted in the Korean language. The perfect Korean version of the English statement, "I telephoned you last night, but you were not home" would be "telephoned, but weren't." On this account it is not obligatory to distinguish a transitive verb from an intransitive verb. Since an assertion of an object is not vital for Koreans, a Korean speaker of English is likely to respond by saying, "I enjoyed very much," to the English question, "How did you like my party?" In the absence of the subjects and objects, the Korean language does not require relative pronouns (Yoon 1986). Despite the fact that pronominal references can be deleted, Koreans have developed a unique addressing system which is designed for demonstration of deference and humility. A pronominal reference indicating a first person is usually replaced by terms devaluating and humbling selves, and a reference indicating a second person is substituted for the person's titles. Indirect circumlocution, including this roundabout addressing behavior, in any context is regarded as more formal and appropriate in Korean society. For instance, it is a common practice for a subordinate to replace a pronominal reference indicating himself with a humbling term like a little man: "Dear Mr. President! 'The little man' (=I) knows nothing." The Korean equivalent for the English sentence "What would you like to eat?" would be "What would Dear Professor like to have?" in case the second person is a professor. It sounds so degrading and out-of-place for a Korean to use the term, 'you' in any linguistic context that in the absence of the person's title, male adults are generally addressed as dear teacher or Mr. teacher, and female adults as Dear Aunt or Dear Teacher's Wife. The term 'teacher' or 'teacher's wife' in this sense bears no connection with the teaching profession.

### **Language of Less Individuality**

The self-effacing culture has led Koreans to be receptive to and susceptible to social norms and ingroup opinions. Instead of regarding himself as an independent individual, a Korean considers himself as a member of a hierarchical structure. In any social context, he can easily identify himself vertically as well as horizontally as an ingroup member. As a consequence, a Korean avoids using 'my' unless he can claim himself as a sole proprietor, as in a sentence like, "This is my school bag," Korean speakers are reluctant to use 'my' as in English phrases such as 'my wife,' 'my father,' 'my country.' To the Korean speaker saying 'we' or 'our' does not mean the sum of you and me. It simply illustrates that there exists a close bond and solidarity between the individual and the ingroup to which he belongs. The remarks, "Welcome to our house! Please come in and meet our wife. Would you also like to meet our son and our father?" would certainly sound inept to English speakers. Thus English speakers would often hear Korean speakers of English using 'our' in almost every phrase where 'my' seems more appropriate. In addition, to Koreans it is an acknowledged social axiom that the highest hierarchy in a vertical structure is given primary attention and fidelity. 'Top-down policies' are usually recognized in any societal units and structures (Yoon 1986). Even in the format of a mailing address, the highest societal unit, i.e., the country comes first, then the name of the province, city, town, and finally the street number follows. A Korean Olympic gold medalist attributes his victory first to his nation and to his people, shouting "What I am today goes to our country and to our people."

Since individuality and singularity do not carry the same weight as in the Western culture, Koreans make no distinct discernment between singular and plural nouns. Although there is a plural marker which can be added to nouns, it is rare for Koreans to use it (Shin 1977). It is commonly said that a thing in the Korean thought represents a plural and generic concept (Kim 1977). The Korean version of the English sentence, "There are many people in the park" would be "person is a lot in park." Consequently, Korean speakers of English would have a difficult time deciding when to say 'individuals' or 'an individual'.

The Korean belief that things are intrinsically mass nouns is well demonstrated in the interpretation of the lexicon 'alone'. In the self-effacing culture, 'alone' is taken as a substitute for the English word 'lonely'. In the land of the morning calm, foreign visitors are rarely left alone to enjoy their privacy. They will often find themselves assailed by Koreans incessant questions: "Aren't you lonely?" "Why are you alone at this time of the day?" "Why are you travelling alone?" Furthermore Koreans insist on joining them. This certainly may be regarded as an intrusion upon privacy and an interference in the personal matters; however, Koreans consider joining good etiquette and a courtesy to their guests. As a result, Korean speakers of English would expect to receive from their

English speaker acquaintances the same treatment (Kim 1981). That may never occur, and might result in feelings of reproach.

#### **Language of Less Passive Voice**

In the language of given information, deleting a direct reference is regarded as crude and as a breach of social code. As a consequence, the use of the passive voice for Koreans is not a full-fledged language activity. Although 'you' as a receiver is qualified and entitled to be placed at the beginning of an English passive voice sentence, Koreans stating you in the middle or at the end of an active voice sentence do not intend to indicate less significance nor less respect. A Korean speaker of English is at ease saying, "As soon as the plane lands, they will take the Prime Minister to the hospital" in the English equivalent, "The Prime Minister will be taken to the hospital, as soon as the plane lands." Furthermore Korean speakers of English would say, "I repaired the radio" or "I cut my hair" without any implications that the repairing or cutting job has been done by the speaker himself. The Korean's statement, "I cut my hair" simply indicates that the cutting job has been completed. Due to the paucity of passive voice constructions, Korean speakers of English are often misperceived to be lacking in sophistication or etiquette, and sometimes are blamed for giving false information.

#### **Language of Honorifics**

The self-effacing Korean culture has produced various ways of honoring elders, seniors, superiors, in-laws, and males. The Korean language has abundant honorifics. Honorific nouns, verbs, and adjectives are allocated to seniors, elders, and superiors. Juniors simply 'eat the meal'; however, a special verb for 'eat' and a special noun for 'meal' are assigned to seniors. There are honorific markers which can be added almost everywhere: to nouns, adjectives, and verbs. A respected senior does not 'die'. Either he 'returns' to wherever he originally came from, or he 'places his spoon down'. Therefore, Korean speakers of English are hesitant to say "I am sorry to hear that your grandfather died recently." They would instead murmur something like, "It is deeply regrettable that your grandfather recently ..." and allow the idea to fade.

#### **Language of Hyperbole**

The self-effacing culture has cultivated another awesome language behavior, the behavior of effusive expressions. It is a common practice for Koreans to exaggerate or to make a redundant statement, especially when they wish to show their modesty, deference, and most of all, generosity. This language behavior of hyperbole might be interpreted as a bluff, or even a double-faced attitude. A Korean's genuine compliment, though excessive, may sound like bribing, flattery, or lacking in sincerity. The counter-balanced behavior, i.e., the behavior of understatement out of modesty, is sometimes suspect. Although the meal is not delicious, Koreans nonetheless pay the compliment, "I've never tasted such a delicious meal in my whole life." A frequent use of hyperbole by senior Koreans is the casual expression, "I'll be sixty years old the day after tomorrow."

In reality the age of sixty is regarded as high achievement. Koreans often comment on the other's hand-writing as the size of a gate. When a Korean who speaks excellent English is asked whether he speaks the languages well, he politely declines by saying, "No. I can speak only a little." Korean parents usually make understatement about their children. If their child is not the best or the second best student in his class of sixty students, the parents would say, "He is not doing well in school." The adjective 'meagre' is probably one of the most favored words among Koreans. Koreans welcome their visitor with a greeting like, "You are honoring us by visiting this meagre house." The foreign visitor would most probably be shocked to find a house with an indoor swimming pool and a sauna. Then the visitor will be seated normally at the head of the table, given a gift, and told, "Although we have prepared a meagre meal, please enjoy your dinner, and accept this meager gift." He would then blink his eyes in disbelief, because he sees twenty different dishes on the table. Furthermore, what he has just heard about the gift would make him wonder what he did to deserve this generosity. On the other hand, an English speaker exclaiming, "Look! What I've brought for you. Isn't it beautiful!" might sound boastful or immodest to Koreans.

The same attitude applies to how to say thank you or I am sorry. A mere 'thank you' does not convey a Korean's feeling, especially when he is truly grateful. At the same time, a simple statement such as "I am sorry" will not satisfy him, when he is indeed sorry. A statement like "If you only forgive me, I will pay back even after death" would mean that he indeed feels guilty and sorry. In cases where feelings and emotions are involved, effusive expressions should never be considered insincere.

#### **Language of Less Imperatives**

Koreans often take imperatives as an insult or an act of disloyalty. For the English notices such as "Keep off the grass" and "Do not litter," visitors to Korea will find signs saying, "Let's keep off the grass," and "Let's not litter." Koreans enjoy converting requests or imperatives into polite statements. "I would appreciate it very much if you would take a leave" would be a perfect Korean version for the English equivalent, "Please go." Koreans addressed in English should not be 'told', but only asked, even if there are no alternatives. English speakers in communication with Korean speakers should use caution in the use of imperatives. No matter how close the relations may be, it is always safer to use no imperatives.

#### **Language of Circumlocution**

Since circumlocution in any linguistic context is considered suitable and cultured, Koreans regard it as a virtue to quote other's works when they need to express their opinions or assertions. This practice is one of the ways to show respect for others and at the same time to humble selves. It would be very annoying for English speaker professors to read Korean students papers full of quotations from other scholars. In addition, straight-forwardness and candor are not much appreciated in the self-effacing

culture. It is unusual to encounter a Korean who first states his main point or motive without any accompanying formalities. In order to get to the main point, Koreans trouble themselves as well as their counterparts by introducing unrelated topics or simply by inquiring about the weather or health. This circumlocutory language behavior, which would annoy or confuse English speakers, is valued in the Korean culture. All the miscellaneous inquiries about the other's well-being, health, and children, generally precede the main point which is, for instance, "Let me borrow ten dollars." Korean children are taught to write a letter in this vein from early childhood. Topics on the weather, the receiver's well-being, family's health, and the sender's reports on daily activities and well-being are included in the letter before the main point. The main point is usually accompanied by an introductory phrase, by the way, or to tell the truth, or sometimes even in a postscript. In addition, Koreans are given to speculation and guesses, so that they make a practice of employing terms such as 'about' or 'approximately,' even when an exact calculation or a specific detail is not difficult to make. A Korean girl saying, "I am about twenty years old" can be from 18 to 24 years old. Koreans are well-known for the concept of Korean time: "Let's get together about two o'clock." And the two o'clock can be stretched into a three o'clock. This particular language behavior of circumlocution often compounds native speakers of English.

#### **Language of Ambivalence**

The conformity to socio-cultural norms easily leads Koreans to agree blindly with the majority or with anyone of higher status. Koreans murmuring 'yes' to questions, requests, or statements show their deference and humility. The rule of thumb in discourse with Korean speakers is, "Do not take a Korean's positive or negative answer at face value." A Korean 'yes' most of the time, means, 'I am with you, I am listening,' or 'I understand quite well.' Therefore, the Korean 'yes' does not necessarily specify a positive response or an agreement. When a Korean speaker of English is asked if he can come tomorrow, he may offer an answer 'yes' promptly, still knowing that he can not come tomorrow. The reason for this kind of behavior is that English speakers are freer to deviate from others and more adamant to hold opinions of their own, whereas Koreans are so sensitive to social norms and ingroup opinions that their primary concern lies in how others regard them. A foreign visitor to a Korean classroom will often notice Korean pupils answering 'yes' loudly in unison whether they understand the teacher or not. In a restaurant Koreans will usually order the same dish that their host selects; and they will immediately take off their jackets if their host or superior initiates the act.

To borrow Kyu-Tae Lee's term, this 'simultaneous action' is frequently spotted in social contexts. The culture of 'simultaneous action' has produced a stereo-typed people (Yoon 1986). Koreans think alike, behave alike, and respond alike. If Koreans are asked what they think about divorce, they will all give the same reply, "That is terrible." (Generally speaking, if a Korean speaker of English is invited to have a soft drink, he is

likely to order coffee instead of juice, regardless of his preference, because he knows that the coffee costs less at least in Korea. Korean hosts serve their guests coffee without any attempt or taking into consideration the guests' preference on the assumption that drinking coffee is proper. On the other hand, in a formal discourse, an absolute 'no' or a direct 'I can't,' or 'I won't' is seldom heard. The expressions 'maybe,' 'well,' 'That would be all right,' or 'I'll see' are euphemistic substitutes for the English flat 'NO.' A Korean's response to the English speaker's offer, "Would you care for a cup of coffee?" would be one of the following: "That would be all right," "Oh, well, I am OK.," "No, thank you," or "You are troubling yourself too much." It does not matter whether the Korean guest answers negatively or ambiguously. The English speaker must use his best judgment, insight and instinct, and bring the guest a cup of coffee. Although the Korean guest does not care for coffee or does not drink it, he will still take it or even pretend to like it once his host places the cup on the table.

When Koreans are in a position to accept generosity, they do not promptly rise and say, 'Thank you' or 'Yes, please.' They always reject the first offer knowing and expecting that they will be asked over and over to accept the generosity. In general Koreans will feel offended and hurt in case an English speaker accepts their first negative response. It is significant for the English speakers to understand the psychology of a Korean's factual 'no' and a social 'no.' By the same token, Korean speakers of English may not take an English speaker's saying 'no' seriously, and may insist or force him to eat to a point of discomfort. It is easy to picture a foreigner's discomfort over a situation in which he is forced to take more food.

One of the difficulties most Korean speakers of English experience in cross-cultural communication is whether to answer 'yes' or 'no' to a negative question. In the Korean language, when a question is in the negative, Koreans either affirm the negative supposition by responding 'yes' or simply negate it. It is interesting to see the logic involved in this behavior: the two negatives cancel each other, thus making an affirmative. For this reason, as can be seen in the following dialogue, English speakers may have a vexing experience in understanding a Korean speaker of English:

English speaker = E	Korean speaker of English = K
E: Didn't you meet him last night?	
K: Yes.	
E: Oh, you met him.	
K: No. I didn't.	
E: ...!	

### **Language of Labyrinth**

The Korean language is often called an affective language which is prolific in adjectives and adverbs (Shin 1977). The Korean language is sometimes attacked as

having less substance on the premise that the boundary between the concrete and the abstract is opaque (Shin 1977). The language with a full scale of hyperbole makes the subjunctive mood in an English sense almost obsolete. Koreans care less about when to say 'were' and when to say 'is' after if. The adverb 'Manyak,' which is the English equivalent 'if' in the subjunctive mood, is sufficient to describe something beyond reach. As a result, Korean speakers of English may have difficulty figuring out the difference between "He will leave if it rains" and "He would leave if it rained." The use of the subjunctive mood is not likely to become second nature to the Korean speakers of English. The discernment between the subjunctive and indicative moods is so hazy that native English speakers may mistakenly consider Korean speakers of English as unimaginative or dreamless.

Language with less concreteness certainly lacks the use of determiners. Koreans do not feel it obligatory to detail the differences among 'a book,' 'the book,' 'books,' and 'the books.' As a result, Korean speakers of English will experience difficulty whenever they attempt to use 'the's' or 'a's'.

At first contact with the Korean language, native English speakers may have the impression that the Korean language has only two distinct tenses: the past and the present tenses. Despite this impression, the Korean language has various verb tenses as in English. Koreans, on the other hand, might consider the boundaries among the English verb tenses as something that can be overlooked. Professor Oh-Ryong Lee reports (as cited by Yoon, 1986) that there exists no Korean term indicating 'tomorrow' in the Korean lexicons, although there are terms for 'today,' 'yesterday,' and 'the day after tomorrow.' It seems odd to say, however, the Korean past tense is capable of doing all the functions for the English tenses, such as the past, past perfect, present perfect, past progressive, and present perfect progressive. Likewise, the Korean present tense works perfectly for the rest of the tenses of English: the present, present progressive and future. The Korean question, "Did you study?" is legitimately equivalent to the English question "Have you studied?" "Were you studying?" or "Have you been studying?" The Korean question "What do you do?" would mean "What do you do?" "What are you doing?" or "What will you do?" in English. It is a common erroneous practice for a Korean speaker of English to answer, "My father is reading a book." to the English question, "What does your father do?" and vice versa, "My father is a banker." to the English question, "What is your father doing?"

Clearly, major obstacles to cross-cultural communication do not lie only in linguistic incompetence, but in communicative incompetence which integrates linguistic discrepancies and different socio-cultural backgrounds between the languages. In a strict sense, absolute communication is not easily obtainable not only between the two different cultures but also within a culture. Even within the same culture, degrees of miscommunication exist. As Slobin (1979) points out, culture changes much faster than

language. At present, the participants in cross-cultural communication are in the process of closing the gap between them. Less conflicting attitudes and viewpoints will result, and hopefully, they will recognize surface linguistic differences within a framework of convergent socio-cultural information.

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#### **Note**

1. The Korean language shows a marked distinction in syntactic and semantic character between formal discourse and informal discourse. In formal discourse, word order is quite rigid, and appropriate case markers and particles are overtly included. In informal discourse, on the other hand, economy of language is the rule of thumb, provided that major unspoken elements are mutually acknowledged and comprehended from the context and face-face-interaction. Informal spoken formal discourse maximizes the use of the context provided by face-to-face interaction. One consequence is that informal discourse differs strikingly from formal discourse in the function of case and its markers. All noun phrases convey new information, their cases need not be marked if their roles are unmarked and clearly determined by contextual and semantic constraints. Case in informal discourse is obligatory when the element marked is given prominent emphasis, specificity, or contrast.

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