

# Culture-Specific Concepts of Politeness for Offering Advice

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## Abstract

This study investigates cultural differences between Korean speakers and English speakers in their perception of the politeness of the speech act of offering advice. The questionnaire developed for use in this study was composed of 8 situations each of which had four advice strategies, modified and adopted from Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies. Each situation represented one of two basic themes [serious advice and trivial advice], one of two distance variables [close(-D) and not-so-close(+D) relation], and one of two power variables [vertical(+P) and horizontal(=P) relation]. We found that Korean speakers chose substantially more bald-on-record form of advice than did English speakers. Even though face-concerns are common to all cultures, this implies that the concept of politeness itself is different from culture to culture, and that there is no universal criterion of what authentic morality or politeness is.

## 1. Research Questions

The speech acts of advice have not yet been studied very much. Even though just a few scholars have conducted research on the speech acts of advice, their findings are often contradictory. The purpose of this study is to investigate cultural differences between KNS and ENS in their perception of the politeness of the speech act of offering advice. Specifically, this study has attempted to investigate the following four questions:

- (1) What is the difference in the speakers' perception on *advice* strategies between Korean and English speakers?
- (2) What is the cross-cultural difference in the impact of social *distance* (D) on advice strategies?
- (3) What is the cross-cultural difference in the impact of relative *power* (P) on advice strategies?
- (4) What is the cross-cultural difference in the impact of the *seriousness of advice* on politeness strategies?

The findings of and answers to these questions are expected to provide some theoretical and empirical justifications for a shift in pedagogical emphasis from the current preoccupation with the usage of linguistic forms to a focus on the relation between linguistic forms and cultural conventions, at least in the case of performing the speech acts of advice.

## 2. Methodology

The subjects were 20 English native speakers (ENSs) and 20 Korean native speakers(KNSs). The ENSs teaching English at a university in Seoul, Korea came from the USA (14) and Canada (6). The KNSs were Korean college students. The questionnaire developed for use in this study was composed of 8 situations, each of which had four advice strategies, modified and adopted from Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies. Each situation represented one of two basic themes [serious advice and trivial advice], one of two distance variables [close(-D) and not-so-close(+D) relation], and one of two power variables [vertical(+P) and horizontal(=P) relation].

## 3. Analysis and Results

(1) **Table 1 shows frequencies of advice strategies selected by KNS and ENS and significance of frequency-difference in terms of Chi-square value.**

Table 1: Frequency and  $\chi^2$  values of advice strategies.

Situations	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	
Language	.....								
Korean	BOR	6	2	10	4	11	2	12	3
	ORR	10	3	3	4	7	6	3	6
	OFF	2	1	4	8	2	10	4	7
	NOT	2	14	3	4	0	2	1	4
English	BOR	0	0	3	2	2	2	4	0
	ORR	3	0	12	3	10	3	7	6
	OFF	4	2	5	6	6	7	9	6
	NOT	13	18	0	9	2	8	0	8
2x4 Chi-square (df=3, $\alpha < .05$ )	5.834		3.018		5.130		4.410		
	<u>19.776</u>	<u>12.282</u>	<u>10.760</u>	<u>8.524</u>					

Note: BOR refers to bald-on-record.  
 ORR refers to on-record with redress.  
 OFF refers to off-record in terms of hint.  
 NOT refers to 'not doing FTAs'.

A significant difference was found in offering advice to close interlocutors (S1, S3, S5, S7). Of these situations, the salient difference (S1) deserves special attention. In the case of S1, ENSs did not use a BOR form (0%), whereas KNSs selected a BOR form (30%). In other words, KNSs tend to use impolite forms in the sense of Brown & Levinson's theory. However, such a BOR form is not always perceived as being impolite by KNSs. In Korea, it is often regarded as an expression of sincere concern of students for their professor. It can be maintained that the concept of morality and politeness itself is relative to perspective, and the notion of 'universal politeness' defined only in terms of the form of linguistic expression seems to be unjustifiable.

## (2) Impact of distance on advice strategies

Table 2. Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) values of the impact of D on advice strategies

	serious advice		trivial advice	
	① (S1-S2)	② (S3-S4)	③ (S5-S6)	④ (S7-S8)
Korean	<u>15.104</u>	4.196	<u>13.640</u>	<u>9.018</u>
English	4.472	5.802	7.446	<u>12.676</u>

Note: df=3,  $\alpha < .05$  (critical value=7.815)

As Table 2 shows, KNSs were more dependent on (D) than ENSs. Collectivistic KNSs tend to categorize close interlocutors in terms of psychologically attached 'we-group', whereas individualistic ENSs does not. In other words, KNSs are more dependent on (D) than ENSs.

## (3) Impact of power on advice strategies

Table 3. Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) values of the impact of P on advice strategies

	serious advice		trivial advice	
	① (S1-S3)	② (S2-S4)	③ (S5-S7)	④ (S6-S8)
Korean	5.636	<u>11.808</u>	3.310	1.396
English	<u>21.512</u>	<u>10.000</u>	3.796	6.000

Note: df=3,  $\alpha < .05$  (critical value=7.815)

As Table 3 shows, when offering serious advice to close interlocutors, KNSs were less dependent on (P) than ENSs. Collectivistic KNSs regard a close professor as an insider of we-group, whereas individualistic ENSs regard him as a remote other.

## (4) Impact of seriousness of advice on politeness strategies

Table 4. Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) values of the impact of seriousness of advice on politeness strategies

	① (S1-S5)	② (S2-S6)	③ (S3-S7)	④ (S4-S8)
Korean	3.988	<u>17.364</u>	1.182	0.608
English	<u>14.236</u>	<u>17.778</u>	2.600	3.058

Note: df=3,  $\alpha < .05$  (critical value=7.815)

As Table 4 shows, A significant cross-cultural difference was found only in the case of relation between S1 and S5.

## 4. Conclusion

Firstly, significant cross-cultural difference in the speech acts of offering advice to close interlocutors was found in this study. In offering serious advice, most of ENSs hardly ever employed

BOR form, whereas KNSs appeared to use it frequently to close interlocutors, be they a professor or a friend.

Secondly, when offering advice, KNSs appeared to be more dependent on social distance(D) than ENSs.

Thirdly, when offering serious advice to a close professor and to a close friend, KNSs appeared to be less dependent on relative power (P) than ENSs.

These differences can be considered to be a reflection of differences in respective cultural values. Collectivistic KNSs tend to regard a *close* person as an insider of we-group, whereas individualistic ENSs regard even a close person as a remote other.

In sum, the differences uncovered in this study imply that Korean learners of EFL should be informed of the individualistic conventions of ENSs. EFL teachers and learners in Korea need to understand that ENSs value independence, whereas KNSs interdependence. EFL teachers should take such difference in the speech phenomena, instead of assuming universal politeness principle, into consideration in their classroom practices in order to encourage learners to develop their pragmatic competence.

Brown & Levinson's theory of politeness is an ambitious attempt in arguing that face-concerns and the ordering of politeness continuum should be common to all cultures. But their theory tends to judge the politeness of speech acts only in terms of its linguistic *form*. However, this study suggests that this continuum is not common to all cultures, and that their theory may be too simple in its exclusive reliance on the *form* of linguistic expression in judging the politeness of speech acts.

In this sense, Korean learners of EFL should be informed not to transfer their own way of performing speech act to the target language. They should improve their pragmatic competence by learning not merely the formal features of English language but also the cultural values of ENSs.

On the other hand, ENSs also should be taught to refrain from blindly applying their own criteria of politeness to the foreigner's speech acts which is based on quite a different cultural value.

This does not mean that there is no morality or politeness at all. It means rather that the essence of morality itself is historically and socially constituted, and that there is no eternal criterion of true morality or politeness.

In an age of unprecedented globalization, mutual trust should take precedence over objective truth, we have to try to respect the richness of other cultures & language conventions in order to enhance mutual understanding.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire

Situation 1: [+P/-D] serious advice

A professor whom you are very close with is a chain-smoker. You always thought that he should stop smoking. While you are talking with him he smokes again. What do you think would be appropriate to say in this situation? Please check (✓) your choice in .

- A. You should stop smoking. It's really bad for your health.
- B. I think it's better to stop smoking. I've heard that smoking is really bad for the health.
- C. I've heard that smoking is really bad for the health.
- D. Nothing.

Situation 2: [+P/+D] serious advice

A professor whom you are not very close with is a chain smoker. You often thought that he should stop smoking. While you are talking with him he smokes again. What do you think would be appropriate to say in this situation?

- A. You should stop smoking. It's really bad for your health.
- B. I think it's better to stop smoking. I've heard that smoking is really bad for the health.
- C. I've heard that smoking is really bad for the health.
- D. Nothing.

Situation 3: [=P/-D] serious advice

A friend whom you are very close with is a chain-smoker. You always thought that he should stop smoking. While you are talking with him he smokes again. What do you think would be appropriate to say in this situation?

- A. You should stop smoking. It's really bad for your health.
- B. I think it's better to stop smoking. I've heard that smoking is really bad for the health.
- C. I've heard that smoking is really bad for the health.
- D. Nothing.

Situation 4: [=P/+D] serious advice

A friend whom you are not very close with is a chain-smoker. You often thought that he should stop



smoking. While you are talking with him he smokes again. What do you think would be appropriate to say in this situation?

- A. You should stop smoking. It's really bad for your health.
- B. I think it's better to stop smoking. I've heard that smoking is really bad for the health.
- C. I've heard that smoking is really bad for the health.
- D. Nothing.

Situation 5: [+P/-D] trivial advice

The professor whom you are very close with has been a widely known as a competent and brilliant scholar. However, he is so cold and unfriendly to the students in his class that he hardly gets a very good score in the lecture evaluation. How would you advise to him in this situation?

- A. You should be more kind to the students!
- B. Why don't you be more kind to the students!
- C. You're not mad of the student's being so rude at you, are you?
- D. Nothing.

Situation 6: [+P/+D] trivial advice

The professor whom you aren't very close with has been a widely known as a competent and brilliant scholar. However, he is so cold and unfriendly to the students in his class that he hardly gets a very good score in the lecture evaluation. How would you advise to him in this situation?

- A. You should be more kind to the students!
- B. Why don't you be more kind to the students!
- C. You're not mad of the student's being so rude at you, are you?
- D. Nothing.

Situation 7: [=P/-D] trivial advice

You are in a live class discussion with your classmates. Your friend who is very close with you isn't really participating in the discussion. She is very smart but quiet and a little shy, so she is probably worried of speaking out wrong opinions. You always felt that she should be more active and show her talents. You are going to give her an advice how would you say to her?

- A. Speak out and participate!
- B. You're such a smart and talented person,

what are you worried about! Speak out and be participative!

- C. You're not really interested in this class, aren't you?
- D. Nothing.

Situation 8: [=P/+D] trivial advice

You are in a live class discussion with your classmates. Your friend who is not very close with you isn't really participating in the discussion. She is very smart but quiet and a little shy, so she is probably worried of speaking out wrong opinions. You often felt that she should be more active and show her talents. You are going to give her an advice how would you say to her?

- A. Speak out and participate!
- B. You're such a smart and talented person,  
what are you worried about! Speak out and be participative!
- C. You're not really interested in this class, aren't you?
- D. Nothing.