

Politeness Strategy of Koreans and Americans

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This study intends to investigate how Koreans and Americans use two politeness strategies of involvement and independence differently depending on the power relationship with the interlocutor. The questionnaire was collected from ten Korean university students and ten American teachers who live in Chongju. In the questionnaire there were nine questions and each participants were asked to choose one answer from two of the examples given. The participants had to answer three sets of questions, which the situations were same but different were the interlocutors. Additional three questions were to see if a people in a certain culture prefer specific strategy of politeness. The findings show that Americans perform politeness strategies of involvement more often than Koreans while Koreans tend to show independence politeness. However, in the point of power relationship there was no significant relationship in both cultures. It was thought that Koreans would change the type of politeness depending on who the interlocutors are, but just like the Americans they didn't show a distinct change. The results suggest that there is a need to let the instructors and students realize the differences between the two cultures. Knowing the difference may reduce the intercultural miscommunication or communication breakdown due to lack of understanding the different culture.

1. Introduction

Successful intercultural communication can never be achieved without understanding thoroughly the socio-cultural and emotional backgrounds of the target languages. Even if we have a thorough grasp of their socio-cultural backgrounds, still there must be some degree of distortion and loss in the process of transfer. In intercultural communication where distinctions depend much more on perceptual differences than on conceptual classifications, the differences between languages are much greater. When the languages like Korean and English are remote from each other not only in linguistic structure but also in cultural background, it is extremely hard to have heart-to heart communication. According to Myung-Seok Park (1979),

Thought and speech are not two different things which are casually connected, like a motorcar and its driver. They are closely linked together like cause and effect, like form and substance, so that a thought expressed in two different ways is practically two different thoughts. (p. 28)

2. Theoretical background

Edward T. Hall says in *The Silent Language*, communication is culture, and culture is communication (Hall 1959, p. 93). This is another way of saying that the very way we organize our lives is part of a network of communication and that those who would function within a society or culture other than their own must learn its cultural as well as its linguistic code. There is an intimate and inevitable relationship between the language structure of a culture and the modes in which the people think and act. And language is the ordinary and most distinctively human way in which people communicate their concepts and state their judgments. People of any culture can think only the thoughts their language permits them to think, and their language in turn helps them construct their universe. Misunderstanding and cultural shock result largely from the different modes of thought and cultural patterns between the two countries rather than from the linguistic incompetence of the user of the language. However, absolute communication is impossible not only between languages but also within a language. Eugene A. Nida (1969, P. 483) says that effective interlingual communication is always possible, despite seemingly enormous differences in linguistic structures and cultural features.

Within the same culture several variations of the same component naturally occur. In spite of this variety, each culture is usually typified by some dominant trait and this is what I would like to investigate in this paper. With these typified traits, I would like to see the distinct differences especially in performing politeness strategies between Korean and American. There are two types of politeness strategies: Involvement and independence politeness. Involvement is shown by such discourses strategies as paying attention to others, showing a strong interest in their affairs, pointing out common in group membership or points of view with them, or using first names. For example, we might say such things as “I know just what you mean, the same thing happened to me yesterday,” or “Yes, I agree, I’ve always believed that, too.” Any indication that the speaker is asserting that he or she is closely connected to the hearer may be considered a strategy of involvement. This strategy has also been called as solidarity politeness for the reason that sociolinguists want to emphasize that this aspect of face shows what participants have in common. It was also called as positive politeness on the base of the thought of poles of magnetism because the two participants show their common attraction to each other. Independence politeness emphasizes the individuality of the participants. It emphasizes their right not to be completely dominated by group or social values, and to be free from the imposition of others. Independence shows that a person may act with some degree of autonomy and that he or she respects the rights of others to their own autonomy and freedom of movement or choice. Independence is shown by such discourse strategies as making minimal assumptions about the needs or interests of others, by not “putting words into their mouths,” by giving others the widest range of options, or by using more formal names and titles. For example, in ordering in a

restaurant we might say, “I don’t know if you will like to have rice or noodles,” or in making the initial suggestion to go out for coffee we might say, “I’d enjoy going out for coffee, but I imagine you are very busy.” The key to independence face strategies is that they give or grant independence to the hearer. It is also called as deference politeness and negative politeness.

I assumed that there would also be the power relationship. What it means is that, depending on interlocutor’s power the politeness strategy will differ. Myung-Seok Park proposed that Americans tend to be impersonal in their relations with others, while Koreans tend to become deeply involved emotionally. The impersonality of Americans seems to be based on the rationalism of western culture, and of the stress Americans put on individualism. In the Korean concept of the group, more personal interaction and emotional involvement is required. Americans generally feel that involvement in general and emotional involvement in particular should be avoided. I hypothesized that Koreans would perform involvement politeness to the interlocutor who has less power and independence politeness to the interlocutor who has more power. For Americans I have assumed that the Americans would mostly perform independence politeness no matter who the interlocutor is.

The most important concept to remember is that these two strategies are paradoxical. It is always a matter of more or less, not absolute expression of just one or the other. If we look from the other’s point of view, if we give too much involvement to the other person, we risk their independence. On the other hand if we give them too much independence, we risk their involvement. That is, if we exclude others, while that may increase our own independence, it at the same time decreases our own involvement.

3. Method & Result

I have conducted a survey to find out the hypothesis. There were ten Americans and then Koreans who live in Chongju, Korea. In the questionnaire there were nine questions and each participants were asked to choose one answer from two of the examples given. The participants had to answer three sets of questions, which the situations were same but different were the interlocutors:

1. You are in a restaurant with your close friend. The waiter brings you the menu. What would you say to your friend?
 - a. I’ve had this steak before and it was tasty. Why don’t you try it?
 - b. Wow!! They have everything. Have you decided what to try?
2. You are in a restaurant with your professor. The waiter brings you the menu. What would you say to your professor?
 - a. I’ve had this steak before and it was tasty. Why don’t you try it?
 - b. Wow!! They have everything. Have you decided what to try?

Involvement to less power

Korean	American
3	5

Independence to less power

Korean	American
7	5

Involvement to more power

Korean	American
0	5

Independence to more power

Korean	American
10	5

For question 1, three Koreans and five Americans answered **a**, which can be the indication of performing involvement politeness to the interlocutor with less power. Koreans doesn't show a clear performance of involvement politeness. But it rather shows independence politeness. For question 2, ten Koreans and six Americans answered **b**, which can be the indication of performing independence politeness to the interlocutor with more power. It is true that ten of all the participants answered **b** in question 2, but it does not indicate the performance of independence politeness for interlocutor with more power because there are seven people who perform independence politeness for interlocutor with less power. There was no significant change due to the power in the performance of politeness for Korean. We can find that both Koreans and Americans perform Independence more often regardless the interlocutor's power. Here is another set of example.

3. You are thinking about inviting your close friend to a restaurant. You haven't decided which restaurant to go to. What would you ask?
 - a. I'm thinking about having Mexican Food. Is it okay with you?
 - b. I'm not sure where you wanna go. Do you prefer certain kind of food?
4. You are thinking about inviting your boss to a restaurant. You haven't decided which restaurant to go to. What would you ask?
 - a. I'm thinking about having Mexican Food. Is it okay with you?
 - b. I'm not sure where you wanna go. Do you prefer a certain kind of food?

Involvement to less power

Korean	American
1	6

Independence to less power

Korean	American
9	4

Involvement to more power

Korean	American
3	3

Independence to more power

Korean	American
7	7

For question 3, nine Koreans and four Americans answered **b**, performing independence politeness to the interlocutors with less power. For question 4, seven Koreans and Americans answered **b**, showing independence politeness to interlocutors with more power. In both situations there were no significant change of performing the politeness like the first set of the example. It rather shows that Americans perform involvement politeness to the people with less power. Here is the last one of three sets of examples.

5. You see a friend who caught a bad cold. What would you say?
 - a. I've had that cold before. It's terrible. You should drink a lot of tea.
 - b. Hope you feel better soon.
6. You see your boss caught a bad cold. What would you say?
 - a. I've had that cold before. It's terrible. You should drink a lot of tea.
 - b. Hope you feel better soon.

Involvement to less power

Korean	American
8	2

Independence to less power

Korean	American
2	8

Involvement to more power

Korean	American
7	9

Independence to more power

Korean	American
3	1

In this set, we can see very interesting result. Most of the Korean participants are performing involvement politeness in both of the questions while most of the American participants perform independence politeness. However, they didn't show significant change of politeness depending on the power.

Additional three questions were to see if a people in a certain culture prefer specific strategy of politeness.

7. You go to a conference and meet someone who is interested in the same field. You find out that the two of you are the same age. Do you think it is okay to call him/her by his/her first name?
 - a. It's okay to call a person by his/her first name.
 - b. It's not polite to call someone you met for the first time by their first name.

I have already mentioned that calling by their first name is involvement and by the title or last name is independence. Like most of the people believe, Americans tend to perform involvement politeness by calling a person by his or her first name.

Seven out of ten Korean participants answered it is not polite to call a person by his or her first name.

8. Your friend asks you to go to the post office. You find out that there are two kinds of mailing systems. You call your friend and say,
 - a. I don't know if you would like to send this by airmail or by speedpost.
 - b. I think speedpost is much better. Why don't you send it through speedpost?

In this question, all of the American participants and eight of the Korean participants answered **a**, performing independence politeness.

9. You are in a department store with your friend. In the shop you would say to your friend,
 - a. Take your time. I am not so sure what your style is.
 - b. What about this red one?

Eight of American participants and four of the Korean participants answered **b**, showing involvement politeness.

4. Conclusion

In this nine questions, Korean participants show seven independence politeness and two involvement politeness and American participants show five independence and four involvement politeness. Different from what I have hypothesized, Koreans didn't show a clear change of performing the politeness depending on interlocutor's power. I proposed that they would show involvement politeness to interlocutor who has less power and independence politeness to interlocutors with more power. However, they rather show independence politeness more often than Americans no matter who the interlocutor is. I have also found that Americans are not always performing independence politeness. Although Koreans performed involvement politeness twice, Americans performed four times. This study could lead us to understand that different from what we have believed Koreans give independence to the hearer no matter the power relationship between the interlocutors. Like we have said it over and over cultural differences often produce misunderstanding and lead to ineffective communication.

Wolfson (1989, p. 31) argues that

The acquisition of sociolinguistic rules can be greatly facilitated by teachers who have

the necessary information at their command and who have the sensitivity to use their knowledge in order to guide students and help them to interpret values and patterns which they would otherwise have difficulty in interpreting.”

Most miscommunication does not occur through mispronunciation or through poor uses of grammar. The major sources of miscommunication in intercultural contexts lie in differences in patterns of the way people speak and act. Sometimes even hostility arises when each group has failed to interpret the intentions of the other group as a result of misinterpreting its discourse conventions. Careful attention to communication of discourse analysis leads to an ability to return to original statements. As learners and teachers we need to be aware of the sociolinguistic conventions, not having a simple awareness about the conventions but a critical awareness.

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