

# On Politeness: Cross-cultural differences

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**Abstract** The central question for politeness has been whether it reflects the nature of human being. Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) insightful work suggests this is so: politeness is universal. A great amount of ink has been spilled over for critiques to their work showing empirical evidence that cross-cultural differences in politeness manifestation are found, hence proving that Brown and Levinson's hypothesis is incorrect or too strong. This paper attempts to contribute to the debate. We conducted a cross-linguistic survey of how American and Korean participants respond to the given situations using politeness strategies. The results showed that convergences were found between the two participant groups in many situations but gaps in others. Implications in terms of politeness theory and its critiques will be provided.

## 1. Introduction

The study of language can be divided into two fields. The one is investigating grammar of language. We are not just talking about structure of language. Grammar also includes investigations of phonological or semantic rules. The other field is the study of utterances; it is a level beyond how sentence is formed and pronounced. The inquiry is concerned with how people use language and why they do that. Pragmatics and discourse analysis would be fit in this category.

In this study, we investigate the interface between pragmatics and sociolinguistics. In particular, we are interested in how people use one of the well-studied speech acts, so called "politeness". We will lay out a theoretical aspect of politeness, proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). What is special about their proposal is that they envision politeness to be a universal concept. They claim that being polite is the nature of human beings. This is conceptually straightforward, so that everyone is supposed to be polite. However, what kind of evidence do we have for this proposal? A huge number of empirical studies should be accompanied to support this claim. In fact, since Brown and Levinson's proposal was proposed, numerous efforts have been made to support or criticize their proposal (Coupland et al. 1988, Culpeper 1996, Kienpointer 1999, Arundale 1999, Held 1999, Eelen 2001, Mills 2003, Watts 2003, among others).

In this paper, we will first introduce Brown and Levinson's politeness theory in section 2 where we discuss their underlying assumptions, which includes "Model Person" and politeness strategies. These two concepts are particularly important for their theory in that positing model person in discussion would avoid any possible irrational act of individuals and help us capture a generalization of what politeness has to do with our life. Politeness strategies are important concepts because we can generalize what kinds of politeness strategies would be used under what situations and see if individual and/or cultural differences would

be found. If someone uses a certain type of strategy, the prediction would be a different person would apply the same strategy in the same situation. The type match can be supporting evidence for universality of the application of politeness strategies. In section 3, we set up a survey on whether Brown and Levinson's universal hypothesis of politeness is correct. Ten American and Korean participants were recruited and given a survey asking for applying politeness strategies to given situations. In section 4, the results of the study will be discussed. The focus will be whether each national would use different types of politeness strategies, and if so, whether the frequency would match, too. The prediction would be, if Brown and Levinson is correct, that we should be able to find similarities in applications of politeness strategies, and that its frequency matches. In section 5, discussion and implication will be discussed with respect to in what sense Brown and Levinson's analysis is relevant to my survey study. And section 6 is conclusion.

## **2. Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory**

In this section, we will review Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model. We will first present the overview of the Brown and Levinson's model, and then elaborate on the major issues on the model: Model Person, Face and Positive and Negative politeness strategies in turn. Then, we will present research questions.

First of all, what does being polite mean in our language use? Under what circumstances do we use more polite words, markers, or even structures? It is not difficult to notice that expressions conveying the speaker's politeness are closely connected with certain speech acts such as request, question, invitation or disagreement. For example, we often have to use hedges before a request, such as *I'm sorry but...* By using this initial clause, the speaker can avoid potential threats that his request is rejected by the addressee – the case where his self-image would not be compromised. The speaker is also taking risks because his request would offend the hearer; he would probably make the circumstance awkward. Thus, the hedge plays an important role for buffering a possible tension between the speaker and the addressee. On the other hand, we might initiate conversation with our close friend by calling their nickname. For example, for invitation of him/her to the birthday party, we could say, "Hey Pumpkin, this Saturday is my birthday. Come. You'll like it." Expressions, such as *Hey Pumpkin*, show intimacy between the interlocutors and they will also count as a politeness strategy.

Politeness has largely two roles. On the one hand, it is defined as a speech act alleviating those risks, which is termed as 'face threats', triggered by certain 'face-threatening acts' toward another (i.e. a request in our example) (Mills, 2003, p. 6). On the other hand, the speech act also plays a role for showing intimacy between the interlocutors. Let us turn to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model that outlines the speaker's politeness strategies. There are basically two types of politeness strategies: positive and negative, and they will be discussed in detail in the following subsections. Brown and Levinson are interested in two

issues: First, they want to generalize types of politeness strategies in our language use. They attempt to define under what situation a particular strategy is supposed to be exercised. Second, they propose that this generalization is *universally* applied. This is a very strong proposal. What this means is that we can predict that an individual would use a strategy under a given situation. The universality also implies that there might be no cultural differences in the applications of politeness strategies. For examples, under the same context, the American speaker and the Korean speaker would use the same types of strategies. At the first glance, this strong claim seems to be easily falsifiable because in normal life even the same person would behave differently: he might be polite one day but rude in another for the same situation. Therefore, Brown and Levinson (1987) come up with the idea of model person. Let us start our discussion of model person in the next section.

## 2.1 Model person

Brown and Levinson (1987) define Model Persons as agents fulfilling the linguistic politeness. In this model, every model person is assumed to be inherited with two specific features – Rationality and Face.

‘Rationality’ here means the ability to choose appropriate means to meet their goals (Brown and Levinson 1978:63). Therefore, the model person with rationality is always capable of making appropriate (linguistic) choices when s/he wants to achieve certain goals. Model persons, therefore, would be somewhat ideal individuals in society who are error free, have a decent memory and know linguistic systems of their native language. For example, when they are asked to make a courteous request, they invariably adopt proper linguistic strategies. In order to achieve this goal, they use, for example, formulaic politeness expressions such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you’.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), model persons also have a desired self-image that they want to be shown about themselves by others. For example, when a speaker wishes to express intimacy toward a hearer, it is likely that s/he finds a way to show closeness to the hearer. The dialogue in (1) depicts such a situation where the speaker’s various actions of showing intimacy with the hearer.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The parenthesis indicates the content of a strategy which will be defined in section 2.2.

- (1) S1: Hey, what are you working on? It's Friday night.  
You don't have any dates? (Showing interests)  
H1: Oh, hey, I'm working on the Syntax assignment.  
It takes forever so I cannot even thinking of going out.  
S2: Poor Bonnie. I heard the assignment is very challenging.  
(Showing sympathy for the hearer & avoiding disagreement with the hearer's opinion)  
H2: It certainly is. I cannot think of any solution.  
S3: Cheer up! I bet you will come up with some idea soon.  
I know you are very good at Syntax.  
(Complimenting on the hearer)

Let us see how the speaker and hearer show their intimacy in more detail. In the first turn-taking between S1 and H1 in the dialogue above, the speaker shows an interest in the hearer's current issues by asking what the hearer is studying. Showing interest is one of the common ways to show intimacy between the interlocutors. In the second turn-taking, the speaker (S2) expresses closeness not only by expressing sympathy for the hearer but also by avoiding disagreement with the hearer. Lastly, the speaker (S3) once again shows intimacy with the hearer by complimenting on the hearer.

By means of these friendly acts, the speaker is likely to succeed in making an amiable or positive image of him/herself toward the hearer. This kind of efforts that speakers make for intimacy is what Brown and Levinson dubbed 'positive face'.

On the other hand, we sometimes wish to keep our distance from others by expressing formality or respect and would behave as if we did not want to be close to them. In such cases, the speaker would probably behave reservedly, and this indicates aloofness toward the hearer. Let us take a concrete example in (2).

- (2) S1: Excuse me, was I speeding, Officer? (Giving deference)  
H1: I'm afraid so, sir. Driving 80 miles per an hour is illegal on this road.  
(Stating the FTA as an instance of a general rule) Could I see your license? (Being conventionally indirect)  
S2: Sorry to bother you, sir but I think I did not bring it with me today!  
(Apologizing)

Firstly, the speaker (S1) expresses his distance from the hearer (H1) by showing respect to the hearer; He can do so by calling the hearer 'officer'. Then the hearer, in return, gives deference to the speaker by calling him by 'sir'. The hearer also uses a counterfactual 'could I' to express courtesy. Such a desire of the speaker to express distance from the interlocutors is called 'negative face'. Brown and Levinson (1987) assume that Model persons have these two kinds of face: positive and negative faces.

Since under Brown and Levinson's account, model persons do not refer to be any specific individual in any specific cultural background, how they behave in the given situations would not be cross-culturally different. By this assumption, they propose that politeness is universal across cultures.

Even if Model persons bear these faces, they necessarily encounter situations where faces are in danger. To save their faces, they could use politeness strategies. In the next section, we will discuss what kinds of politeness strategies model speakers would employ when faces are threatened.

## 2.2 Face-Threatening Acts and Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that there are certain acts intimidating face, which are called 'Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)'. In the following dialogue (3), we can see how interlocutors menace each other's face through FTAs.

(3) Conversation with FTAs

Bonnie: Help me with the math assignment, Simon.

Simon: I do not want to help you. Do it by yourself.

Bonnie: Help me!

Simon: No, I do not want to.

In the dialogue above, when Bonnie asks Simon for a help, Simon rejects her request. Neither did Bonnie and Simon mitigate nor did they avoid face-threatening situations. They just keep on their conversation with intimidating each other's face. Let us compare the dialogue in (3) with the one in (4). The dialogue in (4) is a version where the interlocutors employ appropriate politeness strategies, and we can see how these FTAs can be mitigated by politeness strategies.

(4) Bonnie: Simon, I heard you are really good at math.

Classmates are supposed to help each other, aren't they?

Simon: Doing the assignment by oneself is very important for students.

Bonnie: I will buy you a lunch on Saturday. I know you love to dine on the restaurant at the corner of the Race Street.

Simon: I'm terribly sorry but I have to work on the other assignment on Saturday. Maybe I can help you with the next assignment.

In this dialogue, both Bonnie and Simon use various kinds of politeness strategies to avoid FTAs. For example, Bonnie compliments on Simon's great ability in math, and tries to establish common grounds between Simon and her by mentioning that they are classmates. The linguistic means by which Bonnie wishes to achieve her purpose – i.e. showing intimacy – is what Brown and Levinson calls 'positive politeness strategies'. Meanwhile, Simon mitigates FTAs by telling her what he believes; doing the assignment by oneself is very important for students, instead of explicitly saying that he does not want to help her. In

addition, he keeps his distance from Bonnie by apologizing for his refusal. His strategies are called ‘negative politeness strategies’. Brown and Levinson list possible strategies in the taxonomy of positive and negative politeness. The table 1 shows 15 positive politeness strategies and 10 negative politeness ones.

Table 1. Politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987)

Positive Politeness Strategies		Negative Politeness Strategies	
P#1	Notice, attend to H’s interests, wants, needs, goods, etc.	N#1	Be conventionally indirect
P#2	Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)	N#2	Question , Hedge
P#3	Intensify interest to hearer	N#3	Be pessimistic
P#4	In-group identity marker	N#4	Minimize the imposition
P#5	Seek agreement	N#5	Give deference
P#6	Avoid disagreement	N#6	Apologize
P#7	Presuppose/raise/assert common ground	N#7	Impersonalize the S and the H
P#8	Joke	N#8	State the FTA as an instance of a general rule
P#9	Assert or presuppose knowledge of and concern for H’s wants	N#9	Nominalize
P#10	Offer & Promise	N#10	Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H
P#11	Be optimistic		
P#12	Include both S and H in the activity		
P#13	Give gifts to H		
P#14	Assume or assert reciprocity		
P#15	Give gifts to H(goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)		

The goal of using positive politeness strategies is to establish friendliness or solidarity between interlocutors. Positive politeness strategies include paying attention to hearer’s interests, needs or goods, using in-group identity markers in speech, avoiding disagreement or seeking agreement in safe topics. For example, in the conversation (5), we can recognize that two interlocutors are using various politeness strategies to avoid FTAs, even though they are in a friendly relationship.

- (5) A1: Do you know who is having a concert next Saturday?  
B1: Who is it?  
A2: Eddie Higgins! I know you love him.  
So I bought tickets for you and me! You are going to come, right?  
B2: Wow, I'm the happiest person in the world to have a friend like you.  
A3: Let's jazz for hours! That's what we've always loved.  
B3: Sure, we girls will. Saturday's dinner is on me then.  
A4: No Burger King this time!  
B4: Well, probably not Burger King.

In A1, the speaker A was trying to intensify interest to the hearer by having the speaker B guess the very musician A likes (Intensify interest to the hearer, Positive politeness strategy #3 (P#3)). In A2, A once again showed intimacy with B by presupposing the hearer likes the musician, too (Assert or presuppose knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants, P#9); A answered to the question identifying the name of the musician. When A said he bought tickets, he was certain, presupposing that B would definitely come (Be optimistic, P#11). In B2, B thanked to A's favor with some exaggeration (Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy with hearer, P#2), complimenting on B's deed. Then in A3, A told B of their common ground (Presuppose, raise or assert common ground, P#7) that they always loved such concerts, to emphasize their shared activities (Include both speaker and hearer in the activity, P#12). In B3, B stressed an affinity between them by using 'in-group identity markers' (Use in-group identity markers in speech, P#4) such as 'we girls', and promises (Offer, promise, P#10) to give a treat as a return for A's favor. In A4, A makes a joke about the fact that they have often been to Burger King and implicitly alludes that she did not like it (Joke to put the hearer at ease, P#8) and B. Lastly, in B4, B avoids disagreement with A by saying 'probably' and then the pleasant conversation with great intimacy ends.

In the short dialogue, we have observed the two interlocutors keep using a variety of positive politeness strategies to save each other's face and avoid FTAs. In the next dialogue, we can also see them striving to avoid FTAs, using a different type of strategies: negative politeness strategies.

- (6) A1: Excuse me, was I speeding, Officer?  
B1: I'm afraid so, sir. Driving more 60 miles per an hour is illegal on this road. Could I see your license?  
A2: Oh, sir. I am terribly sorry but I would be so grateful if you could let me go this time. I was not really aware of the speed limit here. Could you, please?  
B2: Hmm...It's technically not possible....okay...But this time only. Drive safely.  
A3: Oh, thank you so much!

In A1, the speaker A showed a respect for B by referring to him 'officer' (Give

deference, N#5). Then in B1, B tried to avoid FTAs by informing what A did wrong, saying that driving 60 miles per an hour is illegal (State the FTA as an instance of a general rule, N#8). Note that he could have explicitly said without using N#8 that A violated the rule. And B asked for A's driver's license with a counterfactual, "Could I see your license?" This short question contains various negative politeness strategies. Firstly, B used the indirect question form (Be conventionally indirect, N#1) for asking for A's driver's license and this indirect question plays an important role for mitigating the imposition (Minimize the imposition, N#4). Secondly, rather than ordering A to show him the license, the speaker B politely asked A if he could see it. (Question, hedge, N#2) In doing so, B presupposed the possibility that A would refuse his request. In other words, B was using an expression of pessimism on whether A would accept his request (Be pessimistic, N#3). All these strategies saved A's negative face. In response to B's question, in A2, A apologized (Apologize, N#6) for the fact that he was speeding and then he begged for a favor (Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H, N#10). In B2, B mitigated the FTA with hedge 'probably'. Finally, B accepted A's request and the conversation with great respects towards each other ends, with A expressing appreciation for B.

To summarize so far, in this section, we have followed Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. The fundamental proposal by the authors is that politeness is universal. To justify their proposal, they have created ideal speakers who have rationality and face: model person. The model person can employ politeness strategies in situations where either interlocutor's face is being threatened. Politeness strategies have been divided into two categories: positive and negative politeness, which has been elaborated in this section.

Since Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is based on model person's pragmatic competence, it is natural to further assume that there should be no difference in the competence of model person in Korea, in Germany, or in the U. S. because there is no reason that we have to define multiple types of model person. This is actually what the authors have proposed. And that is what they mean by "politeness is universal". Therefore, the prediction is straightforward, particularly with respect to when model person has to use politeness strategies. If their account is correct, model person, regardless that he is Korean or American, are predicted to employ the same strategies in the given FTA situations. For example, if you are one of the model persons in Korea and used the N5 strategy in the situation of (5A1), any model person in other cultures are predicted to employ the N5 strategy.

In this paper, we aim to investigate whether this prediction is born out with a cross-linguistic survey. We have asked Korean and American college students to respond to the questionnaire and analyzed their responses in terms of politeness strategies. Our research hypothesis is simple and straightforward: If Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is correct, there must be no difference in the application of strategies. Let us see if the prediction is borne out in the next section.

### **3. Method**

To investigate manifestation of politeness strategies, a survey was conducted. Korean and American participants were recruited and we wanted to see if their manifestation of politeness strategies is identical or not. The prediction, as discussed in the previous section, is that the participants would not show cross-linguistic differences in the application of the strategies.

#### **3.1 Subjects**

The subjects who participated in this study are divided into two groups: 10 native speakers of Korean and 10 native speakers of English. All the Korean participants are Korea university students who were born in Korea and have never stayed in English-speaking countries. There are six English majors, three electrical engineering student, and one student majoring in politics. Of the ten Americans, six are professors who teach practical English at Korea University, and the other four are exchange students majoring in either English or English education at this university. The age of the Korean participants is in the early 20s, and the American participants range from in their twenties and fifties.

#### **3.2 Data collection**

The data were collected from May 19th to 21th in 2008. The Korean participants were recruited out of the classmates who enrolled in the sociolinguistic course. Part of the American participants was recruited out of the experimenter's friends in the English department, and the American professors were agreed to be participants for this study. Since the purpose of this study is cultural differences in the application of politeness strategies, other variables but culture must be controlled. Therefore, we recruited all the participants who came from the U.S.

To investigate the different use of politeness strategies, we created two scenarios, and each scenario had two different situations. The situations in a scenario are set up in such a way that one of the situations could trigger positive politeness strategies in the response and the other could negative politeness strategies. Let us elaborate this in more detail.

The first scenario describes a situation where the speaker had to borrow a laptop from the hearer because his laptop is out of order. This scenario is divided into two situations; the one is a situation where the hearer is a close friend of the speaker, and the other is a situation where he is a boss of the speaker's company. We wanted to see if the participants would employ different politeness strategies depending on who they are talking to. Asking to the close friend would trigger the participants to apply positive politeness strategies, and asking to the boss would lead the participants to use negative politeness strategies. The sample response, which is the actual response from one of the participants, is given as follows.

Scenario I. Borrowing a laptop

- (7) To a close friend (where positive politeness is needed):  
Hey, my computer broke down so lend me your computer a second. I need your computer.
- (8) To one's boss (where negative politeness is needed):  
Ah...my computer has broken down so please lend your computer.

The second scenario describes a similar circumstance, but this time the speaker is supposed to make an invitation to his upcoming birthday party. Again, two situations are set up to see if what kind positive and negative politeness strategies are exercised in each situation. The first situation, in which we predict the participants to employ positive politeness strategies, is to ask his close friends to his birthday party. The second situation, the addressee is his boss, which means he is supposed to ask his boss to the birthday party. This is a situation where the participants are expected to apply negative politeness strategies. Below are actual responses from one of the participants.

Scenario II. Inviting to a birthday party

- (9) To a close friend (where positive politeness is needed):  
Hey, I'm having a birthday party, and you can come.
- (10) To one's boss (where negative politeness is needed):  
I'm having a birthday party, um... would you like to come?

### 3.3 Data Analysis

All the responses were recorded and transcribed for the analysis. The responses of each participant were coded in terms of the politeness strategies that Brown and Levinson (1987) categorized. Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies have been illustrated in table 1 in section 2.2. Once the responses were coded, the experimenter tallied the number of the uses of strategies for each participant. To evaluate whether and how Koreans are similar or different from Americans in the applications of politeness strategies, the responses of the Korean participants are calculated separately from those of the American participants. And the results of both nationals have been compared with respect to what kind of strategies and how many times were used in each situation. The results are shown in the next section. And what this means in the light of Brown and Levinson's model will be discussed in section 5.

## 4. Results

After the survey results are gathered, the experimenter analyzed responses of each participant with respect to politeness strategies proposed under the Brown and Levinson (1987). There are four situations which the participants should respond to: two situations for positive strategy use and the other two for negative strategy use. The following sections presents results from the Korean and American participants by situations.

### 4.1 Positive – Request

The first scenario, in which positive strategies are supposed to be used, is a situation where the speaker has to ask for the hearer’s computer. In this situation, Korean participants have exercised two types of positive strategies and four kinds of negative politeness strategies. On the other hand, American participants have exercised five different positive strategies and six types of negative strategies. This is shown in table 2.

Table 2. Positive – Request

<b>Korean</b>					
<b>Positive Situation (Request)</b>	<b>Types of Strategy</b>	<b>Number of the strategy used</b>	<b>Types of strategy</b>	<b>Number of the strategy used</b>	
	P#4 (In-group identity marker)	3	N#2 (Question , Hedge)	10	
	P#10 (Offer & Promise)	1	N#3 (Be pessimistic)	7	
				N#4 (Minimize the imposition)	10
				N#6 (Apologize)	1
		Total 4		Total 28	
<b>American</b>					
<b>Positive Situation (Request)</b>	<b>Types of Strategy</b>	<b>Number of the strategy used</b>	<b>Types of strategy</b>	<b>Number of the strategy used</b>	
	P#3(Intensify interest to hearer)	2	N#2 (Question, hedge)	9	
	P#4 (In-group identity marker)	5	N#3(Be pessimistic)	1	
	P#6(Avoid disagreement)	1	N#4 (Minimize the imposition)	3	
	P#7(Presuppose/raise /assert common ground)	1	N#5 (Give deference)	1	
	P#10 (Offer & Promise)			N#6(Apologize)	3
			1	N#10 (Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H)	1
	Total 10		Total 18		

Let us observe which strategies have been used in more detail. The Korean

participants employed two types of positive strategies: three occurrences of P#4 and one occurrence of P#10. Meanwhile, they used four types of negative strategies. The negative strategies #2 and #4 were commonly used in this situation by the Korean speakers. Ten tokens per each strategy were employed. There were seven tokens of N#3 and one token of N#6.

On the other hand, the American participants applied more strategy types than the Korean participants did. Five positive and six negative strategies were exercised. More concretely, there were five occurrences of P#4, two occurrences of P#3, and one occurrence of P#6, P#7, and P#10 respectively. The negative strategy N#2 was used nine times, N#4 and N#6 three times each, and N#3, N#5, and N#10 one time.

One salient fact is that both negative and positive politeness strategies were applied by the participants in a situation where request has been made between close friends. A strict application of Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, the prevalent strategy forms is predicted to be positive politeness strategies. Another is that the participants, regardless of their nationalities, used multiple occurrences of N#2 (Questions & Hedges). Why this is so will be discussed in section 5.1.

#### **4.2 Positive – Invitation**

The second scenario was about the speaker's invitation of his close friends to his birthday party, and the participants were asked to respond to the invitation. In this situation, Korean participants have employed five types of positive strategies and four kinds of negative politeness strategies. On the other hand, American participants have employed two different positive strategies and four types of negative strategies. This is shown in table 3.

Table 3. Positive – Invitation

<b>Koreans</b>				
<b>Positive Situation (Invitation)</b>	<b>Types of Strategy</b>	<b>Number of the strategy used</b>	<b>Types of strategy</b>	<b>Number of the strategy used</b>
	P#3 (Intensify interest to hearer)	1	N#1 (Be conventionally indirect)	1
	P#4 (In-group identity marker)	3	N#2 (Question, hedge)	7
	P#7 (Presuppose/raise/assert common ground)	2	N#3 (Be pessimistic)	4
	P#11 (Be optimistic)	3	N#4 (Minimize the imposition)	1
	P#12 (Include both S and H in the activity)	2		
		<b>Total 11</b>		<b>Total 13</b>
<b>American</b>				
<b>Positive Situation (Invitation)</b>	<b>Types of Strategy</b>	<b>Number of the strategy used</b>	<b>Types of strategy</b>	<b>Number of the strategy used</b>
	P#3 (Intensify interest to hearer)	1	N#2 (Question, hedge)	7
	P#4 (In-group identity marker)	4	N#3 (Be pessimistic)	1
			N#4 (Minimize the imposition)	1
			N#5 (Give deference)	1
		<b>Total 5</b>		<b>Total 10</b>

The Korean participants used three times for P#4 and P#11, respectively. P#7 and P#12 were used two times, and P#3 was used once. They employed four types of negative strategies. Once again, N#2 was the most commonly used negative strategy; it was used seven times. N#3 was used four times and N#1 and N#4 one time each.

On the other hand, the American participants applied fewer types of politeness strategies than the Korean participants. P#4 was employed four times and P#3 once. Four types of negative strategies were employed. N#2 was what they used most: seven times. And N#3, N#4, and N#5 were used once.

Interestingly, both Korean and American participants made use of P#4 more than any other strategies. This positive strategy is related to in-group identity markers, such as dialects, which are useful to build familiarity within the group. Given that the situation asked the participants to respond to the close friends, it is natural that there are multiple occurrences of P#4. Multiple occurrences of N#2 were found in the result of both nationals. In fact, the N#2 strategy seemed to occur across the board. The possible reason will be discussed in the next section. Another interesting fact is that the Korean participants used more politeness strategies than the American participants (24 vs. 15 in total), the meaning of which will also be elaborated in section 5.2.

### 4.3 Negative – Request

The situation is the same as the one in section 4.1: the speaker’s computer is out of order, so he needs to ask the hearer to use his. The difference is that the participants in this situation were asked to make a request to their boss, someone who had not established a close relationship with the speaker.

Table 4. Negative – Request

<b>Korean</b>				
<b>Negative Situation (Request)</b>	Types of Strategy	Number of the strategy used	Types of strategy	Number of the strategy used
	None		N#2 (Question, hedge)	10
			N#3 (Be pessimistic)	10
			N#4 (Minimize the imposition)	10
			N#5 (Give deference)	10
			N#6 (Apologize)	3
				Total 43
<b>American</b>				
<b>Negative Situation (Request)</b>	Types of Strategy	Number of the strategy used	Types of strategy	Number of the strategy used
	P#3 (Intensify interest to hearer)	1	N#2 (Question, hedge)	8
	P#7 (Presuppose/raise/ assert common ground)	1	N#3 (Be pessimistic)	6
			N#4 (Minimize the imposition)	3
	P#10 (Offer & Promise)	1	N#5 (Give deference)	2
	P#15 (Give gifts to H)	1	N#6 (Apologize)	6
			N#10 (Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H)	1
		Total 4		Total 26

As shown in table 4, both American and Korean showed a high rate of negative politeness strategies. None of the Korean participants used positive politeness strategies. The American participants showed only four instances of positive strategies: P#3, P#7, P#10, and P#15 once. All the Korean participants employed N#2, #3, #4 and #5. Although less frequently used, multiple occurrences of these four strategies were observed in the survey results of the American participants. N#6 was another strategy found frequently in the participants (Korean: 3 tokens, American: 6 tokens). N#10 was used by one American subject.

#### **4.4 Negative – Invitation**

The last scenario asked the speaker to invite a boss to his birthday party. This is a comparable situation with the second scenario where the invitation is made to his close friend. According to Brown and Levinson's politeness model, negative politeness strategies are predicted to be used by the participants. As predicted, the subjects predominantly employed negative politeness strategies. Both the nationals made use of six types of negative strategies. Here, too, the Korean speakers used more occurrences of negative politeness strategies (33 tokens) than the American participants (23 tokens), as shown in table 5.

Table 5. Negative – Invitation

<b>Korean</b>				
<b>Negative Situation (Invitation)</b>	Types of Strategy	Number of the strategy used	Types of strategy	Number of the strategy used
	P#2 (Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy with H)	2	N#1 (Be conventionally indirect)	1
	P#12 (Include both S and H in the activity)	1	N#2 (Question, hedge)	10
			N#3 (Be pessimistic)	8
			N#4 (Minimize the imposition)	3
			N#5 (Give deference)	10
			N#10 (Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H)	1
		Total 11		Total 22
<b>American</b>				
<b>Negative Situation (Invitation)</b>	Types of Strategy	Number of the strategy used	Types of strategy	Number of the strategy used
	P#2 (Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy with H)	1	N#1 (Be conventionally indirect)	2
	P#3 (Intensify interest to hearer)	1	N#2 (Question, hedge)	10
	P#4 (In-group identity marker)	2	N#3 (Be pessimistic)	3
	P#7 (Presuppose/raise/assert common ground)	1	N#5 (Give deference)	4
	P#10 (Offer & Promise)	1	N#6 (Apologize)	1
				N#10 (Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H)
		Total 5		Total 10

To see more detail of what they used, the Korean participants applied two types of positive strategies: P#2 and P#12. Six kinds of negative strategies were exercised. All the Korean participants utilized N#5 and N#2, so there were ten tokens for each. N#3 was another strategy that showed high tokens (8 tokens). N#1, N#4, and N#10 were also found.

Similar types of strategies were found in the results of the American participants. All the participants applied N#2 to their response as the Korean participants did. Some occurrences of N#1, N#3, N#5, N#6, and N#10 were also

found.

What is interesting here is that all the Korean subjects showed deference towards the hearer by means of honorific expressions, N#5, while four American participants used the strategy. The Korean participants made more use of N#3, too. They tried to have the hearer feel more comfortable in the situation where he/she had to refuse to an invitation by presupposing the possibilities that he/she might not be able to come to the party. This strategy was employed three times by the American group. We found these differences very interesting, so we will discuss them in section 5.2.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Questions and hedges

The most common strategy found in all of the situations is N#2 (questions and hedges). Almost all the participants applied it in the situations where negative politeness strategies are expected to be used, and many of the participants exercised it in the positive situations as well. In this section, we will discuss why the strategy was popular across the situations.

First of all, what are hedges? Hedge is a kind of discourse device employed to mitigate the impact of the utterance, so that it allows speakers to convey their message more accurately. The forms are usually adjectives, adverbs, and clauses, as shown in the examples (11a-c).

- (11) a. The presentation was not *quite* good enough. (adverb)  
b. I have a couple of *significant* questions I'd like to address here. (adjective)  
c. *I am sorry but*, could you pass me the salt? (clause)

Let us consider what it means with an example (11a). Compare (11a) with its alternative version without the hedge: *The presentation was not good enough*. The sense of this alternative is quite different from that of (11a). The speaker makes a strong assertion in the alternative, while the assertion is much weakened in (11a). This difference shows that using hedges does not necessarily show speakers' laziness or lack of knowledge. The speaker could be very exact, but he may use hedges intentionally to avoid making a particular point he does not want to. Therefore, using hedges mitigates the impact of the utterance.

Likewise, questions may achieve the same goal in discourse. Questions also generate alternatives. Compare (12a) with (12b).

- (12) a. Come to my party.  
b. Can you come to my party?

While the imperative form asserts one proposition in (12a), the question form in

(12b) opens up another alternative, which is “Can’t you come to my party?”. Thus, using the question form also mitigates the impact of the utterance.

Now we can explain why using questions and hedges is perceived as a more polite speech. With a question form, the speaker is giving the addressee a choice between a positive and a negative proposition. The speaker signals to the addressee that both propositions are available, and conveys an implicit message that it would be okay even if the hearer chose the alternative option. Therefore, it is differentiated from the imperative form which provides the addressee with only one option. The same reasoning holds for hedges. Hedges also play a role for providing alternatives. However, it is differentiated from question that it normally provided implicit alternative propositions. That is, the alternative cannot be derived by the utterance. Let us consider an example of invitation. Suppose the speaker invited the addressee to the birthday party. One of the Korean participants responded, as in (13).

- (13) I know you’re busy, but I have a birthday party this weekend. Could you come?

What we concentrate on here is the hedge “I know you’re busy”. Suppose that the proposition that the speaker wants to make is “I know you’re busy but you can come to my birthday party this weekend.” The hedge also provides another option to the addressee “I know you’re busy so you can’t come to my birthday party this weekend.” The speaker opens up this latter option that the hearer can choose.

We can explain why the strategy N#2 was very popular across the board. This is because the nature of politeness is being indirect. By being indirect, we mean it provides alternative propositions together with the overt assertion. What the speaker conveys with this negative strategy (N#2) is give a choice to the addressee among the propositions. And the speaker is also conveying a message that he would not be offended even if the addressee does not choose the proposition that the speaker wished for. Thus, the speaker would not make the hearer feel burdened on the choice. It is natural to assume that this would be commonly applied to situations where the speaker has to make a request to the addressee who has a higher social status. This is what we found in our results. All the Korean and most of the American participants applied N#2 to the negative politeness situations. The strategy was also found in the positive politeness situations, although its frequency was noticeably less.

## **5.2 Showing deference and be pessimistic**

In the situation where negative politeness strategies are supposed to be exercised, multiple applications of N#5 and N#3 are found in the Korean participants, but not as much in the American participants. The Korean culture greatly stresses upon the respect towards the senior citizens. Koreans are taught to behave and talk politely to the elderly. Learning such attitudes is recognized and promoted as

successful socialization. Therefore, most Koreans are accustomed to using the politeness expressions on honorifics. They tend to employ every possible means, either verbal or non-verbal, to show appropriate politeness: they conventionally bow to express veneration, invariably use honorifics, etc. Therefore, for Koreans, the negative strategy (N#5: giving deference) is not something new at all. The convention of giving deference is deeply rooted in their thoughts and culture.

It is not surprising that we found not as many occurrences of the strategy among the American participants, compared with the Korean participants. It could be a cultural difference between Korea and the U. S. The Korean culture has been influenced by a system of philosophy known as Confucianism, which contains a maxim about how to show respect to the senior, teacher and parents. As far as we know, there exists no such maxim in the philosophy of the western culture.

Another important reason for the difference, we think, is due to the lack of honorific morphemes in English. Whorf's (1957) *Linguistic Determinism* is relevant in this context. It is possible to interpret that the existence of the honorific morpheme has shaped the concept of giving deference in the Korean culture. To be more concrete, the Korean language has an honorific morpheme *-si* attached to the verb, and it shows the social status of the addressee is higher than that of the speaker. Compare (14a) with (14b). While the honorific marker is used in (14b), it is not in (14a). The usage of the marker depends on the subject; the subject is a teacher who is recognized as a high social status in Korea, so *-si* should be used in (14b). Meanwhile, the subject is my brother in (14a), so there is no need to use the honorific marker.

- (14) a. Tongsayng-i computer-lul sayongha-n-ta.  
 Brother-NOM computer-ACC use-PRES-DECL  
 'My brother is using a computer.'
- b. Sensangnim-i computer-lul sayongha-**si**-n-ta.  
 Teacher-NOM computer-ACC use-**HON**-PRES-DECL  
 'The teacher is using a computer.'

Another difference of the application of politeness strategies is the frequency of N#3 (be pessimistic). The Korean participants applied it more frequently than the American participants. The definition of being pessimistic, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), is that the speaker assumes the hearer would not be able to accept the speaker's speech act, such as request. Of course, one can use this strategy even when he is sure that the hearer would accept his request. For example, on the dinner table, the mother could ask her son for chopsticks that she cannot reach by "can you pass me the chopsticks?" She knows that her son would surely pass her the chopsticks without any hesitation. But she is still being pessimistic in asking for the chopstick. This strategic use is observed in both Americans and Koreans. Note that several tokens were also found in the results of the American participants.

The question is why it is found rather frequently in the Korean participants. If

we carefully observe speech of the Korean participants, we could find they habitually use negative politeness strategies as if they were conventionalized in life. Probably originated from Confucius thoughts, a cultural norm in Korea has it that one should avoid a situation where he has to give burden on others. Making a request would be one of those situations. Therefore, if the speaker were in such a situation, he would be much more pessimistic. On the other hand, this kind of cultural norm does not seem to be commonly conceived in the American culture. This difference also provides us with a possible explanation of why the Korean participants applied more negative strategies than the American participants in general. This is particularly observed in the first situation of the second scenario: Negative 1 – Request (46 vs. 26).

To sum up, we can give two possible interpretations for why negative politeness strategies are more commonly exercised among the Korean participants. First, the existence of the honorific form in Korean matters for more instances of negative politeness strategies, as Whorf (1957) hypothesizes. Second, cultural and/or philosophical differences might influence the frequency of the application of the strategic uses.

### **5.3 Implication to Brown and Levinson's politeness model**

Recall that Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory entails universality of the application of politeness strategies. What it means is if we compare applications of politeness strategies, model persons' strategic uses are not supposed to be different with respect to the types of strategies and their frequency. This gives us a prediction that Korean model persons' choice of politeness strategies would not be different from American model persons'. One thing we have to be careful about is that a single individual may not represent a model person's choice. We cannot simply be sure whether he/she is a model person. However, suppose that the majority of the Korean participants applied politeness strategies in a given situation. Then, this represents the model person's application of the politeness strategy. This reasoning is similar with how we determine the native speaker's intuition on a grammatical structure. There may be discrepancy in judgments, but if majority of the native speakers agree on the judgment of a structure, then that counts as the intuition of the native speaker; in other words, the model person's intuition.

The strong proposal of Brown and Levinson (1987) is that the types and frequency of politeness strategies would exactly match between the Korean and American participants. In other words, for one situation, the type of politeness strategies and its frequency would match. The results in this study do not support this strong claim. Neither do they exactly match with respect to the types of applications, nor do they match in frequency. However, they show that there are some noticeable patterns in politeness strategies that both nationals employed.

Although there were some individual differences as well as cultural differences between two nationals, we still witnessed the majority of speakers –

i.e. model persons – follow certain strategies under the specific situation. For instance, when making a request, the Korean model person frequently employed N#2 and N#3 as the American model person did. In other situations, we can observe the patterns match in general. In the first and second situations of scenario 1, P#4 and N#2 are frequently used by both nationals. In the first situation of scenario 2, N#2, 3, 4 are overlapped, and in the second situation, N#2 is. Therefore, we can conclude that the results do not show the exact match between the nationals, but they still share with particular strategies in a given situation. Therefore, it is safe to make a weak conclusion that Brown and Levinson's universal politeness model holds. When we compare the results between model persons of each national, they show some similarity.

#### **5.4 Limitation of this study**

The current study aims to analyze politeness strategies employed by Korean and American speakers, using a written questionnaire. The participants had to read and respond in writing. The results could be different if the survey asked for oral responses. First, oral responses would capture the casual speech of each speaker, in particular in the positive politeness situations where intimacy is assumed between interlocutors. Since the written language often leads us to use more literal language, this might hinder the participants from applying positive politeness strategies. Second, some strategies, such as hedges, are just not appropriate to be used in the written survey. One important role for hedges in discourse is that they spare some time for the speaker to prepare for the next speech. This can only be captured by the oral data. In written responses, on the other hand, the participants can ignore this function of hedges because response time is not crucial for the written survey. Results would have been much more reliable if the survey were conducted by two experimenters, one of whom leads the natural conversation with the participant while the other codes what they say. In this way, we could have obtained more casual and authentic data that are based on the real speech.

Besides, experimenting on only two nationals might have limited the scope of the study. If we could recruit more participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, the results of the study would be more meaningful in explicating the universality of politeness strategy. This will be left for the future research of mine.

#### **6. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have reviewed Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. They propose that application of politeness strategies is universal, and predict that the applications of politeness strategies would not be different cross-culturally. To argue for this strong proposal, they created an ideal speaker, called Model person, who holds rationality and face. In the communications, Model person would encounter various situations where different types of speech acts are applied. Sometimes the speaker has to disagree with the hearer, make a request, or

apologize. And in some cases, the speaker has to apply strategies to mitigate “face-threatening act”. The strategies have been dubbed politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson. Brown and Levinson propose that the politeness strategies are divided into two types: the one is called negative politeness strategies, which is supposed to be applied to where the speaker wants to keep some distance from the hearer, and the other is called positive politeness strategies for showing intimacy with the hearer.

The prediction Brown and Levinson has made is that model speakers’ application of politeness strategies would not be different between cultures. We doubted that this was too strong a claim because this could be easily falsifiable. Each individual has a different speech style, and he/she should differ by the degree of application of politeness (strategies). A similar assumption could be made with respect to culture. Koreans seemed to be more polite than Americans because some overt differences – either verbal or non-verbal – would be easily detected. Koreans would bow somewhat excessively when they greet to the senior but Americans would not. And the Korean language has an honorific marking in verb, but English does not. Therefore, we had reasons to assume that there should be cultural difference in politeness.

To see if this provocative Brown and Levinson’s hypothesis holds in different culture, we conducted a survey. The American and Korean participants were recruited and asked to respond to the given tasks. The tasks were about making a request and invitation to the birthday party. Analyzing the responses, we wanted to see whether the American participants would apply different strategies from the Korean participants in the same situations. Two things were considered for the analysis: the type of strategies and its frequency. Interestingly, similar patterns of the strategic use were found in each situation. However, the overall tokens of strategies were different: Koreans seem to use more strategies than Americans. We interpreted this difference by a system of philosophy and an honorific morpheme. This implies that Brown and Levinson’s hypothesis of universality of politeness is surprisingly right, although the results support their claim in a weaker sense.

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