# THE KOREAN FACE REVISITED:
# AN APPLICATION OF BROWN AND LEVINSON'S POLITENESS THEORY

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The main gist of this study is to explicate theoretical research of Korean notions of face from the particular reference to Brown and Levinson's (1987 henceforth B&L) theory of politeness. On the one hand, I argue that B&L's terms of face and face-threatening acts (FTAs) are likely to be culture-specific in terms of illustrating some of Korean speech acts. On the other hand, I examine what face means and signifies in Korea in the light of expressions based on literal terms of face. The aim of exploring the phrases pertaining to Korean face lies in showing the role of the usage of Korean terms of face based on cultural values and norms.

## 1. Introduction

Each society has its own politeness strategies and norms that may differ, in many respects, from those of others. The examination of politeness behaviour in a culture other than the Western world will certainly help the understanding of the differences and similarities in politeness behaviour of people from different cultures. It will no doubt reduce the misconception, miscommunication, and stereotypes of each other and enhance intercultural communication. As human beings, we all try to be polite in our own way. But we may use different linguistic tactics, or we may operate under different norms or values. The examples and analysis I will present in this study will provide with one more way of looking at politeness strategies realised in Korean contexts.

## 2. B&L's notion of face and Korean speech acts

Central to B&L's politeness theory is the concept of face. Face consists of two aspects: *positive* and *negative face*. According to B&L (1987: 62), positive face is defined as "the want to be approved of" whereas negative face "the want not to be impeded by others". People cooperate to maintain each other's face. There are certain kinds of acts that by their nature challenge face wants. Acts that intrinsically threaten face are termed face-threatening acts (FTAs). Some acts, such as order, request, suggestions, advice, reminding, threats, warning, offers, promises, compliments, impinge on the addressee's negative face by indicating that the speaker wants the addressee to do a certain act (negative FTAs). Other acts, such as criticism, disapproval, criticism, accusations, disagreement, giving bad news, complaints, insults, challenges, threaten the addressee's positive face by implying that the speaker doesn't share the addressee's wants or characteristics (positive FTAs). While B&L claim that their model applies universally to all languages and cultures, some of the East Asian scholars have challenged the aspects of the model pertaining particularly to face. Gu (1990) has argued that the Chinese notion of negative face differs from that defined by B&L. In Chinese, offering, inviting, and promising are not normally considered as threatening the hearer (H)'s negative face, since Chinese interlocutors do not consider such speech acts as intruding on other people's personal territory. Mao (1994) also demonstrates that Chinese face, *mianzi*, identifies a Chinese want to secure 'public' acknowledgement of one's prestige or reputation, whereas B&L's negative face refers to an individual's desire to be free of external imposition. Matsumoto (1988) claims that the concept of negative face want is alien to Japanese culture. She argues that the notion fails to apply to Japanese culture because it is based on the assumption that the basic unit of a society is the individual, while the basic unit of the Japanese society is a relevant group. Namely social interaction between interlocutors might be governed by "acknowledgement and maintenance of the relative position of others, rather than preservation of an individual's proper territory" (Matsumoto 1988: 423). Consequently, what is central to the notion of face in Chinese and Japanese contexts is not one's own territory as in the case of face proposed by B&L, but one's position in relation to others in-groups and acceptance by those others. I might suggest that the same is true for Korean culture. Since positive face concerns and positive politeness prevail over negative face concerns and negative politeness in Korean culture,

speech acts invading the hearer's privacy and space would not be perceived as such serious transgressions as those which show disregard and disapproval of his/her positive face. Therefore, I maintain that so-called negative FTAs do not always threaten H's freedom of action in Korea. In Korean culture, where collectivism is the cultural norm, few speech acts seem to be considered as impositions. In the similar vein, imposition is not necessarily relevant to B&L's negative face in Korean culture. Let us exemplify this argument over some of those that B&L say threaten negative face in the light of the Korean culture.

### *3.1. Requests*

In B&L's framework making requests is considered an imposition on the hearer's freedom of action. However, notions of imposition seem to be culture-specific or context-dependent in the Korean culture. For example, as Ervin-Tripp et al. (1995: 64) note, not asking help of an appropriate person when you need help can make the person who could help lose positive face, not negative face. In this case, to make requests might be a way to honour somebody by means of giving them a chance to pursue their role. Hence, based on contexts, doing a negative FTA could be rather pertaining to save or maintain H's positive face, not to lose H's negative face. Therefore, imposition does not always threaten H's negative face. Likewise, although it depends on a certain level of action or degree of face threat, embarrassment, or imposition, making requests among in-group members is not necessarily imposing H's freedom of action. Making request help from intimate insiders is not considered an imposition on the H. In contrast, to perform the speech act plays an important role in making solidarity, i.e., saving H's positive face, among or between intimates. Furthermore, making a request for "intimate stuff" (e.g., culinary ingredients) or "free goods" (e.g., cigarettes) (B&L 1987: 80) carries even among and between strangers with no imposition in Korean. Accordingly, requests are not inherently FTA in the Korean society.

### *3.2. Offering*

According to B&L (1987: 66), offers are also considered as a potential intrusion of H's freedom of action. However, to some extent, offers are normally expected without imposition in societies where mutual cooperation is regarded as the norm or value of social interaction. For example, to give up a seat for an old person is quite common in Korean context and is considered as a good behaviour. Such an offer doesn't make H lose his/her negative face at all. No offer of such a good behaviour is causing the smear of H's positive face in the Korean culture. If we take this good behaviour is primarily about linguistic manifestations of polite behaviour, giving seats to old people might be universal. But it sometimes threatens recipients' positive face in Western societies. In addition, offers of food or invitations to share food might be also different from other situations of offering. Like Igbo society (Nwoye 1992: 321), offers of food are commonly made as required by norms of good behaviour in Korea. Offering food among and between neighbours is an act to increase solidarity not to impeded H's freedom of action. So the H doesn't regard an offer as an imposition. In turn, if the speaker (S) doesn't share food with H, who is even an insider, H loses his/her positive face, not negative face.

*3.3. Thanking*

Koreans are normally poor at expressing thanks in daily conversation. Like compliments, thanking close insiders, who would normally give assistance (i.e., family intimate), particularly works to create distance. Koreans hardly thank insiders and intimates not to create distance but to make solidarity. Since thanking in-group members is specifically to increase distance, it is anointing their positive face, not negative face. That's why Koreans have a tendency to adopt strategies for thanking responses, such as silence, rejecting, avoidance, etc.

3.4. *Ambivalent face*

Now we might be curious about exceptions to examples above. Let us deeply consider speech acts with socio-cultural factors or variables, such as status, gender, age, and so on. For example, in case even though a showy girl bought new shoes, her friend didn't

compliment at all, the showy girl loses her positive face. Besides, if young people make requests for seats or even free goods from old people, it might be an imposition based on cultural norms in Korea. Thanking expressed by young people is normally expected and considered as norms of good behaviour in Korea if they are offered any stuff from old people. Otherwise, old people get their positive face lost. On the other hand, we should also think about FTAs with two other variables, degree of imposition and the frequency of performing speech acts. Making a request among and between close insiders normally carries even sometimes among and between strangers with no imposition, however, in case the speech act is routinely performed and the degree of imposition is high, it will be definitely a negative FTA. Impositions of this type depend very much on the social situation of the participants. Consecutive compliments also can be a FTA, since they can be regarded as an indirect request to buy or give something for S. In addition, if offers of food or invitations to eat something are routinely made, they might be impositions, because H should pay them back in the future. Consequently, as examined above, since face in Korea is able to accommodate both characteristics of positive and negative face depending on variables in each FTA, I'd like to describe it by using a neo term, *ambivalent face*, rather than positive and negative face. Therefore, I maintain that to classify some of Korean speech acts into fixed positive or negative FTAs separately is quite problematic. Now let us supply more examples of situations in which terms of face in Korean are used.

**3. Korean face**

It is a well known fact that people in collectivist societies are especially sensitive to face and its relation to politeness because they are relatively more gregarious, group-oriented or relation-focused than westerners. In order to reduce threatening counterpart's face, speakers tend to use more polite language based on their cultural norms. People in a collectivist culture also put heavily stress on what they say and do to avoid embarrassing or offending other people. One's self-image and self-respect depend very much on how one is viewed by others. According to Kasper (1997: 380), "face should be correctly understood only in the context of notion of *self*, emphasising that such notion is

necessarily informed by culturally varying perceptions of personhood and relationship between an individual and society." In order to discuss this issue, an attempt will be made to examine expressions related to the Korean concept of face.

Unlike Indo-European languages, Korean language has a wide variety of expressions pertinent to the term *face.* In Korean not only terms borrowed from Chinese, which are Sino-Korean, but also indigenous terms are used in the case of expressing face: Chinese loan words '*cheymyen* and *myenmok'* and Korean indigenous terms *'nach, elkwul,* and *ccok'.* Expressions based on these literal terms of face are discussed hereafter.

*2.1. Save face*

In Asian culture, face-defensive behaviour is based on not facing behaviour that causes one shame. It is probably due to "shame-guilt" which characterises some cultures. Hence, saving face becomes an important behaviour in those cultures with the members going to great lengths to avoid incidents that might bring shame to the group. Like any other Asian languages, texts in Korean speak very often face-saving.

[Context: nobody wants to attend the seminar presented by A. However, A's friends are willing to do it to save A's positive face]
*cheymyen-ul sallita* 'saving face' (lit. make one's face alive)
*cheymyen-ul yucihata* 'face-saving' (lit. maintain face)
*cheymyen-ul salyecwuta* 'save face' (lit. save and give one's face)

Korean expressions also seem to use a horizontal view of face in this case (e.g., stand up and raise).

[Context: when just only one daughter among several siblings enters a prestigious university, her positive face stands up]
*cheymyen-i seta* 'saving face' (one's face stands up)
*cheymyen-ul seywuta* 'get one's face saved' (lit. make stand one's face)
*cheymyen-ul seywecwuta* 'save face' (lit. raise and give one's face)

It is necessary to deal with two expressions involving face-saving, *cheymyen-ul salyecwuta* and *cheymyen-ul seywecwuta*, in more detail. Unlike Chinese, an expression regarding face, giving someone face, does not exist in Korean. Alternatively, they compound two separate predicates to describe a context for Chinese face giving.

*cheymyen-ul salye-cwuta* *'save and give face'*
face-Acc save-give
*cheymyen-ul seywe-cwuta* *'raise and give face'*
face-Acc raise-give

As in the case of Chinese face giving, face in Korean is also considered as a possession to be given in the light of two expressions immediately given above. However, face in Korea is treated as more than a possession. Namely, terms of face in Korean is saved or raised first before given. Two verbs, *salye* 'save' and *seywe* 'raise', play a role in mitigating the illocutionary force of the verb, *cwuta* 'give' in predicates compounded.

*2.2. Lose face*

In Korean, there are numerous expressions pertaining to the concept of losing face. These Korean expressions are used in case of humiliation, disgrace, and dishonour. The phrases regarding loss of face in Korean are given below:

[Context: Park just got his new job due to Kim's recommendation, but he has given up that job shortly without any proper excuse. In this case, Kim loses his positive face]
*cheymyen-ul ilhta* 'lose face'.
*cheymeyn-ul kwukita* 'to crush or collapse someone's face'
*cheymyen-ul telephita* 'to dirty someone's face'
*cheymyen-ey mekchilhata* 'to paint someone's face'

Besides, Ervin-Tripp et al. (1995: 55) examine a context below for a novel face phrase:

[Context: a student who is poor at dancing is practising in a playground. He thinks nobody is watching him, however, he eventually finds out that his friends have a peep at his dancing. So his positive face is lost]
*ccok phallita* ‘losing face’ (lit. one’s face sells)
*kay-ccok tanghata* ‘losing face’ (lit. bring acute shame on oneself)
*elkwul(-i) phallita* ‘losing face’

*Elkwul* is able to substitute for *ccok* in this context. The similar instance is *elkwul-ul mostulta* ‘losing face’ (lit. not to be able to raise someone’s face) said by a person who feels shame. However, *elkwul* is normally physical face, as in *ney elkwul-i changpaykhaypoye* ‘your face looks pale’. My special interest lies in an indigenous term of face, *ccok. Ccok* is a quite problematic term of face in Korean. Although Ervin-Tripp et al. (1995: 55) maintain that this slang term for face seems to be unproductive, my opinion about *ccok* is made in a different way. *Ccok* is normally used as youth slang or vulgar to emphasise solidarity especially among males. It is daily used as a colloquial expression among youths. So *ccok* is more productive among young people than other terms of face borrowed from Chinese. Besides, C*cok* is substantially associated with B&L's positive face in the light of three aspects below. Let's us explicate *ccok* in great detail.

1. Devices for boosting illocutionary force: prosodic, lexical, and syntactic devices

[Context: when A failed to answer an extremely silly question, B says]
*(Ne) elmana ccok phallye!*
you how much face sold
'You lose your face badly' (lit. how badly you lose your face)

Normally, a phrasal expression, *ccok phallye*, receives the strong stress to boost the impact of a request. An adverb, *elmana*, acts like a upgrader, which increases the illocutionary force of a request. Besides, the expression, *elmana ccok phallye!*, might be

considered as a rhetorical question, which boosts the illocutionary force of a request (Holmes 1984: 352). Accordingly, an expression above is referred to as a sort of requestive hint, because there is implicature constituting a request, 'you should feel guilty or shame'. As I note, the expression, *ccok phallye*, is mainly used among young men for male bonding. It plays a role in increasing or maintaining solidarity and decreasing the social distance between interlocutors. Thus it is regarded as a sort of "positively affective speech act" to increase solidarity (Holmes 1984: 349). Boosting the force of a positively affective speech act can be interpreted as an expression of friendliness or "camaraderie" (Lakoff 1975). B&L (1987: 111) include the use of jargon and slang along with contraction, ellipsis, and diminutivized terms of address in what they called in-group markers; their use indicates shared knowledge, and is associated with positive politeness. Thus ellipsis is definitely a marker of 'in-group' language. In the sentence above, one of the in-group identity marker, ellipsis, defined here as the omission of a subject, *ne* (2nd person singular pronoun) is adopted.

2. Kinesic

According to Scarcella and Brunak (1981:64), the most salient markers of 'in-group' languages are probably kinesic. Body gestures, i.e., standing close and facing their conversational partner squarely, direct eye contact, smiling, laughing, touching, arm movements, are made in uttering the expression, *elmana ccok phallye!*, for making solidarity between interlocutors.

3. Compliments and compliment responses

In Holmes' studies of compliments and compliment responses in New Zealand English, Holmes (1986, 1988) concludes that women appear to compliment as an expression of solidarity, whereas men tend to perceive compliments as face-threatening, thus compliments less and more mitigated forms, and responding to compliments more evasively than women. Let us illustrate the example realised in Korean context given below:

[Context: Two men, A and B, are classmates. A bumps into B on campus]
A: *ya, ney seysinpal mescita* 'yeah, your new shoes are nice'
B: *ccok phallikey*. 'I lose my face'

Since complimenting in-group members is specifically to create distance in the Korean culture, it's anointing their positive face, not negative face. Therefore, they normally adopt strategies for compliment responses, such as silence, rejecting, evasive, avoidance, or self-denigration strategies, to maintain solidarity.

A term in Sino-Korean, *mangsin,* might be also used for the expression, losing face. However, it doesn't purely connote the meaning of other Korean terms of face above. It is rather an opposite meaning of them, i.e., indignity or shame. Therefore, like *ccok*, it is only used for the expression, losing face, not with any other phrasal expressions involving terms of face, as follows. *kay-mangsin tanghata* 'lose face badly' and *mangsin-sal-i ppetchita* 'losing face' (lit. bad luck (to bring disgrace) stretches).

Finally, I'd also put an expression involving face, no face, in the category of losing face. There are certain phrases concerning no face in Korean. All have expressions for states of humiliation and shame. Those expressions are stemming from the idea of lacking face.

[Context: when a student gives a very bad presentation in a big conference, s/he doesn't have positive face]
*myenmok(-i) epsta* 'losing face' (lit. lack face)

[Context: when A failed to fulfil an important promise to B, A has no positive face (to see B) because of shame]
*pol nach-i epsta* 'there's no face (to see)'

Socially, this expression is similar in context to *mwusun nach-ulo nel polswu isskeyssnya!* 'Which face can I look at you with'. This expression can be used if A does something which embarrasses B. It might be also an apologetic expression. Like *elkwul,*

*nach* is normally physical face, as in *ney nach-pich-i cohcilanhta* ‘your face looks pale’ (lit. the colour of your face looks bad).

Hitherto, we've talked about phrasal expressions involving face. The most productive Korean term of face, *cheymyen*, seems to accommodate both characteristics of Chinese face *mianzi* and *lian*, in that *mianzi* pertains to the reputation that is achieved "through getting on in life, through success and ostentation", whereas *lian* is the "respect of the group for a man [sic] with a good moral reputation" (Hu 1944: 45). I also suggest that Korean face, *cheymyen*, should differ distinctively from B&L's characterisation of face. While *cheymyen* identifies a Korean want to secure 'public' acknowledgement of one's prestige, self-esteem, reputation, or dignity, B&L's face mainly focuses on an individual's desire to be free of external imposition. Consequently, we might consider that all expressions above in Korean which related to the concept of face are pertinent to positive face rather than negative face.

## 4. Conclusions

Examinations of speech acts and expressions involving the concept of face show that Korean speaker and hearer are not particularly concerned about protecting their negative face. Besides, based on the examination of some of speech acts with B&L's model of politeness so far, we could also say that some of those that B&L say threaten negative face acts are sometimes much closer to positive FTAs in the Korean culture. Furthermore, as noted above, face in Korea possibly consists of both sides of positive and negative face together in each context of speech acts.

The usage of terms of face might be used in linguistically different ways from culture to culture and should be understood based on each cultural norm. Furthermore, although those expressions are used mostly in the context of face threatening speech acts, those FTAs can be culture specific or context-dependent.

The relations and mutual obligations of speaker and hearer are likely to judge suitable behaviour in different ways in different cultures. Seen an examination of contexts, the usage of terms of face plays a crucial role in maintaining social relations and social control. It aims not only to maintain integrity, solidarity and honour for both oneself and

one's inner group, but also consider mutual obligations in social interaction. Korean face is shared within collective units. That's why, in Korean culture, there seems to be an extreme effort to protect the speaker's own face and the addressee's own face.

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