

## **Request strategies in Korean**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the speech act of request in Korean. The methodology adapts the principles used by the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP, Blum-Kulka et al, 1989), but a slightly modified version of its coding system is used in order to suit the Korean language. Data has been collected in a workplace setting, through video-taping of role-plays. In the recording of the role-plays, three role-play scenarios were performed by Korean participants who were working at medium-sized companies with white-collar environments.

The study shows that Korean request strategies are chosen primarily according to power status, the higher the power status of the addressee, the more indirect request strategy is preferred. Korean speakers appear to be more indirect to the addressees who are superiors and equal work members than to juniors. Another discovery, hardly explored in previous studies, is that hints are used extensively in this study and corresponding to the level of power ranks as well: the lower power rank of the addressee, the less preference of strong hint is displayed.

### **1. Introduction**

This study is to investigate the patterns of request speech acts produced by native speakers of Korean under the variables of social factors. The formation of request speech acts will be conducted, in doing so prototypical request patterns may be developed through variations on the speech acts of native speakers.

This study will explore the characteristics of request speech acts regarding direct/indirect strategies. The data used in this study is obtained from role-plays by Korean native speakers. This study intends to answer the following questions:

1. How do native speakers of Korean realize the speech act of requests with regards to the level of directness of the request utterances?

2. How do the social variables, such as power and distance, affect the performance of requests?

## **2. Previous studies**

CCSARP was developed in an attempt to investigate the speech acts of request and apology from eight language groups: American English, Australian English, British English, Canadian French, German, Danish, Russian, and Hebrew (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984). The CCSARP focuses on exploring universal pragmatic principles across a range of languages and cultures, by making comparisons between native and non-native speakers. The framework of the CCSARP contains a scale of nine levels, as a coding scheme for the analysis of intralingual, situational, as well as cross-linguistic variations in in/directness. The level of directness is discussed at three main levels: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect (hints). The data were collected by means of Discourse Completion Tests (DCT) consisting of short descriptions of sixteen situations including variables of social distance and dominance to elicit written speech acts.

There have been a number of studies, which examine Korean request speech acts. Suh (1999) conducted a DCT to compare request strategies in English used by Korean learners of English as a second language (KESL) and English native speakers (ENS) with regard to social and psychological variables. Suh focused on identifying the differences between the two groups and amongst the advanced level and intermediate level of KESL. The data were collected using a questionnaire with 12 different situations based on social status and intimacy, and the informants were asked to select one out of six request strategies which were listed on the questionnaire.

It was found that ENS preferred to use conventionally indirect strategy like ‘Can you ... ?’ more than KESL, whereas imperatives (being a direct strategy) were used more by KESL. In both socially and psychologically distant situations, there was no significant difference in making requests between two groups. In socially distant but psychologically close relationships, both groups used less polite strategies than in the first situation, and again a significant difference among them was not seen. Both employed less polite strategies in a socially and psychologically close relationship. In psychologically very distant relationships, request strategies used by two groups were most polite.

Kim (1994) studied requests cross-culturally between Korean and English. The data were gathered using questionnaires. The participants of 296 Korean students and 299 American students participated in the study. They were similar in terms of age and academic major. The results showed that the Koreans considered the direct statement as the least effective way of making requests, while the Americans perceived it as the most effective strategy.

Koo (2001) investigated two speech acts, request and apology in Korean, by Korean native speakers (KNS) and American learners of Korean language (AKFL). The author collected spoken data using DCT with ten situations of request and apology each, corresponding to variables of age, social dominance, and power relationship. The informants were asked to produce a request after reading a short description of each situation. The coding scheme used in the CCSARP was employed in the study. The study finds that AKFL learners were more direct in making requests than KNS. The verbosity was seen in KNS, with longer utterances with more supportive moves.

This study will concentrate on investigating request strategies produced by native speakers of Korean, and more importantly using role-play data in a work place setting. It is expected that the outcomes of this study can provide intriguing insights coming from work-place data, to the study of Korean request strategies.

### **3. Methodology**

The method of data collection adopts the principles used by the CCSARP, but a modified version of its coding scheme has been developed to suit the different linguistic characteristics of Korean language. Role-play, in strictly speaking role-enactment, is used in this study. McDonough (1981, p. 80) proposes the method of role-enactment. He argues that role-play is realized where the subjects respond by acting a role in the given situations as if they are actually in that particular situation. This allows researchers to obtain spoken data that is as natural as possible.

A workplace setting was chosen in the data collection for this study, because the speech act of requests appears in a high frequency in the workplace, where people often need to give directions to each other. The data collection was conducted in Korea in the environment of medium-sized white-collar companies.

A pilot study was conducted: two role-play scenarios were tested out. Through the pilot study, technical drawbacks in recordings were modified. The pilot study of role-plays revealed that there were some misunderstandings about the request scenarios.

In the main recordings, the researcher still used the same original request scenarios, but the participants received sufficient explanation about the scenarios before they began, and the recording went smoothly.

### **3.1 Subjects**

The subjects were chosen from workplaces in Daejeon, Korea. They consisted of twelve office workers for the recording of role-plays, two pairs of female/female and male/male subjects for each of the three role-play situations. The data was to examine the impact of social variables including power and distance on the performance of requests.

### **3.2 The design of role-play scenarios**

In order to examine the effect of social variables on the realization of the speech act of requesting, three request situations for role-plays were designed, in which situations varied with respect to social variables of power and distance. In this study, the variables of power include three levels: +Power (the addressee has a higher power status than the speaker), =Power (the interlocutors have parallel status), -Power (the addressee has a lower power status than the speaker). Moreover, in this study the variable of social distance, +D (the interlocutors do not know each other) was considered. Three scenarios are as follows:

#### **Situation 1: [+P, +D]**

Imagine that: You are being interviewed for a promotion by your department head. You do not know this person, because s/he has been on leave due to illness and you have worked for the company for less than six months. During the interview, the interviewer is not satisfied with your documentation, and asks you to provide more information together with an additional reference letter from one of your previous employers. The interviewer wants to make a decision tomorrow because s/he is leaving to attend a conference the day after tomorrow, so s/he asks you to submit the additional information by tomorrow. However, you would like to extend the due date to give your former employer and yourself more time to prepare. Now you ask her/him to give you more time.

#### **Situation 2: [-P, +D]**

Imagine that: You are a department head conducting promotion interviews in your company. The addressee is one of the candidates coming for a promotion interview. You do not know him/her, because you have just come back from leave and the addressee began his/her job after you went on leave. During the interview, you are

not happy with his/her documentation, you want more documentation and an additional reference letter from one of his/her previous employers. Because you want to make a decision tomorrow as you are leaving to attend a conference the day after tomorrow, you request her/him to submit the additional information by tomorrow. You know this probably won't be enough time for the addressee and his/her former employer to prepare the required documentation. Nevertheless, you ask him/her to submit the documentation by tomorrow.

### **Situation 3: [=P, +D]**

Imagine that: You have a colleague, whom you do not know, because s/he has just joined the company. You need to photocopy a lot of documents for a meeting, and only have 15 minutes before the meeting starts. However, when you get to the photocopier, the addressee you have not met before is using the photocopier and s/he has many documents to finish too, and needs them for a meeting which also starts soon. Now you ask the addressee whether or not you can interrupt and do your photocopying first.

### **3.3 Procedure of video-taping of role-plays**

After the participants agreed to be recorded, they were given detailed explanations as to how to perform the role-play, which took approximately five minutes. The request scenarios were translated into Korean. Each scenario had two pairs of subjects performing in it; each pair consisting of two participants of the same sex. The recording session of the role-play took between a maximum of five minutes and a minimum of thirty seconds.

### **3.4 Data analysis process**

After the data were gathered, request utterances were classified and coded, using the coding system of the CCSARP. Identification of request sequences made use of the CCSARP definition, which has been widely used in the study of request speech act. The current analysis is based mainly on the manual coding scheme of the CCSARP, but revised by deleting categories that were inapplicable in Korean, and adding new appropriate categories developed by Byon (2001), Fukushima (1996), Sifianou (1992), Van Mulken (1996), and the researcher herself.

**Table 1: Coding system for directness level of head acts (main request acts)**

Directness level	Strategies	Descriptions and examples
Level 1: Direct strategies (Impositives)	Mood derivable	Imperatives are the grammatical form of the utterances of this type. For example, 그쪽 연락처를 남겨줘요. Kuccok yenlakche-lul namky-e-cwu-e-yo. 'Leave your address.'
	Want statement	The speaker conveys the illocutionary intent by asserting a particular want, desire, or wish. For example, 다해 연락처를 좀 알고 싶습니다. Dahay yenlakche-lul com al-ko sip-sup-ni-ta. 'I want to know Dahay's address.'
Level 2: Conventionally indirect strategies	Suggestory formula	The speaker conveys the illocutionary intent that is phrased as a suggestion that usually interests both of the interactants. For example, 휴가를 좀 연기하면 어떨까요? Hyuka-lul com yenki-ha-myen ette-lkka-yo? 'How about postponing your holiday?'
	Query preparatory	The utterance of this strategy contains preparatory conditions referring to asking the hearer's ability, willingness, permission, possibility, or convenience to perform an act. For examples, 지금 녹음 해 줄 수 있어? Cikum nokum hay cwu-l swu iss-e? 'Can you record that right now?'
Level 3: Non-conventionally indirect strategies (Hints)	Strong hint	The speaker conveys the illocutionary intent by referring to partially relevant statements of the request act. For example, 왜 남의 물건을 만지고 그래? Way nam-uy mwulken-ul manci-ko kulay? 'Why do you touch my things without asking me?' (Clue: The speaker intends to ask the addressee not to take his books.)

#### 4. Data and discussion

This section discusses the data in terms of head act strategies with respect to the three individual situations. In addition, the impact of the social variables, such as power and distance, on the choice of request strategies will also be examined.

##### 4.1 General examination of request strategies in role-plays

Korean speakers made use of five types of head acts in their requests throughout all situations: mood derivable-imperative, want statement, suggestory formula, query preparatory, and strong hint.

Korean speakers treated query preparatory as the most favoured manner in making their requests throughout all situations, and its rate of occurrence was twice as much as mood derivable which was considered as the second preferred formula. In terms of the use of query preparatory, it is clearly displayed that Korean speakers often utilized this formula in the form of questions by asking the addressees' permission or availability to perform potential requests, with the use of *-an/toy-lkka-yo?* (*-안/될까요?* 'Would it be possible/could you/can't I...?'). It seems that Korean speakers also preferred diverse types of direct head acts, such as mood derivable and want statement. For example:

- (4.1) 복사기 제가 먼저 써도 될까요?  
Poksaki cey-ka mence sse-to toy-lkka-yo?  
'Can I use the photocopy machine first?' (Query preparatory) (S3)
- (4.2) 자료수집을 해야 되니까, 시간을 좀 더 주세요.  
Calyo swucip-ul hay-ya toy-nikka, sikan-ul com te cwu-sey-yo.  
'I need to prepare the documentation, so please give me more time.' (Mood derivable) (S1)
- (4.3) 뭐 시간이 되는대로 (0.4) 제출을 해줬으면 좋겠습니다.  
Mwe sikan-i toy-nun-teylo (0.4) ceychwul-ul hay-cwu-ess-u-myen coh-keyss-sup-ni-ta.  
'So, it would be good if you can submit it when you have time.' (Want statement) (S2)

With respect to strong hint, Korean speakers expressed their illocutionary intention in the forms of questions or incomplete sentences, and its preference was very high. This suggests that Korean speakers also convey the illocutionary intent by expressing it in an implicit way at times. For example:

- (4.4) 저도 복사 좀 하려고 하는데, 많이 바쁘신가요?  
Ce-to poksa com ha-lye-ko ha-nun-tey, manh-i pappu-si-n-ka-yo?  
'I also need to make some copies, have you got a lot to do?' (Strong hint) (S3)

Korean speakers displayed their strong preference on using strong hint. The majority of strong hint was realized in the form of a question by mentioning partial elements of a request in a way in which the speaker gives grounding comments of the illocutionary act of the request.

#### 4.2 Data discussion based on individual situations

Korean speakers were prone to use query preparatory (75%) as the most appropriate way to realize requests in the situation in which the addressees had a higher power rank and the interlocutors did not know each other. The next preferred formula of head acts for Korean speakers was mood derivable by using imperative (25%). For example,

- (4.5) 조금만 시간을 더 주시면 안될까요?  
Cokum-man sikan-ul te cwu-si-myen an-toy-ikka-yo?  
'Could you give me more time?' (Query preparatory) (S1)

As shown in (4.5), Korean speakers employed a head act of query preparatory in the form of *-an-toy-ikka-yo?* (*-(안)될까요?* 'Can (can't)/ May I ...?') in the realization of requests with an unfamiliar superior. It was done by asking about the possibility of whether or not the speaker could be given more time to organize the required documentation. Korean speakers also utilized mood derivable-imperative, such as *calyo swucip-ul hay-ia toy-nikka, sikan-ul com te cwu-si-eyo.* (*자료 수집을 해야 되니까, 시간을 좀 더 주세요.* 'Please give me a bit more time, because I need to collect data'). The speaker demanded postponement of the due date for submission. Even though the speaker chooses the form of conveying the request is in a direct way, there are a number of items which deliver polite tone of the request. That is to say that by using this mood derivable statement the speaker applied verbal ending marker *-a/eyo* (*-아/어요* 'informal polite level') and understater *com* (*좀* 'a little'). These lexical modifications play a role to increase the level of politeness.

As compared to the Situation 1, Korean speakers placed more variance in the choice of head act strategies in Situation 2, when requests were made towards the addressees who were unfamiliar junior work members. The most frequently used formula was mood derivable-imperative (43%), as in *Kukel tasi hanpen cakseng-hay-se com nayil-kkaci ceychwul-hay cwu-sey-yo.* (*그걸 다시 한번 작성해서 좀 내일까지 제출해 주세요.* 'Please reformat this, and submit it again by tomorrow.'). In addition to the use of mood derivable-imperative, there were four more additional head act strategies use by Korean speakers: want statement, suggestory formula, query preparatory and strong hint, 14% each.

In the realization of requests with unfamiliar juniors, Korean speakers employed various direct strategies. Korean speakers displayed a significantly low preference on the application of conventionally indirect strategy in Situation 2, rather a solid trend toward the choice of diverse head act strategies with an emphasis on direct strategy.



This outcome could be explained by the supposition that Korean speakers who are superiors might not be indirect in the choice of head act strategies.

In the Situation 3 in which the request is demanded towards the addressee who is unfamiliar equals, the use of query preparatory played a significant role as the most favoured for Korean speakers (67%), and the high frequent use of strong hints (33%). For example:

- (4.6) 저도 복사 좀 하려고 하는데, 많이 바쁘신가요?  
Ce-to poksa com ha-lye-ko ha-nun-tey, manh-i pappu-si-n-ka-yo?  
'I also need to make some copies, have you got a lot to do?' (Strong hint) (S3)

As for the requests made towards unfamiliar equals (S3), Koreans were prone to utilizing conventionally indirect head acts in role-plays. The speakers preferred to use the most polite strategy (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1987), conventionally indirect head acts.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) find that situational variables of age, social status, intimacy, or sex determine the choice of politeness strategies, and its influence in selecting strategies amongst directness and indirectness differ from culture to culture. This study shows that indeed there are different trends in choosing a variety of request strategies corresponding to different combinations of social variables of power and distance. When the interlocutors do not know each other, the data displays a strong trend of employing conventionally indirect head acts in role-plays, except for the situation where the request is made towards junior work members.

The analysis demonstrates that there was a relatively low preference for conventionally indirect strategy, when requests were claimed towards juniors, instead there were many direct head acts employed by the participants who hold higher power status than the addressees. This may indicate that the speaker who is in a higher power position tends to give a direction to the addressee in overt or precise way. It could also be assumed that Korean speakers who are in a position of superiors might not be sensitive about choosing request strategies. This reveals that the social variable of power could be a dominant factor in the realization of requests.

Moreover, Korean speakers showed a tendency to utilize hints when the addressees had either a lower or the same power position, but more preference is seen in the latter situation. That is to say the speaker and the addressee used more strong hints when they have an equal power status, and fewer strong hints when the addressee

had a lower power status.

All in all, it seems Korean speakers switched their approach from conventionally indirect to direct strategy towards junior members, even though the interlocutors did not know each other. This indicates that the choice of head acts is affected by power status rather than familiarity in Korean to a great extent.

## **5. Conclusions**

The current study has been conducted to investigate request strategies used by Korean speakers in role-plays. It must be emphasized that the data from which the conclusions are drawn is work place role-play data, because data of different kinds may indicate a different pattern of language behaviour.

Korean request strategies are mainly based on power status. For Koreans, the higher the power status of the addressee, the more indirect request strategy is preferred. The Korean would use direct (and probably less polite) strategies to the addressees unfamiliar to them, particularly to the juniors. This study also shows that Korean speakers used hints corresponding to the level of power ranks: the higher power rank of the addressee, the more preference of strong hint is displayed.

In general, the speakers opt for conventionally indirect request strategies throughout all three situations, but in the situation in which the request is made towards the juniors there is its relatively lower preference. It is suspected that while the conventionally indirect strategy might be a universal method of making requests towards the addressees regardless of the level of power position, for Koreans the use of conventionally indirect head acts is in relation to the power status.

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