

# A Contrastive Study of Compliment Responses of Korean, Chinese and English Speakers<sup>\*</sup>

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## I. Introduction

The present study is an analysis of compliment responses (hereafter CRs) based on the Korean language data with reference to Mandarin Chinese and Australian English data. A cross-cultural comparison will be made with regards to the ways each group responds to compliments. The following illustrates the two-part exchanges of compliments and

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compliment responses:

1. A compliments B
2. B responds/acknowledges that A has spoken.

For any culture, a compliment may express approval of something that both parties, speakers and addressees, regard positively (Manes 1993) and it must be valued by the culture indicated (Holmes 1993; Manes 1983). As is widely noted, compliments vary cross-culturally (Herbert 1989). Consider the following examples.

- (1) C: (Friend): You have a nice one-room apartment.  
R: Yes. The rent is expensive. It is a burden.
- (2) C: (Friend invited to dinner): The food is delicious. I am full.  
R(Hostess): If you come again next time, I'll prepare the same food.
- (3) C (Friend): You have bought a sewing machine. How much does it cost?  
R: Oh, it's cheap. It's a used one. My wife needs it badly.
- (4) C: Your earrings are pure gold, aren't you?  
R: Yes, they are. They must be pure gold when you put them on.  
C: Money is a necessary condition to become attractive, indeed.  
R: I think so too.

Within an English-speaking community, (1) and (2) will be recognized as compliments whereas (3) and (4) do not fall within the category of compliments; (3) will be considered to be a compliment in Indonesia and (4) in Japan (Wolfson 1981: 113–115). Since the ways in which people compliment and respond to compliments vary culturally, viewing compliments as important, relational speech acts situates them as cultural construction (Doohan and Manusov 2004: 171). Consider the following:

(5) (Pakehe woman to Samoan friend who is visiting)

C: What an unusual necklace! It's beautiful.

R: Please take it.

Such a response in (5), which is socioculturally appropriate in Samoan community, is perceived as inappropriate in a English speaking community since the compliment is taken to mean to express envy or desire for the complimenter's possession, thus giving pressure on the recipient of the compliment. Moreover, consider the following situation, which was introduced to show the cross-cultural variations between Chinese and American speakers (cf. Ma 1996, Tang & Zhang 2009).

American and Chinese cultures are at polar opposites. An American hostess, complimented for her culinary skills, is likely to say, "Oh, I'm so glad you liked it. I cooked it especially for you." Not so a Chinese host or hostess, who will instead apologize profusely for giving you "nothing" even slightly edible and for not showing you enough honour by providing proper dishes: for instance, although the compliments were appreciated, the host replied by saying, "Oh, no, the dishes were not well prepared."

The host(ess) said "no" in reply to the compliments received from the

guests in order to make the guests feel comfortable (Ma 1996). A "yes" response, under such circumstances, would have implied that the host(ess) had put a lot of time and efforts in preparing the food, so the guests should owe a lot to the host(ess). Here even though the message conveyed with "no" in the CR above can be annoying and confusing to many Anglo-Americans, Chinese and Korean would have less difficulty dealing with such message.

In this regard, compliment responses constitute a subject worthy of further research for cross-cultural analysis because they are ubiquitous, yet frequently problematic speech acts. Given that compliments can be an act of judgement/estimation on another person, people may feel uneasy or defensive with regards to the compliments they receive, and thus may have trouble responding to such compliments appropriately (Knapp, Hopper & Bell 1984, Yu 2003). These speech acts become even more problematic as a result of there being a relatively strong agreement within the speech community as to which expression constitutes "a correct response." Virtually all speakers of English, for instance, agree that when complimented, the correct response is "thank you."

However, many people still feel discomfort when they respond to compliments. Pomeranz' data (1978) in American English shows that recipients of compliments find themselves caught between agreeing with the compliments and avoiding self-praising behavior. As such, American speakers were observed to avoid the simple acceptance of compliments (Herbert 1986, 1989; Pomeranz 1978). Rather than simply accepting compliments, these speakers often used a variety of strategies. For instance, Holmes (1988), based on New Zealand data, identified 12 strategies and classified them into three macro response types: Accept, Reject and Deflect/Evade. Her analysis shows that Accept is the most preferred response type (61% of all the response). However, the preferred

response strategy used in non-Western cultures seems to be different: Malaysian students in New Zealand accept about 40% of the compliments they receive (Holmes 1988) while Korean speakers were reported to accept about 25% of the compliments (Suh 2009). The Accept rate in Chinese and Japanese groups were found, in particular, to be much lower (Chen 1993). Chinese are found to use more 'self-praise avoidance' strategies, such as shifting credit to the complimenter (Chen 1993: 59).

A great volume of research on contrastive pragmatics suggests that the uses of CRs between the two different speech communities are pragmatically and culturally very different from each other. This is so because differences exist between the socio-cultural and linguistic norms of one speaker to those of another. In this regard, my research questions are as follows:

(1) How do Korean, Mandarin Chinese, and Australian English speakers use CR strategies at macro and micro levels, with respect to the four situational settings?

(2) What is the impact of socio-cultural factors on the use of CRs?

## II. Data and Methodology

### 1. Data collection

To compare Korean, Mandarin Chinese and Australian English responses to compliments, this study refers to the findings on CRs among Mandarin Chinese and Australian English Speakers. In particular, I draw upon Tang and Zhang (2009), where they compare Mandarin Chinese and Australian English Speakers in terms of their CRs. Using the same questionnaire items that Tang and Zhang (2009) employed in their study, I collected the

Korean Data. The Korean version of four situational settings on the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) were distributed via email. The following presents the four situational settings relating to four different topics: appearance, character, ability, and possession.

**Situation 1 (appearance)**

Your friend has organized a party to celebrate the end of semester. You've dressed up for the party. As you arrive at the party, one of your friends says: "Hey, you look great! You're really handsome/beautiful today."

**Situation 2 (character)**

You have helped your friend (a couple) to look after their child for a whole day at your place. When they come back to pick up the child, they say: "Thank you! You're really helpful, patient, and caring."

**Situation 3 (ability)**

After you have completed a presentation, your classmate says: "Wow, that's brilliant, I hope I can do it the way you did. Well done!"

**Situation 4 (possession)**

You have bought a new mobile phone. When you receive a call, your friend notices that your phone is a different one. Having looked at it and tried some functions, s/he says: "Wow, how smart! My mobile does not have such functions. It is really great!"

A total of 30 Korean speakers participated in this research, with 30 Mandarin Chinese and 30 Australian English subjects considered for comparison (see Tang and Zhang 2009).<sup>1)</sup> There are 15 male and 15

female participants in each group. Korean DCTs were completed individually, mainly through email. The Korean participants were all from South Korea and they are either faculty members or graduate students at a university located in Seoul.

It is worthwhile mentioning that the questions on the DCTs involve interactions between friends/classmates. The factors of power and distance here are more of equality and solidarity, following Tang and Zhang (2009). Hence, findings in this study would be less representative of groups outside the 'friends/classmates' category.

## 2. Data analysis

A contrastive analysis of CRs among Korean, Mandarin Chinese, and Australian English speakers has been carried out to identify different CR patterns among the three groups. Holmes' categories (1988, 1993), which were adapted by Tang and Zhang (2009), have three macro strategies (Accept, Reject, and Evade) and ten micro strategies, as shown in Table 1.<sup>2)</sup>

**Table 1: Holmes' CR categories**

Macro level CR	Micro level CR	Examples
<b>Accept</b>	Appreciation Token	"Thanks", "yes"
	Agreeing Utterance	"I know", "yeah,

- 
- 1) The Chinese speakers were reported to be from Mandarin China and most were international students, and the Australian English speakers were students at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. (Tang and Zhang 2009).
  - 2) "Macro level" refers to one of the three general strategies *Accept*, *Reject* and *Evade*, and "micro level" refers to more specific strategies subsumed under each of the three general strategies.

		I really like it."
	Downgrading Utterance	"It's nothing." "I hope it was OK"
	Return Compliment	"You're not too bad yourself"
<b>Reject</b>	Disagreeing Utterance	"Don't say so" "Nah, it's nothing special."
	Question Accuracy	"Really?" "Is that so?"
	Challenge Sincerity	"You must be kidding"
<b>Evade</b>	Shift Credit	"That's what friends for." "My pleasure"
	Information Comment	"It wasn't hard." "It's really cheap."
	Request reassurance	"Really?"

In addition to the 10 categories proposed by Holmes, I myself added another category as it is relevant to the analysis of the Korean data (i.e., Promise/Future Commitment, Suggestion). The analysis is done by taking an utterance and then put it into categories illustrated above. The following illustrates how the subjects' responses were categorized:

*Korean Data Analysis*

애가 이빠서 시간가는 줄 모르겠더라 (-> Shift Credit)

I was so into watching this adorable little kid that I lost all track of time.

어 인터넷에서 검색해보니까 이게 제일 낫더라 (->Informative Comment)



Yeah, from what I've found on the Internet, this is by far the best one.

The first sentence was one of the most frequently-found responses to compliment on character. This utterance shows that the addressee shifts compliments to the addresser (the addresser's child); hence the utterance falls into the category of Shift Credit. The second sentence was a frequently found response to compliment on possession. When complimented on the new cellular phone, the addressee tries to evade the complimentary force by providing the information about the object complimented.

### III. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the data draws upon the findings by Tang and Zhang (2009)'s contrastive study of compliment responses among Australian English and Mandarin Chinese Speakers. As I noted, the Mandarin Chinese and Australian English parts were taken from Tang and Zhang (2009). The findings of the use of CRs in this study will be presented in two parts; (1) general patterns (macro level) and (2) specific patterns in the four settings (including micro level).

#### 1. General patterns of CR strategies

Figure 1 presents general patterns employed by the Korean, Chinese, and Australian groups at the macro level. What is noteworthy is that the preference of English and Chinese groups was in the order of Accept, Reject and Evade; that is, these two groups prefer Accept most and Reject least. However, the Korean group was reported to favor the Evade

strategy slightly more than the Accept one. We can also notice that the Korean and Chinese use more Evade and Reject, and less Accept than the Australians do. This suggests that the Korean and Chinese speakers tend to be reluctant to accept compliments in a direct manner. Table 1 below gives some examples.

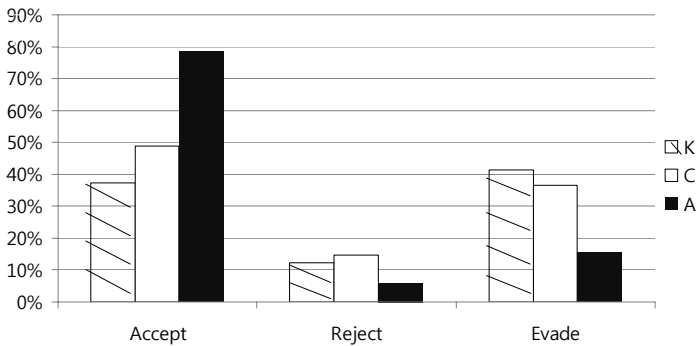


Fig 1 Response Types (at the macro level)

K: Korean	C: Chinese	A: Australian English
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Table 1: Examples of CRs

<p><b>Australian: Accept Strategies</b>  <u>Cheers, mate.</u> you look good yourself.  <u>Thank you.</u> So do you.</p>
<p><b>Chinese: Reject Strategies</b>  <u>Not, really.</u> It's so-so, nothing special.  <u>Don't say that.</u> I did nothing special.</p>
<p><b>Korean: Reject Strategies</b>                  아냐, 버벅했지 뭐. 막상 나가서 하려니까 생각이 하나도 안나는거야  <u>Nah,</u> I just mumbled through. Right when I got up to speak, I simply blanked</p>

out.
<p><b>Chinese: Evade Strategies</b>  <u>You're very polite. It's nothing.</u>  <u>We're friends, that's what friends for.</u></p>
<p><b>Korean: Evade Strategies</b>                  아니야, 아이가 예뻐서 시간가는 줄 몰랐어  <u>I was so into watching this adorable little kid that I lost all track of time.</u>                  서로 돕고 사는거지. 애가 착해서 고생한 것도 없네  <u>It's all about helping each other out. I didn't have to do anything, really – the kid was an angel.</u></p>

## 2. The CR patterns in the four specific situational settings

This section presents the findings with reference to the following four settings – appearance, character, ability and possession – along with an in depth analysis of the data.

### 2.1. CRs for appearance

Figure 2 shows that all the three groups opted more for Accept strategies than the other two strategies (i.e., Reject and Evade). The Korean and Chinese used more Evade strategy but less Accept than the Australians did although the Korean group appears to favor Evade strategies than the Chinese group does. At micro-level, Return compliment ranks second highest, behind only Appreciation token, as a preferred response strategy in all the three groups. By employing "Return responses" strategy such as "You look good yourself" or "오히려 니가 더 보기 좋은데?" ("In fact, you actually look better than I do"), the recipient of the compliment redirects the compliment back to the complimenter and appears to suggest that s/he is not that unique and that the complimenter is worthy of an equivalent compliment as well, while impling that s/he agrees with the complimenter and accepts the credit for the positive evaluation.

While the three groups preferred the Appreciation token and Return compliment to other strategies, there were marked differences in using the Appreciation token. These differences were found in the following strategies: Shift credit, Informative comment, and Request reassurance. In particular, the Australian used Appreciation Token and Shift Credit more frequently, and the Chinese used Disagreeing Utterance more frequently than the other two groups. Another noticeable tendency is that the Korean and the Chinese groups favor Request Reassurance CR while the Australian group rarely used that strategy (see Figure 3). This suggests that the Korean and Chinese are less direct in accepting a compliment, often opting for Evade with the use of Requesting Reassurance strategy. The Korean speakers in particular appear to favor Informative Comment while the other two groups rarely use that strategy.

<p><b>Chinese: Request Reassurance</b> Honestly? Thank you.</p>
<p><b>Australian: Shift Credit</b> Thanks! so do you. Where did you get your skirt?</p>
<p><b>Korean: Informative Comment</b> 종강파티라 신경 좀 썼다 Well...I did pay extra attention, as it was the end-of-the-semester class party.</p>

Table 2: Examples of Evade Strategies

In general, the most favored CR strategies for the Chinese group were, in descending order, Appreciation Token, Return Compliment and Request Reassurance. For the Korean group, again in descending order, Appreciation Token came up first, followed by Return Compliment and Request Reassurance.

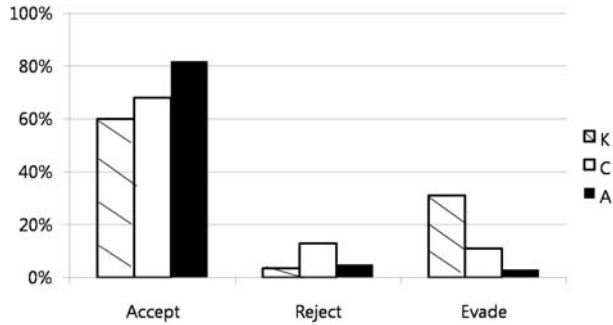


Fig 2. The macro-pattern of CRs to appearance compliment

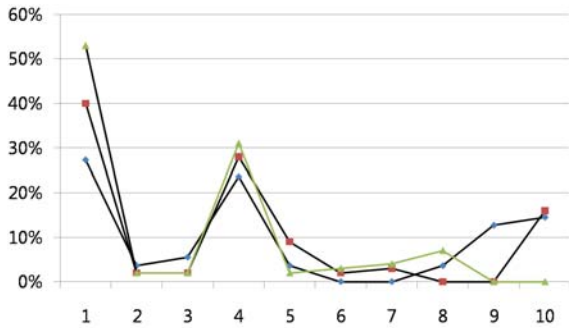


Fig 3. The micro-pattern of CRs to appearance complin

1: Appreciation Token	6: Question Accuracy
2: Agreeing Utterance	7: Challenge Sincerity
3: Downgrading	8: Shift Credit
4: Return Compliment	9: Informative Comment
5: Disagreeing Utterance	10: Request Reassurance

## 2.2. CRs for Character

Figure 4 shows that the Chinese and Korean group preferred Evade over

Accept or Reject strategies, while the Australian group still preferred Accept strategies. This suggests that the Chinese and Korean accept compliments on character indirectly using Evade strategies, showing modesty. In the case of character CRs, they may think that helping friends with baby-sitting is nothing special, as is shown in their favored response "당연히 도와야지" ("It goes without saying that I should help out"). Hence, being complimented on doing something "ordinary" prompts them to evade the compliment (Tang and Zhang, 2009). As is shown in Figure 5, "Shift Credit" was the only strategy the Korean group opted for when evading the compliment, which also marks the highest rate (44.2%), followed by Disagreeing Utterance (26.9%) and Return Compliment (13.4%). Instead of admitting that they deserve the compliment, Chinese and Koreans shift the credit from themselves to the addressee's child, i.e, s/he being a good kid.

Figure 5 displays, at the micro level, that all the three groups, when complimented on character, are likely to use Shift Credit most frequently, which seems to be a "self-avoidance strategy". Moreover, the Australian used the Appreciation Token more frequently than the other two groups while the Korean used the Disagreeing Utterance more frequently than the other two group. The following illustrates some examples of Shift Credit strategy found in the Korean data:

아니야, 아이가 얌전하고 의젓해서 전혀 힘들지 않았어. 앞으로도 종종 부탁 하렴(disagreement + shift credit + future commitment)

Oh no, he was really gentle and docile, so it wasn't difficult at all. Don't hesitate to contact me if you need me to babysit him again!

뭘 당연히 도와야지 혹시 나중에 우리도 부탁하면 도와줘

Don't mention it-- of course I should come to your help whenever

necessary! Please do help us out as well if we need you!

We can also find, in the Korean data, that the Shift Credit strategy is often preceded by Disagreeing utterances such as "아니아(no)" or "뭘(don't mention it)", which explains the high frequency of Disagreeing utterance. The "no" response here is a way of being considerate to others. An easy acceptance of the compliment or a "yes" response would have implied that the complimentee put a lot of efforts and was patient in taking care of the kid. Therefore, the kinds of CR given in the above examples reflect the tendency on the part of Korean individuals to minimize what they did to help their friends out by deflecting credit and trying to be modest.

Besides the Shift credit token being preceded by the Disagreement token, the Shift credit token is frequently tagged with some remarks such as Promise or Future commitment to taking care of the child in the future as well ("앞으로도 종종 부탁하렴" – "Feel Free to call me whenever you need help."). This kind of remarks clearly reflect the speaker's effort to downplay any difficulties s/he may have experienced and to emphasize the voluntary (as opposed to forced or pained) aspect of his/her having taken care of the child.

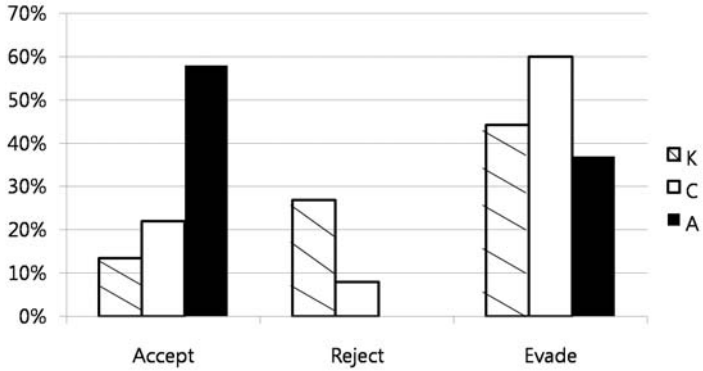


Fig 4. The macro-pattern of CRs to character compliment

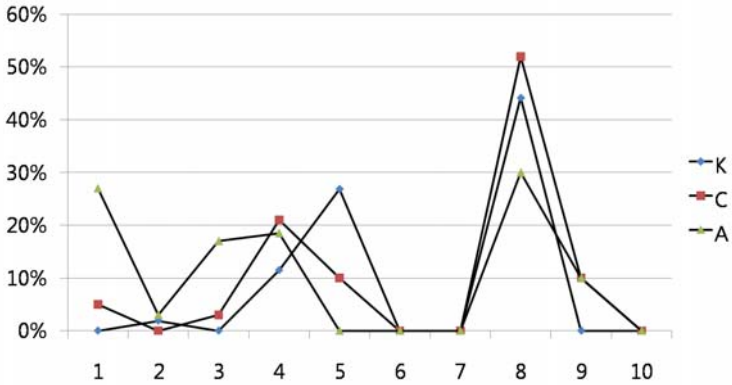


Fig 5. The micro-pattern of CRs to character compliment

1: Appreciation Token	6: Question Accuracy
2: Agreeing Utterance	7: Challenge Sincerity
3: Downgrading	8: Shift Credit
4: Return Compliment	9: Informative Comment
5: Disagreeing Utterance	10: Request Reassurance



### 2.3 CRs for ability

Figure 6 shows the macro pattern of ability CRs. The most frequently used strategy was, once again, Accept strategy in all the three groups. In contrast, the least-used strategies in the two East Asian (Chinese and Korean) and Australia groups, respectively, were Reject and Evade. And as was expected, the Chinese and Korean use less Accept, and more Reject and Evade than the Australians.

Figure 7 presents, at micro level, that the Australians use more Appreciation token and Return compliment than the Chinese and Korean. Moreover, it demonstrates that the Chinese use more Shift credit than their counterparts, and the Koreans use more Disagreeing utterance and Informative comment.

The following demonstrates CRs from the three different nationality groups found in the data:

Table 3: Ability CRs

<p><b>Australian data</b>                  Thanks, mate. You will be all right with your presentation                  (Appreciation + Return compliment)</p> <p>Thanks. You can. Anytime you need me, I'll help you out.</p>
<p><b>Chinese data</b>                  Actually, everyone can do it! You can also do it very well. (Shift credit + Return compliment)</p>
<p><b>Korean data</b>                  고맙다. 사실 긴장을 많이 했는데                  (Appreciation token + Informative comment)                  Thank you! I was really quite nervous, in fact.</p> <p>아니야, 너무 떨려서 정신이 하나도 없었어                  (Disagreement + Informative comment)                  Nah, I was so nervous, I couldn't think clearly.</p>

The Korean speaker of CR, while recognizing the preceding remark as a compliment, often tries to amend its complimentary force by uttering "Informative Comment" e.g. "사실 긴장을 많이 했는데" ("I actually was really nervous.") or "말마라 진짜로 밤샘했다" ("Tell me about it, I had to pull an all-nighter for this."). By deploying Informative Comment, the speaker depersonalizes the force of the compliment, and in doing so appears not to accept credit for the accomplishment that is praised. Besides, the Korean speakers often ask for corrections after making Informative Comments as their CR to ability, e.g. "나 잘 못 한 거 없었어?" ("Was there anything that I didn't do correctly?") or "혹시 더 개선해서 좋은 것 같은 점 말해줄 수 있어?" ("Can you tell me in what areas is there any room for improvement?"), which seems to reflect the respondents' tendency to hold back from a hasty indulgence in self-praise or not to acknowledge the complimentary force too easily. This also suggests that Koreans try to double their efforts by adding this type of comments to the evade strategy.

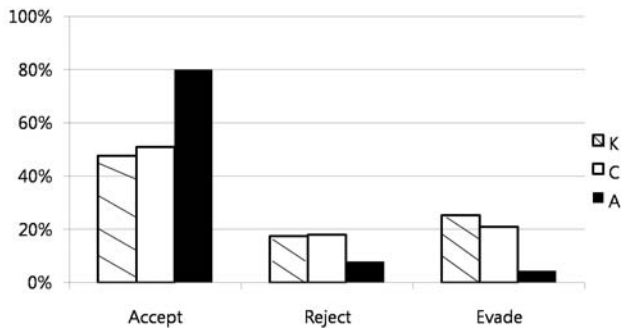


Fig 6. The macro-pattern of CRs to ability compliment

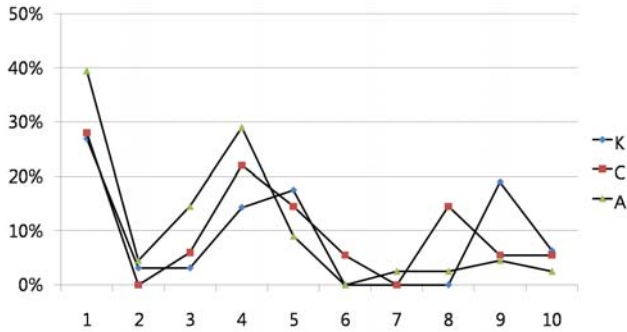


Fig 7. The micro-pattern of CRs to ability compliment

1: Appreciation Token	6: Question Accuracy
2: Agreeing Utterance	7: Challenge Sincerity
3: Downgrading	8: Shift Credit
4: Return Compliment	9: Informative Comment
5: Disagreeing Utterance	10: Request Reassurance

#### 2.4. CRs for possession

Figure 8 shows that the majority of the Australians show their usual tendency to accept the compliment on possession. In contrast, the most frequently used strategy for the Chinese and Koreans was Evade, with the Korean group, in particular, showing the highest rate of Evade occurrences (74.5%). It suggests that the Chinese and Korean feel less comfortable in accepting compliments on their possession and character than they feel on appearance and ability.

The following shows some examples found in the data:

Table 4: Possession CRs

<p><b>Australian data</b>                  Yeah, it's not bad. Hey you should get one                  (Appreciation token + Downgrading + Suggestion)</p>
<p><b>Chinese data</b>                  You can also buy one. It's very cheap.                  (Suggestion + Informative comment)</p>
<p><b>Korean data</b>                  새 기종이라 샀는데 한번 써봐야지 뭐                  (Informative Comment)                  I bought it because it's a brand-new version; I should use it, really.</p> <p>어제 샀거든. 예쁘지? 기능이 많고 좋긴 한데 사용법이 좀 복잡하긴 해.. 요즘 핸드폰 세일 많이 하더라. 너도 바꾸려면 지금이 좋은 기회인 거 같아. (Informative Comment + Suggestion)                  I bought it yesterday! Pretty, isn't it? It's a good phone, with many functions, but it's kind of difficult to operate. These days, so many cell phones are on sale. If you want to exchange your current one for a new one, now is the time to do it.</p>

Figure 9 at the micro-level shows that after Appreciation Token and Downgrading, the Australian and Chinese group used Informative Comment as the third preferred strategy, whereas Informative Comment was the most preferred strategy for the Korean group. Since the mobile phone is an ever-upgrading machine, it may require a certain explanation, especially on their new features/functions. Sometimes the speaker recommends the purchase of the item complimented, as shown in table 4.

자주 쓰는 기능은 아닌데 한번 맘먹고 질렀다

It's not a function that's frequently used, but I still bought the phone with this function added on to it.

그래? 그럼 지금 써보고 많이 좋으면 너도 하나 사

Really? So you use it, and if it's really good, you should buy one as well.

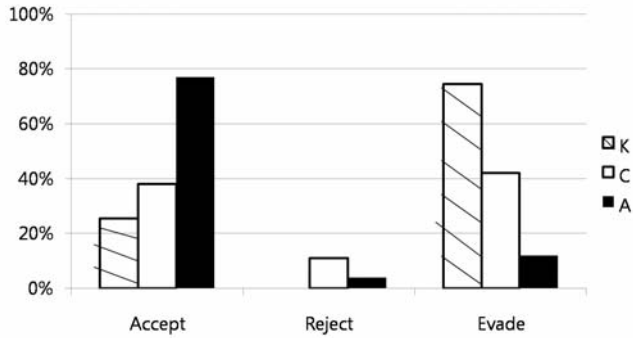


Fig 8. The macro-pattern of CRs to possession compliment

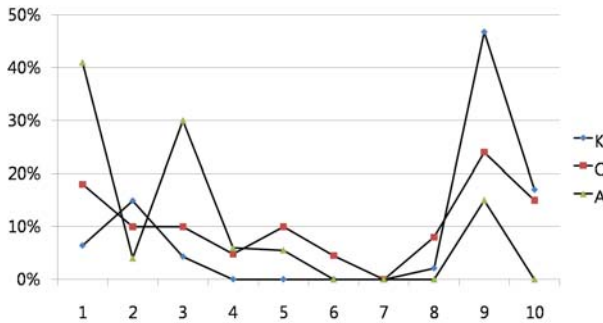


Fig.9 The micro-pattern of CRs to possession compliment

1: Appreciation Token	6: Question Accuracy
2: Agreeing Utterance	7: Challenge Sincerity
3: Downgrading	8: Shift Credit
4: Return Compliment	9: Informative Comment
5: Disagreeing Utterance	10: Request Reassurance

### 3. Macro and Micro level CRs

As is illustrated in table 5, the general tendency for the Chinese and Australian groups follows the order of Accept, Evade and Reject, in descending order of preference. In contrast, the corresponding order for the Korean group is Evade, Accept and Reject. However, the Korean and Chinese group still used less Accept, and more Evade and Reject than the Australian group. That is, Chinese and Koreans tend to be reluctant to accept compliments in a direct manner, which is in line with some of the previous findings (Paik 1998, Suh 2009). They claim that Koreans tend to evade/deflect the credit, presumably with the intention of trying to appear modest. A similar argument can be made for the Chinese group. In Chinese culture, the "deny response" is an indirect communication pattern of modest acceptance, and the "no" response with a "yes" demonstrates consideration and politeness toward others (Fong 1998, Ma 1996, Tang & Zhang 2008). In contrast, the Australian English culture prefers the use of the Accept response as a direct communication of acknowledgement (Tang & Zhang 2008: 339).

The high frequency of Informative comment observed in the Korean data seems to be a nice solution to the conflict between the speaker's support of the prior compliment and his/her sensitivity to self-praise avoidance (e.g., Pomeranz 1978, Holmes 1988; Herbert 1989). Besides, Request reassurance seems to be used more frequently in Chinese and Korean group than in the Australian group. In the Chinese and Korean groups, the complimentee may try to avoid self-praise by not accepting the compliment right away, only agreeing with the complimenter on the condition that the latter gives reassurance to the praise.

Table 5: Overall distribution of CR

Macro CRs	Micro CRs	K	C	A
Accept	Appreciation Token	15.9	22.5	39.4
	Agreeing Utterance	5.5	2.8	2.75
	Downgrading Utterance	3.2	4.7	15.1
	Return Compliment	12.7	18.8	21.1
Sub total		37.3	48.8	78.4
Reject	Disagreeing Utterance	12.3	10.8	0.4
	Question Accuracy	0	2.8	0.04
	Challenge Sincerity	0	1	1.4
	Sub total	12.3	14.6	5.9
Evade	Shift Credit	11.8	18.3	8.2
	Informative Comment	18.6	9.4	6.9
	Request Reassurance	10.9	8.9	0.04
	Sub total	41.3	36.6	15.6
Miscellaneous		9.5		

Table 6 below shows that the Australians consistently preferred the Accept strategy in all four situations. However, the Chinese and Korean group preferred most Evade strategy when responding to compliments on character and possession. As for the Character CR, in China and Korea, collectivism seems to play a significant role (Tang & Zhang 2009). In other words, helping others out (esp. helping a friend out with a child-sitting) is something one should do, something that they are willing to do as their duty and at the same time not to expect any reward or praise for it. As for the Possession CR, Chinese and Korean individuals desire to take the focus away from a material advantage they may have over the complimenter, thereby maintaining parity between the two.<sup>3)</sup>

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3). "parity" is important in conversations – this could be a fundamental assumption. But Asians and Australians have different conceptions of "parity" and therefore

In both the compliment CRs on Appearance and Ability, at the macro level, the most preferred strategy was Accept in all the three groups. A detailed analysis shows that this Return compliment is preferred next to the Appreciation token, suggesting that the recipient of the compliment tries to humble him/herself by diminishing the complimentary force of the original praise. Also such responses may signal that the recipient of the compliments feels indebted to the complimenter via the compliment, and is obliged to repay the complimenter in some way.

Table 6 Four settings and most preferred CR strategies

	Appearance			Character			Ability			Possession		
	K	C	A	K	C	A	K	C	A	K	C	A
Accept	O	O	O			O	O	O	O			O
Reject												
Evade				O	O					O	O	

K: Korean speakers C: Chinese speakers A: Australian speakers

O refers to a preferred strategy.

## IV. Conclusion

The research findings show that, overall, the Chinese and Korean groups are distinct from their Australian counterpart. Australian English participants are found to be more willing to accept credit offered by compliment. On the other hand, Chinese and Korean participants are more likely to evade or reject the credit. Such tendency appears to be accounted by the norm of modesty (Yang 1987, Chen 1993, Yu 2003, Suh 2009).

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use different CRs to establish/restore this sense of "parity" between the conversants.



Under this norm, the complimenter usually does not expect an agreement from the recipient of the compliment; however, this does not necessarily mean that the Chinese and Korean people do not think of themselves positively. Rather, their reluctance to accept compliment easily represents a sense of humility. When employing Evade or Reject strategy, complimentees often humble themselves by diminishing the complimentary force of the praise originally directed to them. It also explains why Korean and Chinese people often withhold their expressions of delight or gratitude, even when they feel delighted at receiving a compliment. Behaving modestly is important for the Korean and Chinese, because modesty is one of the most critical constituents of a positive self-image<sup>4)</sup> (cf. Yu 2003).

In contrast, the norms for the Australians, like Americans, appear to encourage the acceptance of compliments, which is evident in socialization advice found in etiquette books (Herbert 1990).<sup>5)</sup> By agreeing with the complimenter, the recipient of the compliment maintains the former's face. In doing so, it follows that the recipients also maintain their own face (according to this particular chain of cultural logic). Therefore, the Australian English speakers, when receiving compliments, frequently agree with the complimenter or at least avoid showing disagreement, even when they do disagree with the speaker (Leech 1983, Wolfson 1989; Chen 1993,

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4) The prevailing cultural norms in CRs of Korean and Chinese cultures strongly hint at modesty that aims at deflection, as this is a critical constituent of positive self-image on the part of both the complimenter and recipient. Thus, it can be argued that in these cultures, recipients make efforts to appear modest in their CRs, and this, in turn, is perceived as socially desirable because the complimenter too shares this set of beliefs with regards to an essential social norm.

5) Virtually all speakers of English, for instance, agree that when complimented, the correct response is thank you. This is also the response recommended in etiquette books: "*When you are complimented, the only response necessary is 'Thank you.' Don't disparage yourself. If someone admires your dress, don't say 'This old thing. I got it at a bargain basement sale.' A simple 'thank you' is sufficient*" (Johnson 1979: 43-44)

Yu 2003). For the Australians and Americans, acceptance and reciprocation of compliments and words of encouragement at face-value, rather than modesty that aims at deflection, constitute the prevailing cultural norm in determining CR strategies.

An indirect acceptance to compliments, as observed in the Chinese and Korean CR behavioral patterns, may show modesty and "self-praise avoidance," in line with the Chinese and Korean tradition of collectivism, feudal hierarchy and order. They can be characterized by a tendency to denigrate oneself as a way to show respect to others (cf. Tang & Zhang 2009). For the Koreans and Chinese, strategies such as Deflect are viewed as self-effacement and therefore virtuous. Indirectness, as an aspect of modesty, is highly valued in Korean and Chinese cultures (Kalton 1979, Sohn 1986). In many occasions, Koreans do not openly express their opinions or feelings but show modesty by being indirect or remaining silent (Paik 1998: 157). A similar observation can be made with regard to the Chinese on the basis of the findings in this study.

The dynamics of Chinese "facework" can be perceived of as involving "an interactional orientation on the part of the individual speaker toward establishing connectedness to, and seeking interpersonal harmony with, one's own community" (Ma 1994: 459). In other words, the kind of face a Chinese or a Korean deploys can be considered a public image that not only depends on but also is determined by the participation of others (Ma 1994, Yu 2003); If compared with Brown and Levinson's notion of face, Australian English speakers' face can be deemed an individualistic, self-oriented image whereas Chinese and Korean one seems to be communally- and interpersonally-oriented (Zhang 1995, Yu 1997, 2003). The difference between the two concepts should be viewed as one of degree rather than of kind.

This study gives support to the claim that speakers of a given culture

have mutually shared expectations about the definitions of appropriate behavior and its social meanings in different contexts (Yu 2003). As for CRs, the practice in Australian culture, which places special emphasis on agreement in spoken interactions, encourages the speaker to respond to the compliment with acceptance form (i.e., Accept). In contrast, the practice in Korean and Chinese society, which attach a high value to relative power and modesty in spoken interactions, encourages the speaker to respond to the compliment with non-acceptance forms (i.e., Evade or Reject).

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Abstract

## **A Contrastive Study of Compliment Responses of Korean, Chinese and English Speakers.**

Kyung-Hee Suh

In this study, the compliment response behavior of native Korean speakers and Mandarin Chinese speakers, who are basically regarded as having rules of speaking and social norms very different from those of Westerners, is compared with that of native Australian English speakers. The data were collected through the use of written discourse completion tasks(DCT), with four situational settings (appearance, character, ability, and possession). According to the findings, the Chinese and Korean groups demonstrate similar CR behavior, whereas the behavior of both these groups is markedly different from that shown by their Australian counterparts. Australian English participants are found to be more willing to accept credit offered by compliment. On the other hand, Chinese and Korean participants are more likely to evade or reject the credit. Such tendency appears to be accounted for by the norm of modesty. Compared with Brown and Levinson's notion of face, that of the Australian English speakers can be deemed an individualistic, self-oriented one. In contrast, the notion of face as reflected by the Chinese and Koreans seems to be communally- and interpersonally- oriented (Zhang 1995, Yu 1997, 2003). The difference between the two concepts should be viewed as one of degree rather than of kind.

**Key words:** Compliment Responses(Accept, Evade, Reject) Discourse

Completion Task, cross-cultural differences, social norms.  
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