

영어어문교육 제7권 1호 2001년 여름

The Use of Downgraders by Korean English Speakers and American English Native Speakers in Requestive E-mail

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Yang, Eun-Mi. (2001). The use of downgraders by Korean English speakers and American English native speakers in requestive e-mail. *English Language & Literature Teaching*, 7(1), 51-66.

This paper compares different uses of downgraders by Korean English speakers (KES) with those by American English native speakers (AENS) in their requestive e-mail. Three different situations in which social power and distance were controlled were set up to examine and compare the participants' politeness strategies in requestive e-mail. It was found that the KESS' use of downgraders appeared differently from the AENSs' use qualitatively and quantitatively across three situations. The AENSs used downgraders almost three times as more, resulting in a much more mitigated and polite effect in requests. The AENSs' requests were mostly modified by syntactic modifiers, such as aspect, tense, conditional, and consultative devices. On the other hand, the KESS' requests were modified mostly by politeness markers and conditionals in a limited number of requests.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to studies on foreign/second language learners' linguistic behavior, the output of the learners' data is often found deviated from target language norms (e.g., Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Moon, 1996; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Suh, 1998). The learners are likely to fail to convey their meaning or politeness value appropriately, when performing various types of speech acts, such as apologies (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983), requests (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Suh, 1998; Yeung,

1997), compliments (Jeon, 1996; Paik, 1998; Wolfson, 1989), and complaints (Moon, 1996; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993).

The KESs' underuse of downgraders was reported in Suh's (1998) and Moon's (1996) studies in the area of oral request and complaints respectively. In their studies, their Korean subjects used fairly small number of downgraders in discourse completion tasks, even though they were studying in an ESL environment. Faerch and Kasper (1989) and House (1989) reported learners' over-reliance on a lexical downgrader, 'please'.

Many researchers including Brown and Levinson (1978) claim that the act of request intrinsically threatens the face needs of the hearer and thus requires strategic redress. For cross-cultural communication, when the non-native English users show some deviated or inappropriate expressions or level of politeness, there could be misunderstanding or communication breakdowns. Helping learners acquire or be aware of the target language norms in expressing their ideas seems to be one of the responsibilities of the EFL/ESL teachers and textbook writers.

In this context, the researcher of the present study examined internal modifications of the request head act that Korean English speakers and English native speakers make in their requestive e-mail.

The research questions that guided this study are:

- (1) What are the differences between KESs and AENSs in the use of internal modifications to express politeness in their requestive e-mail?
- (2) Does the writer's proficiency level play a role in his/her employment of internal modifiers?
- (3) Is there any differences in the use of internal modifiers by the KESs and the AENSs when social constraints vary?

II. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

One group of the participants in this study consisted of 113 Korean English speakers (KES) and the other group of participants consisted of 70 American English native speakers (AENS). Participants were controlled for age and education level to attain a high level of homogeneity. The KES group consisted of 37 graduate and 76 undergraduate students from 17 different universities throughout Korea. The

AENS group consisted of 70 students or professionals from three different areas in the U.S.A. Among the 113 Korean participants, 38 were classified into advanced level, 49 intermediate, and 26 beginning according to their English proficiency.

2. Instruments and Procedures

Data were gathered through a data elicitation device, which was e-mail writing tasks covering three requestive situations provided by the researcher. There was no time limit for the participants to complete the e-mail messages. The participants could connect to the web page at any time to complete the messages.

Three request situations were provided in a questionnaire on a web page, and the participants were asked to write three e-mail messages responding to the three requesting situations provided. The situations were provided in Korean for KESs to avoid being affected by the English written in the situations column by the researcher. The scenarios of the three situations were devised to reflect real-life situations which can occur for those who are college or above college level in educational background. They were described as follows.

Situation 1

You are a student and are looking for a job. You want to apply for a company (Galaxy Trading Co), so you need a recommendation letter. You decided to e-mail one of your professors, Henry Robert, to ask him for a recommendation letter. You attended a course (Macroeconomics E403) taught by him last semester. Please write an e-mail message requesting the letter.

Situation 2

You are working at a company. You have a close friend, Susan Green, who is a graduate student in Korea. You want to ask Susan to get a video tape which was produced in Korea for reference for your company. The title of the tape is "A Beautiful Earth." It is not available in the market in your country yet. Please write an e-mail message asking for a favor.

Situation 3

You ordered a book titled 'On Communication' yesterday from Booktopia through the internet. But today you found the book at a local library, so you want to cancel your order. Please write an e-mail message canceling the order.

Table 1 summarizes the relationship between three situation types and situational factors.

TABLE 1
Situation Types and Situational Factors

Situations	Dominance (Social Power)	Social Distance (Familiarity)
S1. Recommendation Letter	S<R	-SD
S2. Video tape	S=R	-SD
S3. Order cancellation	S=R	+SD
S: sender of e-mail	SD: social distance	R: receiver of e-mail

'S<R' means that the hearer/receiver has more social power over the speaker/sender, and 'S=R' means that the interlocutors are equal in social power. Social distance with a plus symbol (+SD) means that the interlocutors do know each other, and with a minus symbol (-SD) means they do not know each other. Situations 1 and 2 have -SD values in social distance with each of a different dominance variable (Situation 1: S<R, Situation 2: S=R), while Situation 3 which is a business-oriented situation has a +SD value in social distance and a S=R dominance relation.

3. Data Analysis

The main politeness devices were investigated through examining internal modifications of the request head acts. Internal modifications are downgraders or upgraders which modify the request inside the head act. Downgraders are used to mitigate the impositive force of request, while upgraders are used to increase the impact of the request. They are comprised of syntactic and lexical/phrasal downgraders. Though the ways of expressing politeness are different in different cultures, using mitigating devices are known as universal to express politeness (House & Kasper, 1981).

The types of downgraders which were used in the present study are as follows¹⁾:

- (1) Aspect: The durative aspect markers to tone down the perlocutionary effect an utterance is likely to have on the hearer. (e.g., *I'm wondering if you would send*

1) The categories and definitions were mostly taken from Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) CCSARP coding manual.

me the tape.)

Tense: Past tense forms to downgrade the perlocutionary effect an utterance is likely to have on the hearer. They are coded as downgrading only if they keep the same meaning when present tense forms are used instead of past tense ones. (e.g., *I was wondering if you could write a recommendation letter.*)

- (2) Conditional: Verb forms that express hypothetical meaning using modal verbs such as *would*, *should*, or *could*. It is used by a speaker to modulate the impact his or her request is likely to have on the hearer. (e.g., *I would appreciate your recommendation letter.*)
- (3) Conditional clause: Clauses that express hypothesis or condition. They are used to lower the assertive force of the speakers' request. (e.g., *I would be honored if you would do that.*)
- (4) Interrogative/Consultative device: Optional devices by means of which X seeks to involve Y and bids for Y's cooperation; frequently these devices are ritualized formulas. (e.g., *Are you willing to write a recommendation letter for me?*)
- (5) Politeness marker: Optional elements added to a request to show deference to the interlocutor and to bid for cooperative behavior. (e.g., *Please send me the tape.*)
- (6) Understater: Adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker under-represents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition. (e.g., *Is there a little room for me in the car?*)
- (7) Downtoner: Sentential or propositional modifiers which are used by a speaker in order to modulate the impact his or her request is likely to have on the hearer. (e.g., *I was wondering if you could possibly write a letter of recommendation for me.*)
- (8) Subjectivizer: Elements in which the speaker explicitly expresses his or her subjective opinion vis-à-vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of his/her request. (e.g., *I hope that it would be possible to get a letter of recommendation from you.*)
- (9) Cajoler: Conventionalized speech items whose semantic content is of little transparent relevance to their discourse meaning. (e.g., *You know, I'd really like you to present your paper next week.*)
- (10) Appealer: Elements used by a speaker whenever he or she wishes to appeal to his or her hearer's benevolent understanding. (e.g., *Send me the tape, will you?/okay?*)

- (11) Intensifying modifier: Adverbials or adjectives used to intensify the speaker's subject opinion. (e.g., *I would be greatly appreciated if you could write a recommendation letter for me.*)

The number and types of downgraders examined by each language group were presented and analyzed for the three given situations.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Situation 1

The social power and social distance in Situation 1 (recommendation letter situation) were $S < R$ and $-SD$. In a situation where the social power of the receiver (a professor) is greater than the sender (a student), the sender usually tries to show deference and politeness as much as possible. In the Korean language, deference is obligatorily expressed in a formal level of speech with polite speech style including honorific and humble forms.

The average number of downgraders by a KES was 1.32 in Situation 1; the AENS's average was 3.23. This shows that almost 2.5 times the number of downgraders appeared in AENS's data compared to KES's. Zero-marking (no use of downgraders) was found in only one AENS request, while it was found in 26 of 110 KES requests (24%).

One of the most preferred downgraders of AENSs, the 'tense and aspect', was underused by KESs. Only four instances were found in total 145 downgraders. On the other hand, KESs' second most favored downgrader, 'politeness marker' (33 out of 145 instances) was hardly used by AENS (3 out of 226 instances). The politeness marker, *please*, is a clear and easily acquired politeness device because it requires just a lexical addition to a request sentence. On the other hand, aspect and tense are syntactic mitigators.

Past tense and progressive aspect were taken just as grammatical elements to express tense and aspect not as politeness devices by KESs. The dual function of these devices are not easy for KESs to acquire without explicit explanation with many examples in an input-poor EFL context.

Frequency and distribution of downgraders used by KESs and AENSs in Situation 1 are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Downgraders in Situation 1

Types of Downgraders	KES (n=110***)		AENS (n=70)	
	Total	Average	Total	Average
1. Aspect/Tense*	4 (3%)	0.04	49 (22%)	0.70**
2. Conditional	37 (26%)	0.34**	58 (26%)	0.83**
3. Conditional clause	21 (14%)	0.19	18 (8%)	0.26
4. Interrogative/ consultative device	3 (2%)	0.03	31 (14%)	0.44
5. Politeness marker	33 (23%)	0.30**	3 (1%)	0.04
6. Understater	2 (1%)	0.02	1 (0%)	0.01
7. Downtoner	0 (0%)	0	9 (4%)	0.13
8. Subjectivizer	32 (22%)	0.29	40 (18%)	0.57**
9. Cajoler	0 (0%)	0	0 (0%)	0
10. Appealer	0 (0%)	0	0 (0%)	0
11. Intensifying modifier	13 (9%)	0.12	17 (8%)	0.24
Total	145 (100%)	1.32	226 (100%)	3.23
T-test result	t-value= -9.71, p<.05			

*The use of aspect and tense was calculated separately.

**The numbers in bold indicate the most favored downgraders of each group.

***110 out of 113 KES participants wrote e-mail for situation 1.

The common downgraders used by KESs and AENSs are illustrated in the following sentences.

I would appreciate it if you would do so. (KES)

Would you please send me your recommendation? (KES)

Please you write a letter of recommendation for me. (KES)

I will be very grateful if you would. (KES)

If you recommend me, I will very appreciate. (KES)

I was wondering if you are comfortable enough to write me a recommendation.
(AENS)

I was hoping you could provide me with a recommendation letter. (AENS)
I wanted to know if you would be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me. (AENS)
I am hoping that you could write the letter for me. (AENS)
Would it be possible for you to write a letter of recommendation on my behalf? (AENS)

When KESS' use of downgraders by proficiency level was examined, it was found that speakers in the advanced level group used a greater number of downgraders than in the beginning or intermediate level groups. The average number of downgraders in each of the three proficiency level groups were 1.12, 0.96, and 1.89 respectively, and the numbers between the three groups proved significantly different ($p < .05$). The most frequently used downgrader by the advanced group was 'conditional' like in AENS, while 'politeness marker' was the most favored downgrader by the beginning and intermediate groups. Though aspect and tense were still underused even by the advanced group compared with AENSs, the clear increase in the use of 'conditional' at the cost of 'politeness marker' by the advanced group partly reflects the acquisition order of downgraders by KESS:

politeness marker --> conditional --> tense/aspect

Most of the advanced learners preferred double marking using 'conditional' with 'subjectivizer' (10 instances among 36 advanced KESSs) like AENS (32 instances among 70 AENSs), while beginning and intermediate groups hardly used the double marking (1 instance only).

In sum, in Situation 1, "*I was wondering if...*" was the most favored request type by AENSs, while "*Would/Could you?*" was most favored by KESSs. The number of politeness devices in the sentence "*Would/Could you...*" were usually limited to politeness device or conditional, but the sentence "*I was wondering if...*" usually had 3 devices (tense/aspect, subjectivizer, and consultative device) resulting in a more mitigating effect in AENS's requests than KESS's request.

2. Situation 2

The interlocutors in this situation (video tape situation) are close friends. The social power and social distance relationship between the sender and the receiver

in Situation 2 have a value of S=R and -SD. Between the interlocutors with these social factors (S=R, -SD), people use a plain speech style of the informal level of speech without honorific and humble forms in the Korean language.

Both the AENSs' and the KESs' use of downgraders decreased in Situation 2 (the average was 2.96 and 0.94), compared with Situation 1 (the average number was 3.23 and 1.32). Social power between the interlocutors seemed to be one factor in the decreased use of downgraders. However, AENSs still employed far more downgraders than KESs; 3.15 times more downgraders were used by AENSs. Zero-marking was employed by 30% of 113 KESs and just 4% of 70 AENSs. Frequency and distribution of downgraders used by KESs and AENSs in Situation 2 are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Downgraders in Situation 2

Types of Downgraders	KES (n=113)		AENS (n=70)	
	Total	Average	Total	Average
1. Aspect/Tense*	1 (1%)	0.01	51 (23%)	0.73**
2. Conditional	21 (20%)	0.19**	56 (27%)	0.80**
3. Conditional clause	11 (10%)	0.10	11 (5%)	0.16
4. Interrogative/ consultative device	4 (4%)	0.04	37 (18%)	0.53**
5. Politeness marker	37 (35%)	0.33**	7 (3%)	0.10
6. Understater	0 (0%)	0	1 (0.5%)	0.01
7. Downtoner	4 (4%)	0.04	5 (2%)	0.07
8. Subjectivizer	18 (17%)	0.16	35 (17%)	0.50**
9. Cajoler	1 (1%)	0.01	0 (0%)	0
10. Appealer	4 (4%)	0.03	0 (0%)	0
11. Intensifying modifier	5 (5%)	0.04	4 (2%)	0.06
Total	106 (100%)	0.94	207 (100%)	2.96
T-test result	t-value= -9.46, p<.05			

*The use of aspect and tense was calculated separately.

**The numbers in bold indicate the most favored downgraders of each group.

"I was wondering if you...", *"Do you think you could..."*, and *"Could/Would you..."* were the most favored requests by AENSs, while *"Please..."*, *"Could/Would you..."*, and *"I hope that..."* were the most favored requests by KESs. Some examples of AENSs' favorite request types are:

I was wondering if you could look for it and mail it to me.

Could you see if you can find a copy?

Could you possibly send a copy of it for me?

If you would be able to look for this video for me, I would really appreciate it.

Do you think you could pick up a copy and mail it to me over here?

The KESs' preference of the politeness marker conforms to the previous findings by Faerch and Kasper (1989). The German and English learners in their study also preferred the politeness marker to other syntactic/lexical/phrasal downgraders. *Please* is easy for learners to acquire and use, as it is a clear, explicit, and unambiguous mitigating device.

The aspect and tense device which was the second most favored downgrader of AENSs was hardly used by KESs. Like aspect and tense device, the interrogative/consultative device, one of the favorite downgraders of AENSs, was also quite underused.

The three proficiency groups did not show a significant difference in the average number of downgraders. The averages were 1.00, 0.84, and 1.03 for the beginning, intermediate, and advanced groups.

3. Situation 3

Situation 3 (book order cancellation situation) is very different from the Situations 1 and 2 as it is a transactional situation where the interlocutors do not need to have any personal relationship. The social power relationship has a value of $S=R$, and the social distance has a +SD value because the sender and the receiver of this e-mail do not know each other personally. Among the interlocutors with these social characteristics, people use a polite speech style of the formal level of speech with honorific and humble forms in Korean. The use of downgraders also showed a very different pattern from the previous two situations as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Downgraders in Situation 3

Types of Downgraders	KES (n=113)		AENS (n=70)	
	Total	Average	Total	Average
1. Aspect/Tense*	2 (4%)	0.02	6 (8%)	0.09
2. Conditional	23 (43%)	0.21**	39 (51%)	0.56**
3. Conditional clause	0 (0%)	0	4 (5%)	0.06
4. Interrogative/ consultative device	3 (6%)	0.03	0 (0%)	0
5. Politeness marker	8 (15%)	0.07	15 (19%)	0.21**
6. Understater	0 (0%)	0	0 (0%)	0
7. Downtoner	0 (0%)	0	6 (8%)	0.09
8. Subjectivizer	16 (30%)	0.14**	5 (6%)	0.07
9. Cajoler	0 (0%)	0	0 (0%)	0
10. Appealer	0 (0%)	0	0 (0%)	0
11. Intensifying modifier	2 (4%)	0.02	2 (3%)	0.03
Total	54 (100%)	0.49	77 (100%)	1.10
T-test result	t-value= -5.32, p<.05			

*The use of aspect and tense was calculated separately.

**The numbers in bold indicate the most favored downgraders of each group.

The number of downgraders by KESs decreased in Situation 3 (average 0.49) from Situation 1 (average 1.32) and Situation 2 (average 0.94) as in the case with AENSs. However, the decrease in the KES data was not as sharp as in the AENS data. The average of the AENSs in Situation 3 was 1.1. Zero-marking was employed by 66 (59%) of 111 KESs and just 13 (19%) of 70 AENSs.

The kinds of request used by KESs in Situation 3 are “*I’d like to...*” (17 instances), using conditional; “*I’m sorry / regret / am afraid...*” (14 instances), using the subjectivizer; “*Could you...?*” (5 instances), using the conditional; and “*Please...*” (5 instances), using the politeness device. It is interesting that the request type of “*I’m sorry/regret/am afraid...*” was non-existent in AENSs’ e-mail. It seems that Koreans felt more imposition in canceling the order than Americans, so they tried to show their acknowledgment of the imposition to the requestee using this

mitigating device. It can be interpreted that because the consumer-first tradition has not been fully established yet in the Korean culture, Koreans do not feel comfortable enough in withdrawing their order. But this does not seem to be the case in the U.S.

The most frequently appeared request types of AENSs were “*I would like to...*” (31 instances) and “*Please...*” (11 instances). There were four instances of “*I would appreciate...*”. The use of downgraders by KESs and AENSs is illustrated in the following examples.

I would like to cancel that order. (KES)

I'm really sorry to cancel the book. (KES)

I regret that I should cancel the order due to personal circumstance. (KES)

Could you cancel the order? (KES)

Please cancel my order. (KES)

I would like to cancel the order that I placed yesterday. (AENS)

Please cancel my order. (AENS)

I would appreciate if you could cancel my order. (AENS)

The frequency trend of the proficiency levels in Situation 3 was similar to the trends of Situations 1 and 2. The advanced group's average of downgraders was 0.68, preceded by the beginning (0.46) and intermediate (0.34) groups.

It was interesting that intermediate level speakers' use of downgraders showed some regression in quantity. It was speculated that since the intermediate speakers used more indirect head act strategies than the beginning level speakers, they did not seem to need to use downgraders to decrease the imposition of request act. So, they seem to consider the indirectness of head act the most important factor to make a request polite.

4. Summary and Implications

The results indicate that KESs' use of downgraders is more limited than AENSs in expressing politeness effectively in the act of request. One reason for this limitation can be explained in the great differences between the two language systems in realizing politeness. Because the Korean language has many different levels and styles in showing politeness and deference with particles, nouns and

verbs, beginner level KESs think that the English language does not seem to have any system to express politeness. While learners, with their proficiency level increasing, become more aware that they have to use some devices, such as politeness markers and conditionals to express politeness in English, implicit and ambiguous devices, such as aspect and tense are the last ones to be used. The KESs' over-reliance on a lexical downgrader, 'please', in this study corroborates the findings by Faerch and Kasper (1989) and House (1989). This politeness marker seems to be learned in the early stages of L2 learning and overused invariably as Scarcella (1979) pointed out.

The distribution and frequency of downgraders by the two language groups in the three situations are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5
Average Numbers of Downgraders in Three Situations

Types of downgraders	S1		S2		S3		Total	
	KES	AENS	KES	AENS	KES	AENS	KES	AENS
1.Aspect/Tense*	0.04	0.70**	0.01	0.73**	0.02	0.09	0.02	0.51**
2.Conditional	0.34**	0.83**	0.19**	0.80**	0.21**	0.56**	0.25**	0.73**
3.Conditional clause	0.19	0.26	0.10	0.16	0	0.06	0.10	0.16
4.Interrogative/ Consultative device	0.03	0.44	0.04	0.53**	0.03	0	0.03	0.33
5.Politeness marker	0.30**	0.04	0.33**	0.10	0.07	0.21**	0.23**	0.12
6.Understater	0.02	0.01	0	0.01	0	0	0.01	0.01
7.Downtoner	0	0.13	0.04	0.07	0	0.09	0.01	0.10
8.Subjectivizer	0.29	0.57**	0.16	0.50	0.14**	0.07	0.20**	0.38
9.Cajoler	0	0	0.01	0	0	0	0	0
10.Appealer	0	0	0.03	0	0	0	0	0
11.Intensifying modifier	0.12	0.24	0.04	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.11
Total	1.32	3.23	0.94	2.96	0.49	1.10	0.92	2.43
T-test result	t-value=-9.71 p<.05		t-value=-9.46 p<.05		t-value=-5.32 p<.05		t-value=-8.7 p<.05	

*The use of aspect and tense was calculated separately.

**The numbers in bold indicate the most favored downgraders of each group.

An educational implication can be drawn from the result of KESs' far less use of downgraders. First, downgraders which are used by native speakers need to be included and emphasized in language teaching for the learners' successful communication with other English speakers. As Faerch and Kasper maintain, "because language users expect internal modifiers subconsciously, even though they do not attend to the presence of these devices consciously, they are immediately aware of the absence of the internal modifiers in a speech act" (Faerch and Kasper, 1989, p. 243). Therefore, the learners' lack of these politeness devices can lead them to the losing end in interactions with English speakers. It is necessary for the language educators to include the pragmatic area, especially the politeness rules, in the curriculum to enhance learners' pragmatic competence.

Second, it is advisable to include e-mail writing in the English classroom. One reason for suggesting the inclusion of e-mail writing in the English classroom is the greatly increasing possibility of using this skill outside the classroom. Another reason for the inclusion of e-mail in the classroom is related to the characteristics of its written communication mode. It requires careful planning and revising before sending the mail. The feature of requiring careful selection of requesting strategies or words can be a very effective means to develop learners' sensitivity and awareness on various language aspects, such as linguistic, sociocultural, pragmatic, and rhetorical aspects.

IV. CONCLUSION

The result of this study revealed the types of downgraders the KESs employ when writing requestive e-mail. English education in Korea, especially the appropriate ways of realizing politeness, leaves much room for improvement for the Koreans' successful interactions with other English speakers. It can be concluded that internal modifications of the request head act should be emphasized in English education for a realistic use of language, the aim of which is successful communication. The absence of these devices can give rise to the communication breakdown or misunderstanding. Teaching materials, including textbooks, also need to contain authentic use of these politeness devices.

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Revised version received in June, 2001