

## Thanking and Apologizing Behaviour in Requestive Email of Koreans and Americans

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**Yang, Eun-Mi. (2002). Thanking and Apologizing Behavior in Requestive Email of Koreans and Americans. *English Language & Literature Teaching*, 8(1), 125-141.**

This paper examines the pragmatic features of the thanking and apologizing moves which appear in requestive email of Korean speakers of English as a foreign language and American English native speakers. It is important for second language learners to behave appropriately in a target language when communicating with other English speakers who have different cultural backgrounds. The result of this study revealed the differences in the use of thanking and apologizing moves in the requestive email between Koreans and Americans. Koreans used fewer moves of thanking and more moves of apologizing than Americans in three different situations. Koreans' underuse of thanking which is a routine and formulaic expression for Americans could be a marked phenomenon to a recipient of the email in English bringing about a minus effect.

### I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important issues for the researchers and teachers involved in language education is how to enhance the understanding on intercultural<sup>1)</sup> communication which is mostly conducted in English. Intercultural communication is communication between people of different cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds. Researchers in interlanguage pragmatics have been interested in the way how language learners' interlanguage manifests pragmatically salient or universal forms

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1) The terms 'intercultural' and 'cross-cultural' are used synonymously in this paper.

compared to the native norms. They have contributed much to our understanding of different behaviors between language learners with different language backgrounds in performing speech acts, such as requesting, apologizing, complaining, advising, complimenting, etc.

The aim of this paper is to provide cross-cultural pragmatics insights into language educators by adding analytical findings of some email discourse features, thanking and apologizing behaviour, of two different language groups in the field of intercultural communication. Email discourse genre was taken for identifying some pragmatic aspects of students' interlanguage not only because it is one of the most frequent discourse forms in daily life, but also because it can make it easy to recognize the conventional features of language used by speakers with different cultural backgrounds.

The research question of this study is if there is any difference in the use of thanking and apologizing moves in requestive email written by Korean English Speakers (KES) and American Native English Speakers (ANES) in English. KESs are all non-native English speakers, so their English is 'interlanguage'<sup>2)</sup> as they put it.

The first part of this paper examines previous work done related to cross-cultural communication. The second part includes findings from the analysis of requestive email written by two different cultural groups.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Studies on Intercultural Communication

Much research has focused on cross-cultural communication in the area of pragmatics in applied linguistics recently. Ortuño (1991) introduces Kluckhohn's model to be applied to the teaching of cultural components in foreign language courses. Kluckhohn, an anthropologist, defined five basic human values based on the data collected in the American southwest. The following excerpt of Ortuño from Kluckhohn model about the cultural differences in terms of time can be applied to

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2) Interlanguage is an intermediary form of a language: a form of language typically produced by learners of a second language or foreign language, which combines elements of two or more languages.

English education in many ways.

Americans and Canadians sometimes say that "time is money." This expression suggests that they treat time as a precious commodity not to be wasted. Except for occasional short breaks, many North Americans consider it dishonest not to be working during hours for which they will be paid. In comparison, Spaniards and Latin Americans think of a job as an integral part of life, not just something to occupy the hours between eight and five o'clock. Occasionally, they may not arrive at work on time, and they may spend a lot of time engaged in what North Americans would call "idle conversation" (Ortuño, p. 455)

When the teachers better understand the students' own culture along with the target language culture, they can gain a more relativistic perspective on the students' discourse features in a target language. As Ellis (1996) maintains, teachers can take a role of a mediator by trying to fit contradicting norms together and help learners incorporate the new information into the old sets of beliefs and knowledge.

Pauwels (1994) takes up the issue of applying linguistic insights into intercultural communication to training programs for professionals working in culturally diverse contexts. She argues that since the areas of discourse, interactional machinery and speech acts can have a major impact on the smoothness of communication in cross-cultural settings, those operating in cross-cultural contexts have to acquire a good understanding of the potential problems of communication relating to these areas (p. 207).

It is even more difficult to adjust in a cross-cultural situation when the communication occurs in a business context. The level of familiarity and power roles are among the most important but difficult areas writers need to observe in their business writing. Yli-Jokipi (1996) examined business letters and telefax messages in two languages and three cultures of Finnish, British, and American. Yli-Jokipi argued that to compare the discourse features in different cultures in the light of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, one should not restrict the attention to broad-scale strategies. For example, Finnish writers tended to choose opaque choices to signal politeness, while English writers chose various lexical/syntactical devices. Finnish writers' non-intruding, detached behavior was compared to the English writers' behavior which values 'participation' or

'involvement'. It was also suggested that Finnish writers' behavior corresponded to the attributes of non Anglo-American cultures.

Yeung (1997) conducted a study on written data comparing the formulation of requests in the English and Chinese business correspondence of Hong Kong. 360 English and 181 Chinese letters and memoranda in business situations were collected over a two-year period to examine the politeness strategies in making requests. The results showed that of the three factors, power, social distance, and ranking of imposition in Levinson's politeness theory, only the imposition factor had a statistically significant impact in the English data. On the other hand, none of the factors showed any statistically significant effects in the Chinese data, and the author concluded that the Chinese seemed to have a somewhat different system for the choice of politeness strategies which is not accurately reflected in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.

Many researchers (e.g., Bloom, 1981; Hinds, 1983; Hinkel, 1994; Matalene, 1985; Tsujimura, 1987; Yum, 1987) argue that vagueness and ambiguity are viewed negatively but explicit argumentation is considered more effective in Anglo-American rhetorical frameworks, which does not seem to be the case in Korean, Japanese, and Chinese students' writing.

## 2. Studies on Interlanguage pragmatics

White (1993) explored the problem that a grammatically well-formed utterance may be functionally confusing or contextually inappropriate through unwitting violation of speech act rules in relation to the use of 'please' by Japanese users of English. He argues that "all the linguistic knowledge must be contextualized if it is to have any significance, and contextualization involves grasping the conditions under which such items are used to construct, control, and direct interaction" (p. 201). In addition to his question of whose rules are to apply when English is being used for international communication, he maintains that the pragmatics of intercultural communication in English involve considerations which go well beyond simple issues of grammaticality or lexical choice.

Moon (1996) and Suh (1998) described interlanguage features of Korean ESL learners in the communicative act of complaining and requesting respectively. It was speculated that the deviations in the learners' performances were mainly due to the interference of the learners' first language/culture and grammar-oriented English education in Korea. In Moon's study, the difference of thanking and

apologizing behavior was found between Korean ESL learners and English native speakers in the complaining act.

The role of transfer in shaping interlanguage of second language learners at a pragmatic level was also highlighted in Joen's (1996) study. In her study, Korean English speakers showed considerable differences in syntactic patterns, topics, and compliment responses in the speech act of complimenting and used their native pragmatic knowledge in their realization of compliments in English.

Takahashi (1992) conducted a study to explore transferability of five indirect request strategies of Japanese learners of English at the pragmatic level. Thirty-seven female Japanese learners of English were asked to undertake an acceptability judgment task for five indirect request strategies of Japanese and English in four different situations. The result of the study indicated that contextual factors played a major role in determining transferabilities at the pragmatic level. Proficiency effects on the transferability were also identified. That is, high ESL learners consistently provided "non-transferable" assessments for some strategy and "transferable" assessments for some other strategies, while low ESL learners did not attain such consistency.

Chang and Hsu (1998) and Yang (2001a, 2001b) examined requestive email written in English by Chinese English speakers and Korean English speakers respectively. They found that Chinese and Korean English speakers structure their request messages in a more indirect sequence than the English native speakers because they express politeness mainly through information sequencing. In these studies, the authors argued that it is important for learners to study requests within the overall discourse sequence in which they occur because the overall structure of request messages as well as a single phrase is an important variant which determines the directness and politeness level of a speech act.

### III. METHOD

#### 1. Data

To see the pragmatic differences of using thanking and apologizing moves between NNSs and NSs of English in realizing a speech act, the present researcher used the same data which she had used in Yang's studies (2001a, 2001b). In those studies, 113 Korean English speakers (KES) and 70 American English native

speakers (AENS) wrote requestive email according to three different situations. The KES group consisted of 37 graduate and 76 undergraduate students from 17 different universities throughout Korea. The AENS group consisted of 45 undergraduate students, 6 graduate students and 19 professionals from the three university areas of the U.S.A.

For KES data, two English teachers including the present researcher scored the email writings by their linguistic accuracy and appropriateness on a 10-point scale, and classified them into three levels (advanced: 8~10 points, intermediate: 4~7 points, and beginning: 1~3 points). Among the 113 Korean participants, 38 were classified into advanced level, 49 intermediate, and 26 beginning.

## 2. Instruments

Scenarios of three different requesting situations were devised which can occur for those who are college or above college levels in educational backgrounds (see Appendix). In Situation 1, a student is asking for a recommendation letter for applying a job from his/her professor. In Situation 2, a friend is asking for a video tape from his/her friend in the U.S.A. for reference for the company. In Situation 3, a buyer asks for a cancellation of a book ordered from a bookseller.

The first two Situations are closer to interactional messages (i.e., messages between two persons), which are controlled in the area of interlocutors' social power. The first one is between a student and a professor and it has S<R<sup>3)</sup> value in social power and -SD<sup>4)</sup> value in social distance, and the second one is between close friends so it has an S=R value in social power and -SD value in social distance. Situation 3 can be described as being more transactional (i.e., a message between a person and a company) than the other two situations, which has a S=R dominance relation and +SD value in social distance.

## 3. Data Analysis

The ways of expressing politeness are different in different cultures, but using mitigating devices are known as universal to express politeness (House & Kasper,

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3) 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.

4) -SD means there is no social distance and +SD means there is some social distance between the interlocutors.

1981). In the speech act of request, thanking and apologizing belong to external modifiers or supportive moves, which modify the request outside the head act. Supportive moves include the grounder, the preparator, the disarmer, the imposition minimizer, the promise of reward, the threat, thanking, or apologizing. In this study, thanking and apologizing among the supportive moves were examined by group and situation.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the analysis of the use of supportive moves of thanking and apologizing by situation in the KES and AENS groups, the findings about the supportive moves can be summarized in the following sections.

##### 1. Situation 1

In Situation 1, the requester is a student who is asking for a recommendation letter from a professor. In this highly impositive situation, it was assumed to be important to express politeness acknowledging the imposition of the requestive act to achieve a positive reaction from the requestee.

**TABLE 1**  
**Thanking and Apologizing by Cultural Group and Proficiency Level in Situation 1**

Supportive moves	KES				AENS (n=70)
	Beginning (n=26)	Intermediate (n=46)	Advanced (n=38)	TOTAL (n=110)	
Thanking**	0.27(7)*	0.41(19)	0.53(20)	0.42(46)	0.76(53)
Apologizing**	0.04(1)	0.07(3)	0.05(2)	0.05(6)	0(0)
Total	0.31(8)	0.48(22)	0.58(22)	0.47(52)	0.76(53)

\*<average number used by a person (total occurrence)>

(Read as: The average numbers of thanking used by a beginning KES were 0.27. Seven moves of thanking were found in beginning KESs, and 19 moves appeared in intermediate KESs...)

\*\*These moves appeared more than once in some email.

As shown in Table 1, KESs used a smaller number of supportive moves in overall quantity than AENSs did. While 46 (42%) of 110 KESs expressed gratitude or appreciation explicitly, 53 (76%) out of the 70 AENSs did this. The way of thanking was also different; while KESs just wrote "*Thank you*", AENSs expressed gratitude more specifically writing "*Thank you for your time/consideration...*", "*Thank you for your help...*", etc.

"*Thank you*" in email messages gave a feeling of just closing the requestive act, while "*Thank you for your time/ consideration/ effort/ help...*" transmitted a feeling of more elaborated gratitude with a closing effect. As Moon (1996, p.65) argued, "*Thank you*" is formulaic and even automatic to English native speakers in this kind of situation. The effect of politeness by acknowledging imposition writing the expression of thanking is strengthened when this meaning was also expressed in head acts together with a supportive move of thanking. "*I appreciate...*" was used by 18 (26%) of 70 AENSs in head acts, and among them 14 were strengthened by the supportive moves of thanking. "*I appreciate...*" was employed by 22 (20%) of 110 KESs in head acts, and among them eleven were strengthened by the supportive moves of thanking. The following example illustrates the use of this supportive move with "*I appreciate...*" phrase in the head act.

*Subject: Recommendation Letter*

*Content: Dear Dr. Robert*

*I hope your semester is going well and you are having as much fun with this semester's class as you did with mine last semester. I am currently continuing my business education and am looking to make use of my studies in th field. I am applying for a position at Galaxy Trading Co. And **would greatly appreciate it if you would write** a recommendation letter for me. If this is not convenient for you or your time is too limited, I will understand. Otherwise, **I thank you kindly for your time and your letter.***

*Sincerely,*

*(AENS #15, f)*

In case of apologizing, 5% of the KES data showed this move, while it was not found at all in the AENS data. The examples are "*Please forgive me for writing to you suddenly*", "*First, I must say sorry*", "*I'm sorry for bothering you*", etc. Apologizing is another negative politeness strategy according to Brown and Levinson (1987). They argue that "by apologizing for doing an FTA, the speaker

can indicate his reluctance to impinge on H's negative face and thereby partially redress that impingement (p.187)." It may reflect the fact that while in the Korean culture apology is a commonly used politeness strategy when making requests, in the American culture it is a rarely used one.

As shown in Table 2, though KESs used more supportive moves of thanking as their proficiency improved, the percentage of this move by even advanced level speakers did not come close to the percentage of AENSs, resulting in a less polite effect in their email messages.

## 2. Situation 2

The interlocutors are close friends in Situation 2, and a requester asks a requestee to buy and send him/her a video tape which is not available in his/her country. This is a relatively high imposition situation between interlocutors with similar social power.

**TABLE 2**  
**KESs' Supportive Moves of Thanking and Apologizing by Proficiency Level in Situation 2**

Supportive moves	KES			TOTAL (n=113)	AENS (n=70)
	Beginning (n=26)	Intermediate (n=49)	Advanced (n=38)		
Thanking**	0.19(5)*	0.29(14)	0.39(15)	0.30(34)	0.74(52)
Apologizing**	0.08(2)	0.08(4)	0.11(4)	0.09(10)	0.01(1)
Total	0.27(7)	0.37(18)	0.50(19)	0.39(44)	0.75(53)

\*<average number used by a person (total occurrence)>

(Read as; The average numbers of thanking used by a beginning KES were 0.19. Five moves of thanking were found in beginning KESs, and 14 moves appeared in intermediate KESs...)

\*\*These moves appeared more than once in some email.

In this situation, the number of thanking moves decreased from Situation 1. Thanking is a negative politeness strategy which is used to express the acknowledgement of the imposition incurred by making a request. KESs used an even smaller number of thanking moves in overall quantity than AENSs did. While 34 (30%) of 113 KESs expressed gratitude or appreciation explicitly, 52 (74%) out

of the 70 AENSs did this.

In Situation 2, though KESs used more supportive moves of thanking as their proficiency improved, the percentage of this move by even advanced level learners was far lower than the percentage of AENSs as in Situation 1. The following examples illustrate email by an intermediate KES who did not employ a thanking move and an AENS who employed one.

*Subject: hi! this is ooo (first name)*  
*Content: hi? it's me. how are u?*  
*n how about your study? i'm fine.*  
*hmm.. Susan I wanna your help. u can help me, right?*  
*I need a video tape whose name is 'A Beautiful Earth'.*  
*I need it for my work n I can't get it in Korea.*  
*So I am asking u. Plz help me.*  
*i'll wait your reply.*  
*good-bye n have a nice day*  
*lovely ooo (first name)*  
 (KES #64, m)

*Subject: Favor for a friend*  
*Content: Hi Susan. I was just wondering if you could do a favor for me. I*  
*need a reference tape for my company, but it isn't out on the market in the*  
*U.S. yet. So I thought I would ask you to get it for me, because I know that*  
*it is on the market in Korea. If you can that is great if not don't worry about*  
*it, I will think of something else. p.s. We need to get in touch with each*  
*other anyway! **Thanks for your time!** ooo (first name)*  
 (AENS #54, f)

### 3. Situation 3

In Situation 3, apologizing was the more favored move for KESs (69% of KESs used this move), while thanking was the more favored one for AENSs (70% of AENSs used this move) as shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**KESs' Supportive Moves of Thanking and Apologizing by Proficiency Level in Situation 3**

Supportive moves	KES			TOTAL (n=111)	AENS (n=70)
	Beginning (n=26)	Intermediate (n=47)	Advanced (n=38)		
Thanking**	0.12(3)*	0.19(9)	0.29(11)	0.21(23)	0.70(49)
Apologizing**	0.69(18)	0.68(32)	0.71(27)	0.69(77)	0.23(16)
Total	0.81(21)	0.87(41)	1.00(38)	0.90(100)	0.93(65)

\*<average number used by a person (total occurrence)>

(Read as: The average numbers of thanking used by a beginning KES were 0.12. Three moves of thanking were found in beginning KESs, and 9 moves appeared in intermediate KESs...)

\*\*These moves appeared more than once in some email.

This difference can be explained in terms of the cultural differences in a transactional situation. Koreans tend to consider the transaction as similar to a personal relationship, so they feel sorry when they have to ask for a cancellation of their previous transaction. So, in this situation "*I am sorry*" was more natural than "*Thank you*" to express the acknowledgement of the impingement for Koreans. Koreans' apologizing act was also observed in their head acts. So, the force of this supportive move was heightened by 21 occurrences of the "*I am sorry to...*" phrase in head acts. The following example illustrates this double use of apologizing.

*Subject: Excuse. Canceled to book*

*Content: Well, I'm really sorry to cancel to book "On Communication". I found it in my school. So it is not needed to buy it. **Sorry.***

(KES #10, f)

Americans tended to consider this cancellation as a natural right for a buyer in this kind of transactional situation and did not feel obliged to apologize for this act. No occurrence of the "*I am sorry to...*" phrase in head acts was found in the AENSs' data. An example of a typical email by AENSs is illustrated below:

*Subject: order cancellation*

*Content: Yesterday I ordered a book from you titled 'On Communication', but **I would like to** cancel my order because I found this book at the local library. Please reply or give me a call if this is a problem. **Thank you.***  
(AENS #38, f)

In Situation 3, KESs showed a similar pattern as in Situations 1 and 2. The higher the proficiency level, the more supportive moves of thanking and apologizing were used. An email example from an advanced learner is given below:

*Subject: To cancel the order*

*Content: I am ooo. I ordered a book, 'On Communication' to Booktopia yesterday. But unfortunately I should cancel yesterday's order I inform that I am compelled to cancel the order. There is 'On Communication' in library of my university **I apologize** to your company for what I should cancel the order of 'On Communication'. Whenever I need some books, I will order the something through your company, 'Booktopia'. If you paid during processing, I would pay for what you paid as soon as you send receipt and data to me. **I am sorry.***  
(KES #88, m)

Compared with the AENSs' email, this mail tried to be overpolite and kept using redundant apologies. The verbosity was one aspect of advanced Koreans' requestive behavior which could create an undesirable effect, in the culture where a brief and clear message is preferred in a transactional situation.

## V. SUMMARY

KESs and AENSs were different in their sensitivity to the sociopragmatic differences in the three situations in the use of thanking and apologizing moves. Table 4 summarizes the result across three situations.

**TABLE 4**  
**Thanking and Apologizing moves employed by KESs and AENSs across three situations**

Supportive moves	Situation 1		Situation 2		Situation 3	
	KES (n=110)	AENS (n=70)	KES (n=113)	AENS (n=70)	KES (n=111)	AENS (n=70)
Thanking**	0.42(46)*	0.76(53)*	0.30(34)	0.74(52)	0.21(23)	0.70(49)
Apologizing**	0.05(6)	0(0)	0.09(10)	0.01(1)	0.69(77)	0.23(16)
Total	0.47(52)	0.76(53)	0.39(44)	0.75(53)	0.90(100)	0.93(65)

\*<average number used by a person (total occurrences)>

(Read as, the average numbers of thanking used by a KES and an AENS were 0.42 and 0.76 respectively. 46 moves of thanking appeared in KES and 53 moves of thanking appeared in AENS messages...)

\*\*These moves appeared more than once in some email.

On the average, more than 0.70 incidences of expressing gratitude were found in one email message by AENSs evenly over the three situations. On the other hand, just 0.21 to 0.42 incidences of this supportive move were used by KESs in a message across three situations. KESs differentiated the use across the three situations having the move in the order of Situation 1 (0.42 incidences in a message), Situation 2 (0.30 incidences in a message), and Situation 3 (0.21 incidences in a message) in quantity. Since thanking is the act of acknowledging imposition of requestive act, it is a useful means in expressing politeness. In addition, thanking is a routine and formulaic expression by English native speakers. KESs' underuse of this strategy might give them a minus effect, because the absence of this routine expression could be a marked phenomenon to a recipient of the email in English. That is, the English native speakers can recognize the absence of the routine polite expressions easily because thanking is an unmarked and natural outcome by a requester when making requests.

Another difference found was in the use of apology. KESs used apology more often than AENSs across three situations. Especially in Situation 3, apologizing was the supportive move most frequently used by KESs. Approximately 0.69 incidences were found in a KES's message in this situation. It seems that apologizing was a politeness strategy most favored by Koreans in this situation because of the cultural difference in a transactional situation. Koreans need to learn that English native

speakers do not feel obliged to apologize in this kind of transactional situation. Thanking and apologizing behavior of KESs is congruent to Moon's (1996) study on complaining behavior by Korean English nonnative speakers.

It was found that a developmental pattern of interlanguage exists in this area. When KESs' proficiency level becomes higher, they employed more supportive moves of thanking, even though the number of this move by advanced KESs is still far from the use by AENSs.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The pragmatic area to be considered the most in a cross-cultural communication is the way of manifesting appropriate politeness. Since the language learners already acquired appropriate politeness strategies in their native language, they tend to apply the same strategies when speaking/writing in a foreign language, unless they are taught the difference of the pragmatic rules between the two languages. When the common devices to express politeness in a language are absent in communication, it could give rise to the communication breakdown, misunderstanding, or negative impact in a cross-cultural communication.

Teaching materials, including textbooks, should contain authentic use of these politeness devices. In addition, explicit teaching can be a good way to heighten the pragmatic competence for those learners who have the competence in their native language, as House (1996) showed in his study. It is difficult and takes a long time to get aware of the pragmatic difference only through a deductive way without explicit teaching.

The results of this study revealed one aspect of pragmatic areas of Korean English speakers. These findings and further studies of the comparative pragmatics between interlanguage of our students and English of native speakers will help us successfully teach the students to express the appropriate politeness for achieving their communicative goals in English.

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## APPENDIX

### Scenarios of Three Different Requesting Situations

#### Situation 1<sup>5)</sup>

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

#### Situation 2<sup>6)</sup>

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 email message asking for a favor.

#### Situation 3

You ordered a book titled 'On Communication' yesterday from Booktopia through

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5) In the Korean version, the professor taught English instead of economics.

6) In the Korean version, Susan Green was an exchange student in Korea in the past but now is back in the U.S. The email writer wants to ask Susan to get a video tape which was produced in the U.S.A., for reference for the company.

the internet. But today you found the book at a local library, so you want to cancel your order. Please write an email message canceling the order.

교육단계(applicable levels): secondary, tertiary, adult

주제어(key words): interlanguage, discourse analysis, interlanguage pragmatics

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Received Date: 2002. 4. 28

Confirmed Publication: 2002. 6. 13