

Pragmatics of Commiserating

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Hahn, Jee-Won. 2011. Pragmatics of Commiserating. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*. 19(2). 153-171. This study investigates interactional competence for the sake of developing complete language proficiency. As a way of responding appropriately, the speech act of commiserating is highlighted in this study. When someone details an unpleasant or unsatisfying experience, commiserating is a common reaction (Boxer 1993). Two 'troubles-telling' situations are selected from collection and the data are compared depending on different situations. According to the findings, situational factors are found to affect the types of commiseration strategies used. When there is someone or someone's behavior to be blamed, focusing on the offense is the most common behavior in Korean. When there's no object to be blamed, encouraging the trouble-teller is the most preferred. A cross-cultural view has been considered in order to understand Korean data from a broad context. From this view, perspective-taking plays a role in distinguishing cultural differences in expressing empathy.

Key Words: pragmatic competence, responding, commiserating, rapport, Korean, perspective taking

1. Introduction

The notion of pragmatic competence can be found in two lines of literature, that is, in association with communicative competence (Celce-Murcia 1997; Hymes 1974) and in cross-cultural pragmatics (Leech 1983). From a broad perspective, pragmatic competence is accepted as part of communicative competence that involves knowledge necessary for keeping conversation such as contextual information, social features, and function including illocutionary competence. Interactional competence in particular is highlighted and cultivated

in the context of language education considering values in continuing a conversation. In order to keep conversation going, competence in appropriately responding to someone's utterance is needed. Initiating moves are discussed and appropriately responding is also commonly dealt with in textbooks. Solidarity and building rapport is encouraged in language learning environments. Many conversation topics in textbooks include making small talk, agreeing, positively responding, and building rapport and social relationships. Headings such as 'Keeping a conversation going (*Transitions* 2, p. 19)' 'Showing interest (*Hemisphere* 3, Unit 11)' 'Responding by showing interest (*Touchstone* 3 Unit 2)' also indicate the emphasis on interaction in language learning.

Commiserating is a way of responding in conversations involving someone's bad news. A person naturally seeks approval by others, which belongs to positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). He/She seeks agreement and acknowledgement from others. Thus, speaking of one's problems is likely to be met by expressions of understanding. As a common positive response, commiserating is investigated in the situation in which a person reports troubles. An example involving commiseration can be illustrated in EFL textbook (1).

(1) Conversation strategy: Commiserating (*Hemisphere* p. 27)

Role-play. Role-play the situations below. One of you is the person described. The other commiserates.

Your brother has driven your car without your permission. He was in an accident.

You have a very sick parent in the hospital.

You are angry at your best friend for

As noted in EFL context, commiserating is one common speech behavior motivated by interactional competence. Cultivating competence in EFL context, appropriate use of native concepts may help learners' understanding of the target language. Before language learners are exposed to a target language, it is necessary to understand native way of speaking. Need to investigate the Korean concept of commiserating in the context of teaching English expressions of commiseration becomes the issue of the study. Using a discourse completion

task, two commiseration situations are provided to elicit possible responses. First this study identifies the concept of commiseration based on native lexicon. Next, it examines the linguistic realizations of commiseration. Finally, a cross-cultural perspective is taken into consideration by using supplementary data.

2. The speech act of commiserating

The behavior of commiserating has been dealt with in two research lines: speech act theory and troubles-telling events (Allami 2006; Dufon 1995; Laforest 2002). From a speech act theory, semantic properties of commiserating are identified along with other types of speech behavior. In the studies of troubles-telling, commiseration has been dealt with as one common response.

In speech act theory, commiseration is included as a category in which the speaker shows concern for and empathizes with the addressee showing signs of goodwill (Austin 1962; Searle 1976). Searle's classification involves expressive speech acts that convey the psychological state of the speaker. Searle classifies five categories: representatives (assertions, claims, reports), directives (suggestion, request, command), expressive (apology, complaint, thanks), commissives (promise, threat), and declaratives (decree, declaration). The category of expressives indicates the speaker's psychological state towards certain state of affairs, person, or object. It presupposes that the psychological state expressed is true and the speaker is sincere. For this reason, the illocutionary force of commiserating is to make the speaker feel at ease. From a modified version of speech acts, Bach and Harnish (1979) elaborate the category of the expressive as acknowledgements referring to "express certain feelings toward the hearer" (p. 51). Feelings include pleasure for greeting, gratitude for thanking, or regret for apologizing occurring over particular occasions. For this reason, expressives are related to the addressee's positive face according to Brown and Levinson (1987).

Within politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987), commiseration is found in the studies on face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1987) such as complaints and griping as a response. The function of face-threatening acts such as complaints and griping is to elicit solidarity and positive politeness. Unlike

what is said on the surface, complaining as rapport-inspiring speech aims to establish relationships and solidarity (Boxer 1993). For this reason, positive responses are expected. Boxer (1993) analyzes American speakers to see how they responded to someone's troubles. In Boxer's study, complaints or expression of dissatisfaction are likely to be followed by responses such as advice, jokes, and commiseration. Among others, the most common response is to commiserate as a sign of agreeing with what the speaker says. Similarly, Tannen (1990) notes that commiseration is likely to function as backchannels or evaluative responses in an extended structure of verbal exchanges and might invoke expressions like "Oh that's horrible", "I know what you mean", "That's too bad." Commiserating is a kind of responses to someone's bad news and trouble talk.

Recent empirical studies on commiseration have extended to non-Western languages and diverse settings. These studies identify a set of strategies to express sympathy. Allami (2006) analyzes Iranian students who make further conversation to maintain solidarity through the supportive speech act of commiseration. Gripping is mainly employed for commiseration and less for other purposes such as advice, joking, and contradiction. Allami employs similar framework as Boxer used for analyzing complaints in American English. Four different responses appear in a response to troubles-telling through complaining and griping. Among others, commiseration is shown to be the most common. Pudlinski (2005) investigates 53 emotive responses occurring on a peer support line within a community in mental health services. Expressions of empathy and sympathy are analyzed from an interactional and sequential perspective. According to Pudlinski, the trouble-telling and responding event is divided into three stages such as initial, medium, and ending stage, each of which consists of different commiseration strategies. Boxer and Pickering (1995) examine complaint-response sequences used in language textbooks. According to them, by commiserating, the addressee is able to show a mutual sentiment with the speaker. Use of language indicates discrepancies between naturally-occurring and textbook language.

A number of studies on Korean speech acts tend to focus on apologies (Ahn 2006; Byon 2005; Yang 2002) and requests (Byon 2004; Han 2005). The focus of these studies is to examine linguistic realization patterns across cultures. They

mainly consist of two or three groups, native speakers of Korean, those of American English, and Korean learners of English being compared to find out differences between native speakers and non-native speakers. Thus, apologies and requests are frequently investigated as the common speech acts in cross-cultural pragmatics while other types of speech acts are not. Here, a research agenda originates from one important pragmatic aspect, interactional competence (Hymes 1974). In this study, commiseration is defined as the speech act to serve the other's expectation to be appropriately met. This speech will be explored from a Korean's point of view.

3. Data collection

A discourse completion task is employed for data collection. To elicit speech, it is common to fabricate a scenario and set up situations where someone may react. In the area of cross-cultural pragmatics, the problem with a discourse completion task is lack of variety of situations and naturally occurring speech because made-up situations are used. However, the benefit of using a discourse completion task is the ability to obtain a larger amount of data in a shorter time. Typical representative speech situations are presented and participants are asked to write appropriate responses for each situation. The questionnaire includes typical situations and students were asked to write appropriate responses. For the current study, two situations are selected out the textbook *Hemisphere 3* such as responding to someone's troubles and concern: (1) Situation 1: Bad friend causing frustration (2) Situation 2: Sick father causing concern. By looking at students' performance of English pragmatics, the survey examined whether language learners are able to convey concern in an 'English-like' manner. Conveying messages appropriately and how much they maintain the target form after class instruction.

Six questions are presented in the questionnaire (See Appendix A). The first two questions belong to general views on the way of speaking from a Korean's point of view. Open-ended questions are used in order to collect commonly occurring Korean responses. English on the other hand was collected through multiple-choice. It is difficult to expect a variety of English expressions for

Korean learners since they are limited in language proficiency and their knowledge is simply gained through the textbook.

The survey was conducted in ESL classes that the author taught. The survey was conducted in three university courses taught by the author before the final exam during the last class of lecture. The courses were provided for all the levels ranging from the first year to the senior. Age groups of participants include early 20s (from 20 to 24). The level of English language proficiency involves from beginning to intermediate. Students participating in the survey were arts and engineering majors with limited access to learning English or English use. A total of 80 students participated and all were at the intermediate level of language proficiency. The survey was carried out before the final exam during the final class of the semester. The survey aimed to evaluate second language achievement of English pragmatics in order to evaluate students' understanding of English speech acts and comparing the initial stage of the class and the final stage of the class. The test was conducted anonymously to relieve pressure associated with grading and evaluation. The instruction does not require any personal information. Participation was voluntary and students were asked to give their age and gender.

4. Commiserating in Korean

4.1 Concept of commiseration

The Korean concept of commiseration was investigated by using sample dialogue involving the English expression of commiseration. Students were asked to respond to the question 'What does B do when given the saying above?' describing what the second person says in response to the first person's troubles talk. In English, the word *commiserate* consists of two morphemes *com* and *miser* and means 'to feel or express compassion or sympathy.' The English *commiserate* is translated into two types of words in Korean. The former includes the Korean words *wilo* and *kyeklye* meaning 'consoling' and 'encouraging.' The latter refers to a set of words sharing the morpheme *tong* meaning 'the same' and 'together.'

(2) Results of Korean concepts (73)

wilo (or *kyeklye*) (39)words with *tong* (33) – *tongue*; *tongcho*; *tongkam*

extra (1)

From a Korean's view, one important concept of commiseration lies in sharing feelings. Many Korean words describing the scene of commiserating include *tongue*, *tongcho*, and *tongkam* sharing the morpheme *tong*. For instance, *tongchung* means 'consoling by taking the other's misfortune and sorrow as his or her own.' *Tongkam* has the meaning of the same feelings; *tongcho* means the same tune. These words mean that having the same feelings and sharing ideas with the other. Identifying with the speakers status can be essential.

4.2. Strategies of commiseration

According to the analysis of the data, Korean commiseration is realized differently depending on the two situational factors. What is said in the task is coded into categories such as accusation, encouraging, and suggestion. These strategies may occur alone or in combinations of two or more. In Situation 1, a total 86 responses are collected. Out of these responses, six categories are identified such as accusation, encouraging, and suggestion. Two main categories can be identified including accusation and expression of feelings. Accusing the offender is the most prevalent occurring 46 times. The second was to express another's feelings appearing 16 times. For minor strategies, encouraging and sharing a similar experience are included. Examples illustrated in (3) are selected from the data.

Table 1: Commiseration in Korean for S1

Strategies	Examples	Occurrences
Accusing the offender	'He/she is a bad friend'	46
Expressing another's feelings	'You must be annoyed'	16
Expressing one's opinion and feelings	'That's really too bad'	11
Encouraging	'That'll be all right'	5

Suggesting for action	'Call and talk to him/her'	5
Sharing a similar experience	'I am the victim, too'	3
Total		86

(3) Examples of Korean¹⁾

a. Accusing the offender

cengmal nappwu-ta
 really bad-DC
 '(He or she) is really bad'

b. Expressing another's feelings

maum aphu-keyss-ta
 heart sick-will-DC
 'You must be hurt.'

c. Expressing one's opinion and feelings

nemwu simha-ta
 too harsh-DC
 'It's too harsh.'

d. Encouraging

kwenchanh-ul-kke-ya
 all right-VS-would-DC
 'It's going to be all right'

e. Suggesting for action

pwul-le-se ttacy-e
 call-and talk-IMP
 'Call and talk to him or her.'

f. Sharing a similar experience

na-to tanghay-ss-e
 I-too get hurt-PST-DC
 'I was hurt, too.'

In Situation 1, where someone's bad behavior becomes the source of the trouble, the most common response is to make accusations against the offender.

1) Abbreviations appear in Appendix B.

When there is an object of blame, it is likely to criticize the person or the person's behavior and take the side of the trouble-teller. Accusation of the offender is realized in two ways: using interrogatives and declaratives. Interrogatives ('What is she like?') are used to express embarrassment by using rhetorical questions ('How can she do that?') and challenging questions. In accusing the offender, declaratives are also used by using the statement 'She is bad' asserting the wrongdoing.

As noted in Table 1, the second most common strategy is to express empathy by using emotive expressions. Expression of empathy occurs frequently in trouble-telling events. The person is likely to express how he or she understands the other's feelings or expresses one's own feelings. Describing another's feelings is mainly realized in the sentence frame 'You must be...'. Descriptive terms are filled in the sentence frame such as 'depressed' 'annoyed' 'hurt' and 'hard.' These words are used to describe how the person feels and states the understanding of his or her feelings.

In Situation 2 where the source of the trouble comes from worries about one's family member, a total of six strategies are used as a means of commiseration: encouraging the other, expression of feelings, and wishing. When there's no offender or target to be accused, encouraging and expression of empathy are the main two strategies. In addition, these two main strategies are likely to be combined. For instance, the speaker tends to express feelings and ends with positive comments such as encouraging and wishing.

Table 2: Commiseration in Korean for S2

Strategies	Examples	Occurrences
Encouraging	'Cheer up'	34
Expressing one's opinion and feelings	'That's too bad'	24
Expressing another's feelings	'You must be hard'	18
Expressing concern	'Is it serious?'	6
Wishing	'Hope he gets well soon'	4
Suggesting for action	'Let's go to hospital.'	1
Total		87

(4) Examples of Korean

a. Encouraging

himnayki-l pala-y
 cheerful-VS hope-DC
 'I hope you get better.'

b. Expressing one's opinion and feelings

ku mal-ul tul-uni yukam-ita
 that words-AC hear-since sorry-DC
 'I feel sorry to hear that.'

c. Expressing another's feelings

kekchung manhi twe-keyss-ta
 worries a lot become-will-DC
 'You must be worried a lot.'

d. Expressing concern

manhi aphu-si-e
 a lot sick-SH-Q
 'Is he a lot sick?'

e. Wishing

ppalli nau-siki-l pala-y
 quickly get well-SH-VS hope-DC
 'I hope he gets well soon.'

f. Suggesting for action

pyeng-mwunan ka-ca
 disease-greeting go-PRO
 'Let's go to the hospital.'

Compared to Situation 1, the strategies are simplified in Situation 2 since there is no person to be blamed. Most strategies belong either to the trouble-teller or the source of the trouble. The former is realized by means of encouraging while the latter is in the form of expressing concern. Some strategies are commonly used across all situations, such as expression of empathy and encouragement. Appealing to feelings is also common in Situation 2.

5. Commiserating from a cross-cultural perspective

So far, Section 4 analyzed Korean way of commiseration and presented patterns. In Section 5, a tentative comparison will be made for broad understanding of commiserating. More data can be found in American English and Korean-English. The former comes from the literature and the latter comes from the question items included in the survey conducted in the current study. For this reason, a cross-cultural comparison attempted here is simply motivated to see how the results of Korean commiseration can be conceivable from pedagogical perspective.

For American English data, this study implements the literature as a means of accessing data on commiseration. American data on commiseration come from telephone conversations (Pudlinski 2005) occurring between caller and consultant on a peer support line. Troubles-tellings and their responses are recorded, which reach a total 53 verbal exchanges. American commiseration is reported to consist of eight methods such as assessments, emotives, reports of feelings, and use of idioms. Among others, those that occur more than five times include five methods: expressing assessments with emotives, sharing a similar experience, expressing one's feelings, reporting one's reaction, and naming another's feelings as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Commiseration in American English (based on Pudlinski 2005)

Strategies	Examples	Occurrences
Assessments or emotive	That's not fair; That's really tough.	20
Sharing a similar experience	I feel that way	11
Expressing one's feeling	Sorry to hear that.	8
Reporting one's reaction	I'd feel worried.	5
Naming another's feelings	You must be really hurt.	5
Total		49

The most common display of American commiseration is the use of and combination of emotive expressions (*oh oh gees*) and assessments (*That's really sad; That's really tough*) referring to the event. Assessments with emotives appear 20 times out of 49 instances. Assessments indicate that the recipient is

sad or bothered about the other's news which may be enough to sympathize in response to the announcement of trouble. The second most common strategy is to share a similar experience occurring 11 times.

Commiseration strategies are divided according to perspective-taking: speaker-oriented and hearer-oriented. Describing another's feelings is given through the hearer's perspective while stating one's own opinion and feelings are given from the speaker's perspective. Speaker-oriented strategies using the first pronoun 'I' include most strategies such as assessments, expression of one's own feeling, and sharing a similar experience. Hearer-oriented strategies with reference to the second person pronoun 'you' include naming another's feelings. According to the findings in Pudlinski (2005), American English commiseration shows dominant preference for speaker-oriented perspective in commiserating. Most strategies are narrated from a speaker's perspective. The least favored strategy is describing feelings from the other's perspective. Speculating on the other is very restricted in American English commiseration.

Compared to the Korean pattern, the English use of expressing another's feelings is less frequent. In Korean, speculating about a person's feelings is one common strategy. For instance, in a situation where someone becomes the source of the trouble, describing the other's feeling is the second most common strategy in Korean. The sentence in the frame 'You must be...' appears frequently. From an American perspective, speculating about the other's emotional status is not favored; instead, expressing empathy from the speaker's perspective is frequently used. Another difference can be found in the strategy of sharing a similar experience. In Korean, sharing an experience is very limited, which is the least common category (occurring only 3 times). In contrast to Korean, sharing a similar experience is the second most common strategy of commiseration in American English, which occurs more than the expression of feelings.

Due to relevance in the English-learning environment, this study examines the choice of English commiseration expressions by Korean learners in order to understand Korean learners' interlanguage preferences. Here, the four expressions are selected from the lesson included in the textbook: accusing the offender, expressing one's opinion, expressing another's feelings, and sharing a similar experience. Korean learners are asked to choose one expression in the

two situations employed for the Korean native data: (1) S1: Bad friend (2) S2: Sick father.

Among the four expressions, expression of regret using 'sorry' is the most preferred and familiar to Korean learners of English across all situations. When it comes to a specific situation, there are variations. In a situation where the speaker feels frustrated and troubled due to someone's behavior, Koreans preferred the strategy of accusing the offender. In Situation 1, accusing by using a rhetorical question occurs 38 out of 77 times, occupying the half of the total. The preference for rhetorical question can be seen as transfer from Korean.

Table 4: Commiseration in interlanguage for S1

Expressions of commiseration	Examples	Occurrences
Accusing the offender	'How could she do that to you?'	38
Expressing one's opinion and feelings	I'm really sorry to hear that.	17
Expressing another's feelings	That must be hard on you.	15
Sharing a similar experience	The same thing happened to me	7
Total		77

Due to the type of troubles that arise from poor health most responses express regret in Situation 2. The most common strategy is to express regret occurring 54 times out of 76 instances, which amounts to about two thirds of the total instances.

Table 5: Commiseration in interlanguage for S2

Expression of commiseration	Examples	Occurrences
Expressing one's feelings and opinion	I'm really sorry to hear that.	54
Expressing another's feelings	That must be hard on you.	20
Sharing a similar experience	The same thing happened to me.	2
Use of rhetorical question	How could she do that?	0
Total		76

Results of interlanguage data can be interpreted in relation with those of Korean data since similar patterns appear in the two data sets. When language learners are exposed to EFL environments, their performance of speech acts is likely to be influenced by the native pattern. First, expression of regret is favored for both Koreans and Korean learners of English. Across situations, expressing regret is the common way of commiserating. Particularly, in Situation 2, the frequency of expressing regret is dominant. Secondly, in describing emotions, Korean learners of English favor expressing from another's perspective as much as they do expressing one's perspective. Third, while American English speakers favor the strategy of sharing an experience in commiserating, the strategy of sharing an experience is not common for Koreans and Korean learners of English. Thus, the preference of commiseration strategies in the interlanguage data shows relevance to the Korean native data.

6. Conclusion and limitation of the study

Commiseration in Korean is affected by situational factors. In this study, troubles are provided from different sources. When the source of troubles lies in someone or someone's behavior and when there is an object to be blamed, the person is likely to respond by accusing the offender. When there is no source to be blamed, encouraging is the most common. As a situation-independent (situation-dependent strategy?) strategy, describing one's or the other's feeling is favored in the two situations.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the act of commiserating is found to have universal aspects regarding the choice of strategies. A variety of strategies such as expressing feelings, encouraging, and sharing an experience are adopted. However, conveying feelings occurs across languages. Both Koreans and English speakers favor strategies such as expressing assessments and feelings. Expressing one's and another's feelings occurs across situations and across languages.

Differences in commiserating are found in perspective-taking. Feelings and assessments are likely to be conveyed in commiserating in English from a speaker's view ('I'm sorry', 'That's hard') American English have a tendency to avoid speculation about someone's feelings. However, Korean commiseration is

likely to be expressed from a hearer's perspective ('You must be concerned') as well as a speaker's perspective. From an American English perspective, it is clear to avoid describing feelings from a hearer's perspective. Instead, sharing feelings and experiences is used in many instances. From a Korean's point of view, talking from a hearer's point of view is as prevalent as from the speaker's point of view.

As noted in the interlanguage data, commiseration strategies realized by Korean learners of English are similar to those in the Korean native data. This fact echoes the findings drawn from previous studies on pragmatic competence (Ahn 2006; Byon 2005). According to this study, an instance of pragmatic dimension includes perspective taking which differs in how the event is narrated. A learner's performance on speech acts tends to be influenced by the native language. Even though learners are constantly exposed to the target language, they are likely to react according to the way of speaking in their native language. To cultivate pragmatic competence, it is important for teachers to recognize such limitation in learning features in a language class.

The cross-cultural perspective taken in this study is limited in some respects since the data compared come from all different sources. For instance, Korean data are collected from the survey and American data are from the literature. Comparison is actually hard to be made since the data compared come from all different sources. However, the real interest in this study is to look at Korean commiseration first and then applies to language learning context not in drawing generalizations. Furthermore, even though the data used for this study are not systematic, the tentative comparison reveals some interesting findings.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Instruction: The survey aims to examine your understanding of the use of English. Please write down based on what you've figured out.

1. You've heard the dialogue as the following in class:

A: My roommate was talking behind my back. She told all sorts of lies about me.

B: That must be hard on you.

In this example, we've learned that B is commiserating A. What would you describe what B says in Korean?

2. There are several possible English expressions for the situation (1). Which expression sounds the most accessible to you? Choose one.

a. How could she do that to you?

b. The same thing happens to me.

c. That must be hard on you.

d. I'm really sorry to hear that.

3. What would you say in Korean if you were the speaker B in the following example?

A: My roommate was talking behind my back. She told all sorts of lies about me.

B: _____

4. If you spoke in English, what would you say if you were the speaker B in the following conversation?

A: My roommate was talking behind my back. She told all sorts of lies behind me.

B: _____

- a. How could she do that to you?
- b. The same thing happens to me.
- c. That must be hard on you.
- d. I'm really sorry to hear that.

5. What would you say in Korean if you were the speaker B in the following conversation?

A: Father became ill and was hospitalized. I'm worried.

B: _____

6. What would you say in English if you were the speaker B in the following conversation?

A: Father became ill and was hospitalized. I'm worried.

B: _____

- a. How could she do that to you?
- b. The same thing happens to me.
- c. That must be hard on you.
- d. I'm really sorry to hear that.

Appendix B: Abbreviations

AC	Accusative case particle
DC	Declarative suffix
IMP	Imperative suffix
PRO	Propositive suffix
PST	Past tense marker
Q	Question marker
SH	Subject honorifics
VS	Verbal suffix

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