Metapragmatic comments on relating across cultures

Korean students' uncertainties over relating to UK academics

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This paper analyses postings made by student applicants on Korean online communities about how best to handle interactions with potential future PhD supervisors at UK universities. The questions they posed reveal the lack of relevant contextual information they experienced, especially around the rights and obligations of supervisors. This paper thus analyses students' metapragmatic comments and argues for greater attention to be paid within interpersonal and intercultural pragmatics to interactional goals and conceptions of role relations, especially the rights and obligations associated with them. The analysis has revealed that background information on role relations is of great importance for relational management and communication planning in high stakes intercultural interaction. This suggests that potential cultural variation in the perceived rights and obligations associated with a given role (in this case, PhD supervisor) and their implications for assessments of role relations are of central concern.

Keywords: role relations, intercultural relations, metapragmatics, interactional goals, uncertainty, rights and obligations

1.   Introduction

Recent work in pragmatics has shown an increased interest in 'relations'. For example, a major volume on 'interpersonal pragmatics' (Locher and Graham 2010) was published in 2010 and several journal articles have appeared on the topic since then (e.g. Arundale 2010; Enfield 2009; Spencer-Oatey 2011, 2013). Kádár and Haugh (2013, 50) have labelled it the 'relational shift in politeness research'. Yet much of the analytic focus to date has been on interactional discourse and little attention has been paid to situations where relating is important

yet people feel they need to deliberate in advance how to handle them. For example, in high stakes situations, such as job interviews or sales pitches, where applicants want to make a positive impression on their interlocutors, people may feel they do not have the background information they need to handle the situation effectively in order to achieve their goal, such as being offered the job or clinching a deal. In these scenarios, people may try to obtain relevant information in advance of the interaction so that they can feel better prepared in handling it and can thereby reduce their sense of uncertainty. In intercultural interaction, lack of shared background knowledge or common ground can be particularly common and potentially problematic (Kecskes 2014).

This article explores just such a situation, using data from Korean social media websites. It analyses questions posed by Korean students who want to apply for a postgraduate research degree in the UK or who have recently been accepted for such a course. We focus on the questions they raised about their interactions with (potential) future supervisors. We examine the uncertainties that they expressed and consider the relevance of our findings for interpersonal pragmatics and intercultural relations.

2.   Multidisciplinary perspectives on relating across cultures

Politeness theory has always paid great attention to participant relations and the notion of context (see Lefringhausen, Spencer-Oatey and Debray 2019; Spencer-Oatey, Lefringhausen and Debray 2019, for interdisciplinary discussions of the culture, context and behaviour interface). Haugh, Davies, and Merrison (2011, 7) suggest that the situated nature of relating behaviour can be examined from three main angles: "(1) within discourse, (2) relative to groups and participation frameworks, and (3) in common or background knowledge." In this section we use this categorisation to explore the context as it pertains to our data.

2.1   Discourse perspectives on relating

Discourse perspectives on relating focus on analysing the discourse that occurs between participants. In the case of our data, Korean applicants are using social media to comment on and/or ask questions about recent or future interactions with staff at UK universities. While this can count as discourse data in its own right (albeit asynchronous), in this paper we treat it as metapragmatic data. Kádár and Haugh (2013, 181) define metapragmatics broadly as "the study of *awareness* on the part of ordinary or *lay observers* about the ways in which they use language to interact and communicate with others" (italics in the original). Kádár

and Haugh (2013, 181) list a number of different types of discourse data that can be analysed from a metapragmatic perspective, one of which is computer-mediated discourse, which is the data used in this study. We analyse it specifically for the uncertainties that Korean applicants reveal through the online metapragmatic comments.

2.2   Participants and relating

Our focus on students' comments aligns with the increasing attention being paid within pragmatics to first-order perspectives on politeness and relating (Watts, Ide, and Ehlich 1992; Eelen 2001); in other words, to lay person's conceptualisations rather than those of the analyst.

Haugh et al. (2011) argue that it is important to distinguish between two types of first-order perspectives: emic perspectives and participant perspectives. An emic perspective makes sense of speech practices in terms of "indigenous values, beliefs and attitudes, social categories, emotions, and so on" (Goddard 2006, 2), while a participant perspective involves the orientations of the participants themselves. They illustrate this by referring to Ide's (1989) concept of *wakimae* ('[social] appropriateness' or 'discernment'). Ide argued that this concept is essential for understanding politeness in Japanese; however, Haugh et al. (2011) point out that Cook (2006) subsequently pointed to the need to demonstrate through analysis that the participants themselves actually orient to *wakimae*. In our study, we consider the possible role of the emic Korean concept of *kibun*.

This makes it clear that we need to pay attention to two facets: the participants and the issues they are concerned about. We deal with the latter first and maintain that in some contexts, two important concerns may be goal achievement and impression management. How these concerns are handled may depend on emic values and beliefs – a point that we return to in the discussion section. Here we consider how motives for relating are handled within politeness theory.

Much work within politeness theory has focused on harmony/disharmony (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1978/1987; Leech 1983; Culpeper 2011). However, another important, interconnected facet of interpersonal relations is impression management. This has connections, of course, with harmony/disharmony, but can usefully be separated out. Leary and Kowalski (1990, 34) refer to impression management as "the process by which people control the impressions others form of them". They maintain that impression management has two components: impression motivation and impression construction. In terms of impression motivation, Leary (1995, 54) explains it as follows:

> People are more motivated to regulate how they are perceived by others to the extent that: (a) they believe that the impressions others form of them are relevant to attainment of their goals, (b) these goals are particularly valuable or important to them, and (c) a discrepancy exists between the impression they desire others to have of them and the image they think others actually hold.

As can be seen from this quotation, Leary links impression management closely with goals. Spencer-Oatey (2008), in her rapport management model, proposes interactional goals as one of the three bases of rapport, pointing out that goals can be relational as well as transactional (i.e. task-focused). So, from an interpersonal relations point of view, goals seem to be of crucial importance to both smooth relations and to impression management.

With regard to impression construction, one factor influencing impression construction is the target's values; in other words, the "perceived values and preferences of significant others" (Leary and Kowalski 1990, 41). With respect to our study, student applicants need to be able to make judgements of the potential supervisor's (emic) values and preferences, if they are to convey a positive impression.

We now turn to the other facet of first-order perspectives: the participants themselves. Classic theories of politeness (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 1983, 2014) have pointed to the impact of participant relations, particularly their degree of equality/inequality (power, P) and distance/closeness (D) (Brown and Levinson 1978/1987; Brown and Gilman 1960/1972). Such P and D relations are typically influenced by the participants' role relations, and in fact many cross-cultural pragmatic studies (e.g. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989; Gass and Neu 1995; Chen, He, and Hu 2013; Hatfield and Hahn 2011) have manipulated different role relations (e.g. student/teacher and student/flatmate) to investigate the impact of participant relations on language use. Spencer-Oatey (1996) pointed out the potential flaws in relation to this and argued that the facets of P and D need unpacking. She drew on French and Raven (1959) to help unpack P (Spencer-Oatey 2008, 34–5), explaining the differences between reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, expert power and referent power.

Surprisingly, however, despite the central importance of the concept of role relations within pragmatics, and within politeness theory and interpersonal pragmatics in particular, there has been very little exploration of the concept. Many years ago, Craig, Tracy, and Spisak (1986) pointed out that the rights and obligations of a role relationship influence people's judgements of the weightiness of a face-threatening act. Conceptually, Allwood (2007) identifies role rights and obligations as a key parameter for analysing social activities, defining them as "the expectations (and sometimes formal requirements) which exist concerning the rights, obligations and competence needs that are associated with a particular

role in an activity" (2007, 7). Spencer-Oatey (2008) similarly includes them in her rapport management model, maintaining that they are a core facet of social/interactional roles, and Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2020) further argue for their importance in intercultural politeness.

Within sociology, Brandle (2011, 507) defines a role as "the set of expectations that the society has on the behaviour of an individual occupying a particular social position," and Turner (2002) further clarifies that the expectations are seen as a set of rights and obligations. Turner (2002) also points out that people's conceptions of roles act as a key orienting process in social interaction. He maintains that, although in reality the expectations of role-related rights and obligations may have "varying degrees of concreteness and consistency" (2002, 234), the key issue is that people behave *as if* there truly are specific rights and obligations associated with a given role. This suggests the notion of framing. Dewulf et al. (2009) identify two perspectives on frames: frames as cognitive representations and framing as interactional co-construction. They explain this as follows:

> Frames as knowledge schemas refer to structures of expectation about people, objects, events and settings. Interactive frames refer to alignments that are negotiated in a particular interaction and focus on how communication defines specific aspects of what is going on in interaction, in the sense of Bateson's classic example 'is this fight or play?'   (Dewulf et al. 2009, 158)

We would argue that both perspectives are important, and that in intercultural interaction, lack of common ground in terms of both cognitive and interactive frames may impact on the interaction. We turn to that next.

2.3   Culture, framing and relating

A fundamental question in intercultural communication, especially from a pragmatic perspective, is what counts as 'cultural' and whether it can be identified within an interaction. Within cross-cultural psychology, culture has traditionally been interpreted primarily as values, but there is increasing recognition of the conceptual and empirical limitations of this approach (Fischer and Schwartz 2011) and attention is increasingly turning to culture as norms and schematic knowledge (e.g. Leung and Morris 2015; Spencer-Oatey et al. 2019; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2020). In the latter two publications, the authors argue that participants' cultural patterning encompasses a range of elements in addition to cultural values, including conceptualisations of communicative activities, role responsibilities, and interactional norms. A number of different terms have been used for such patterning, including cognitive frames, cognitive representations, schemas and scripts, but they all refer to "memory structures that help us to organize and

interpret incoming perceptual information by fitting it into pre-existing categories about reality" (Dewulf et al. 2009, 159). They help us in processing, interpreting and generally making sense of input of all kinds. In other words, such elements play a dynamic framing role in interaction, such that when participants' cultural patterning is (potentially) noticeably different, this can give rise to intercultural uncertainty and risk of unwanted relational impact. In the case of our study, the applicants were unsure whether they could rely on their existing knowledge of the Korean educational system when handling their applications to UK universities.

Clark (1996) explains this further, saying that if we are to understand each other, we need to have a certain amount of shared knowledge or 'common ground'. Berger and Bradac (1982) maintain that three types of knowledge are particularly important for managing relations: knowledge of cultural conventions, knowledge of social roles, and knowledge of others as individuals. Yet in intercultural interaction, all three may well be missing. Kecskes (2014, 151) points out that this is because people need to "have common or similar prior experience, participate in similar actions and events, know each other, and have been in similar situations before" in order to develop common ground. He argues that although participants of intercultural encounters have a certain amount of common ground, it is typically much less than that among members of the same cultural group. As a result, uncertainty is particularly prevalent in intercultural interaction.

According to Berger and Calabrese (1975), high levels of uncertainty cause increases in information-seeking behaviour. In our study, information seeking is particularly relevant because this is what the Korean applicants were doing. Griffin (2012, 131) reports three approaches to acquiring information:

– Passive strategy: unobtrusively observe others from a distance
– Active strategy: ask a third party for information
– Interactive strategy: talk face-to-face with the other person and ask specific questions

Ramirez et al. (2002) add a fourth strategy, which in fact could be regarded as a 'new' type of active strategy. They label it 'extractive', explaining that internet technologies now offer extensive opportunities for indirect information gathering.

> Communicators may now use search engines to discover information available on the Internet about others, including locating home pages created by or mentioning the target. This can be likened to conducting a personalized background check. […] The use of *extractive strategies*, including searches of electronic list postings and Usenet newsgroup messages and archives, draws upon a vast storehouse of written comments generated by targets. […] they [these postings] may offer particularly valuable insights to information seekers, especially because the information can be collected covertly, and without the target's knowledge.
>
> (Ramirez et al. 2002, 220)

This is exactly what the Korean students in our study did when facing uncertainties in relation to UK academics. However, little is known about what relational information people feel they lack for 'successful' intercultural interaction.

On the basis of the above, we identified two research questions:

RQ1:   What types of uncertainties did the Korean students seek insights on via extractive strategies?
RQ2:   How can their uncertainties be analysed conceptually?

3.   Methodology

3.1   Data collection

In this article, our focus is on the types of uncertainties Korean students have in relation to UK academics. We limit our data to the case of the UK Higher Education (HE), since, firstly, many aspects of HE can vary greatly even within the English-speaking world. Secondly, relatively little information is available to Korean students on ways to manage the uncertainties in the UKHE due to the small number of the Korean students at UKHE compared to those in the US, so Korean students are likely to face higher levels of uncertainty and hence turn to internet forums to seek information and advice. Thirdly, the UK and Korea are the native countries of the authors, who therefore have a greater understanding of the UK and Korean HE systems.

The data for our study comprises the questions posted on two online communities and forums by Korean students about the uncertainties they were facing with regards to studying at a UK university: '영국사랑' (www.o4uk.com, hereafter o4UK) and 'go hackers' (www.gohackers.com, hereafter GOH).[1] These two websites were chosen for the following reasons. First, they are the two biggest online communities and forums for Korean students who either plan to study abroad at the higher education (HE) level or are already studying outside Korea, including in the US, UK, China, and Japan. Second, the sites are constantly updated, enabling scholars to carry out a diachronic as well as a quantitative and descriptive analysis. Third, comments and replies are rich sources of data that allow scholars to examine dynamic interactions among the members of the com-

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1. Initially, '하이브레인넷' (www.hibrain.net), a Korean website exclusively for postgraduates who are already within academia or plan to remain in it, was also considered in the data collection stage. However, due to the nature of the website (i.e. a website where job opportunities for postgraduates and early career researchers are shared), searching for the questions concerning the relational issues with regard to UK academics returned no data; therefore, this website was not examined in this study.

munity. These websites feature authentic, real problems and struggles international students have prior to and during their stay abroad, whereby the voice of the 'end users' of UK HE can be identified.

However, it should be pointed out that the two online communities are slightly distinctive in nature, and each merits further explanation. First, 04UK is for Koreans to share their experiences and knowledge about living/studying in the UK. Not limited to the issues concerning HE, it covers an array of topics, from visas to grocery shopping and education. This website features a 'Q&A' section, consisting of six sub-categories: '우수 게시물 모음' [excellent posts collection], '비자' [visa], '생활/지역' [living/area], '대학(원)' [undergraduate/postgraduate], '랭귀지' [languages], and '기타' [etc]. At the time of data collection (16 December 2018) it featured a total of 2,797 postings, which started from October 2010. Among these, we selected for further investigation those that raised questions that concerned UK academics/supervisors in some way (see below for details of how this was done).

GOH is a platform provided and operated by Hackers Language Institute Co., Ltd., one of the biggest language institutes that provides foreign language education in South Korea. Targeting exclusively those who are either preparing for language tests, or are planning to study abroad, it offers various resources for English second language training (in reading, listening, speaking, and writing, as well as grammar), and reviews of tests of English for international communication and proficiency (e.g. TOEFL and IELTS) and tests of other languages such as Chinese (e.g. HSK). The website also features sections for discussions and reviews of different types of college and university/graduate school entrance exams (e.g. SAT, GMAT, GRE, MCAT, PCAT, DAT, and LSAT). Due to such nature, the Q&A sections are more specific and focused than in 04UK. The topics discussed are exclusive to studying abroad, and include themes like 'Exchange students' diaries', 'Exchange students' Q&A', 'Graduate school diaries', 'Graduate school Q&A', 'Studying abroad Q&A', and 'International Students' discussion forum'.

For the purposes of this study, we obtained data from the '영국유학 Q&A' [Q&A about studying in the UK] section of GOH, because, as signalled in the title of the section, it is restricted to questions about studying in the UK. Some questions are threaded but we focus only on the questions, disregarding those interactions among the users of the community, since our focus in this paper is the uncertainties that people have, not how people answer the question on a specific topic, although interactions among the members were considered for contextual information.

At the time of data collection (16 December 2018), the '영국유학 Q&A' section featured a total of 23,481 postings, which started from January 2006. These 23,481 questions included any issues relating to studying and living in the UK, as well as

some replies (by those who did not use 'comments thread' function). Many of the questions in fact dealt with practical/daily life issues such as how long it takes to get a UK student visa, or the average living cost for international students in the UK. Other questions were broader and we selected for further investigation those that concerned UK academics/supervisors in some way (see below for details of how this was done).

All comments on the two websites are openly available. The websites allow users to use an alias (false name) if they wish. For GOH, no log-in process is required to write a post; the user can use a false name, and later can change the original post using the password s/he set. For o4UK, a log-in process is required to write a post but the users can choose an alias for the ID they use. Similarly, no log-in process is required to read the posts and comments. This means that data used in this study could be retrieved without a registration and login process. More importantly, we deleted all names (whether false names or otherwise) and we also deleted all university names and any occasional reference to specific academics.

In order to analyse people's questions about UK academics, relevant postings were retrieved using the search box available on each website, by using the following items as search words. For o4UK and GOH, we used 교수 [professor], 지도교수 [supervisor], 튜터 [tutor], 렉처러 [lecturer] as search items because the sections of the websites under examination are already limited to the postings about UKHE. The results of the 'content search', using the search items mentioned above, are summarised in Table 1 below.

Among the postings that have 'professor', 'supervisor', 'tutor' or 'lecturer', some postings did not actually concern issues of relating to UK academics. For example, many were referring to professors/supervisors/tutors/lecturers in Korea, such as 'It has been a while since I met my former supervisor in Korea. What should I do to get a reference letter [for the UK university] from him/her?'. Others referred to adaptation issues and just happened to include the search term; for example, 'I am the only Asian in the class, and I am not sure if I can adapt myself to this environment, although the professor in charge already sent emails to other colleagues to introduce me. Any tips?'. All such questions were excluded from the corpus of documents to be examined since they did not refer to relations with UK academics. This resulted in a final corpus of 265 documents of questions. Since no log-in process is required and more than two people could have used the same alias (or false name) for the GOH website, it was not easy to identify how many people posted the questions. Thus, we treat the 265 documents as 265 different people in this study.

Table 1. Specifications of the data set

04UK	Sections analysed	'대학(원)' [u/g and p/g] under the 'Q&A' section	
	Time period	October 2010 – December 2018	
	Total number of postings (as of 16 December 2018)	2,797	
		교수 [professor/lecturer/senior lecturer/reader]	379
	Number of postings that have key terms under examination (a total of 431 postings)	지도교수 [supervisor]	28
		튜터 [tutor]	24
		렉처러 [lecturer]	0
	Number of postings selected from 04UK for further analysis, which focus on role relation issues		24
GOH	Sections analysed	'영국유학 Q&A' [Q&A relating to studying in the UK] under the 'preparing studying abroad' section	
	Time period	January 2006 – December 2018	
	Total number of postings (as of 16 December 2018)	23,481	
	Number of postings selected for further analysis that have key terms under examination (a total of 1,702 postings)	교수 [professor/lecturer/senior lecturer/reader]	1496
		지도교수 [supervisor]	129
		튜터 [tutor]	72
		렉처러 [lecturer]	5
	Number of postings selected from GOH for further analysis, which focus on role relation issues		241

3.2 Analytic procedures

The data set of questions was translated from Korean into English by one of the authors and the English translation was added to each of the records. Then the full set of records (i.e. 265 documents), comprising the questions in both Korean and English, was imported into the qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA. Both authors then participated in the analysis, first reading through each of the entries several times to familiarise themselves with the data. After this, multi-

ple iterations of conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) were carried out. In other words, the coding was done inductively, with the coding categories derived directly from the data rather than through the use of a predetermined set of categories. Each full question was treated as the unit of analysis, and since each question often included multiple different elements, each comment (as is normal in qualitative data analysis) could be coded to more than one code. MAXQDA allows the code system to be built with a hierarchical structure, so that there are parent codes, children codes, grandchildren codes, and so on.

The initial coding of the 265 questions resulted in three top-level codes, 'the application process' (dealing with the practicalities of applying), 'life at university' (dealing with things like language proficiency and referencing procedures) and 'time phase' (whether the study cycle was started or finished when the question was posed). However, at the end of this initial content-based coding phase, it was clear that a number of questions posted were specifically about role relations and that it would be helpful to focus specifically on this. So, a new top-level code, 'Role relations' was created, and the full dataset was then coded again from this angle.

99 different people posted questions about role relation issues. In coding the questions posed by these people, we once again took a content-based approach and this led to two main codes, role responsibilities and communication protocols, each with sub-codes and sub-sub-codes. We coded inductively as we analysed each of the questions posted in the forums. The building of the code system and the coding of the data was an iterative process and continued until both authors were satisfied that all the meanings had been captured in the various codes and their inter-relationships. Two points about the normal coding process for qualitative data need to be noted: (a) Codings were made only to the lowest level of a relevant code category, so that when hierarchies are collapsed, there is no double counting; (b) Since each full posting was treated as the unit of analysis, a single post could be coded to more than one code.

4.   Findings

Within the role relations top-level code, there were two sub-codes, as shown in Figure 1, 'Role responsibilities and power' and 'Communication protocols', with 35 questions on the former and 70 on the latter. The various sub-codes and their interrelationships are shown in Figure 2.

In the following sections, we use the coding tree to organise our reporting of the questions raised about role relations, along with some indicative comments/questions.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the 'Role relations' coding categories and coding frequencies (collapsed view)

Figure 2. Screenshot of the 'Role relations' coding categories and code frequencies (uncollapsed view)

4.1   Comments and questions on role responsibilities and power

A large number of comments and questions related to the nature of the role of supervisor, his/her level of power, and the supervisor-supervisee relationship in UK universities. Students posting these questions wanted to understand better some 'structural' or 'factual' issues.

Some applicants (13 postings), were unsure how labels such as lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, and so on related to the right to supervise PhD students and they felt they needed to know that in order to be able to identify suitable potential supervisors.

Q1. *maeu kŭngjŏngjŏk panŭngŭl chusin kyosunimi senior lecturerto anigu kŭnyang drinde kwaench'ank'etchiyo? kŭnde kyŏngnyŏgŭn issŭsigo yŏrŏgaji chikch'aekto mat'ko kyesidŏragoyo.*

One professor who gave me a very positive response is not even a senior lecturer, but just a doctor. Will that be okay? But s/he has [some] experience and holds various positions as well.   [GOH52, Code RR-L]

One student asked about the nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship in UK universities, wondering how it compares with that in Korean universities.

Q2.   *han'gugesŏnŭn chidogyosu-haksaeng kwan'gyega chom ch'inmil(?) hajan-hayo…kyosunimŭi kongbu p'oham kakchong(?) chisisahangdo mank'o..kŭnde yŏngguktaehagesŏ t'ŭkhi mphil/phd k'osŭsaenggwa kyosug-anŭi kwan'gyenŭn kŭrŏji annayo? mŏ sanhhoganŭi tongnipchŏgin yŏn'gujaro saenggakhandago..yŏnggugesŏnŭn kŭrŏn ŭigyŏndo itkinŭn hande, amuraedo kungnae taehak(kungnaedaehagesŏ taehagwŏn sŏksarŭl mach'yŏssŭm-nida)esŏŭi haksaenggwa kyosu kwan'gye, munhwanŭn chom taso sangha-jŏgin kaenyŏmi tŭrŏitki maryŏninjira kŏgie chunhaesŏ haengdohage toenikkayo.. kyang op'ŏ patko….kamanhi issŭmyŏn toenŭn'gŏnji…..animyŏn meil chaju ponaesŏ igŏtchŏgŏt murŏbogo kŭraeyadoenŭn kŏnji..*

The professor-student relationship is rather close (?) in Korea. There are also many, various (?) instructions given by a supervisor, including that relating to a study. Is the relationship particularly between a professor and a MPhil/PhD course student at a UK university not the same?

[Some] say the supervisor treats them [MA/PhD students] as independent researchers. However, the relationship between a student and a professor at universities in Korea (I completed the MA course at a Korean university) has a somewhat hierarchical concept, based on which [I] tend to act.

I wonder I should stay silent after receiving the offer…or I should email the professor frequently and ask questions…   [GOH59, Code RR-R-H]

Here we can see that the student oriented to potential cultural differences at the national level, wondering whether the supervisor-supervisee relationship is simi-lar or different.

The largest number of questions and comments, however, related to the power of the supervisor, particularly in relation to the application process and decision-making. There were 21 postings relating to that.

Q3.   *kyosunimi padajugiro han kyŏngu hapkyŏngnyurŭn ŏnŭ chŏngdo toenayo?*
      What is the probability of acceptance if the professor has already agreed to take [me] as a student?   [GOH251, Code RR-P]

In French and Raven's (1959) terms, they were unsure how much reward and coer-cive power supervisors have; in other words, what power they have to control positive or negative outcomes. Some students in fact asked whether a supervisor had the reward/coercive power to accept an applicant even if there were problems with the student's academic record. They wondered, if that were the case, whether building a good relationship with a potential supervisor would facilitate accep-tance.

Q4. *ibŏne yŏngguktaehagwŏn [chŏn'gongmyŏng] msc kwajŏnge chiwŏnhagop'ŭn yebijiwŏnjaimnida. tarŭmi anira GPAka hakkyoch'ŭgesŏ yoguhanŭn minimŏme todarhaji mot'aesŏyo..ㅠㅠ… hoksi..urinara ch'ŏrŏm yŏnggukto kyosunimgwa miri k'ŏnt'ekhaesŏ yaegiga chaldoemyŏn op'ŏrŭl padŭl su innŭnji kunggŭmhago hoksi kŭrŏhan kyŏnghŏmi issŭsinbuni issŭsimyŏn choŏnŭl kuhagoja pukkŭrŏpchiman kŭrŭl ollyŏbomnida.*

I am a prospective candidate applying for an MSc [name of discipline] course at a Graduate School in the UK. The thing is I have failed to meet the minimum GPA required by the university. 🙁 Is there any chance that, in the UK, like in Korea, I can get an offer, if I contact the professor in advance, and if it goes well? It's embarrassing, but I leave this question to get your advice if there is anyone who has such experience.   [GOH163, Code RR-P]

In cases like this, the students were hoping to use greater familiarity (i.e. lower D) for personal benefit, building a close relationship with someone with high reward/coercive power in order to leverage a positive decision and to override institutional acceptance criteria.

In summary, one set of comments and questions posted on the websites indicated a desire to understand the roles, responsibilities and degree of power of a supervisor in the UK higher education system. Some of this was simply in terms of understanding the labels, but more significantly the students wanted to understand the role that the supervisor plays in the application process and especially how much power they do or do not have. As we shall see in the next section, they felt that understanding this was important as it would affect how they should communicate with the supervisor and professional services staff.

4.2   Comments and questions on communication protocols

As can be seen from Figure 2, students' comments and questions about communication protocols related to two main issues: the timing of their communication with (potential) supervisors and the content of their communication.

With regard to the timing of communication, there were 42 postings that raised questions such as whether or not supervisors should be contacted directly, and if yes, when in the application process they should be contacted.

Q5. *paksajiwŏnŭl chunbihago issŭmnida. kyosu sŏch'inŭn ŏnŭ chŏngdo wallyodoen sangt'aeinde ŏttŏn sigŭro k'ŏnt'aegŭl haeyahalji kami chal anoneyo. p'ŭrop'ojŏri sangdangbubun chinhaengdoen sanghwangesŏ k'ŏnt'aegŭl haeyahalji animyŏn CV chŏngdoman ch'ŏmbuhae chogŭmirado iltchik k'ŏnt'aegŭl hanŭn'ge chohŭlji morŭgessŏyo. choŏn put'aktŭrimnida!*

I'm getting ready to apply for the PhD programme. I have more or less finished searching for professors [to contact], but I am not sure how to contact them. Should I contact [the professor] when the proposal is substantially done? or Is it better to contact him/her with my CV as early as possible? Please give me some advice! [GOH175, Code CT-W-I]

Others were unsure what to do when they had received no reply, wondering whether they 'should' email again. Although there is no explicit mention of the underlying concern, the very fact that the person is posting a question indicates concern about handling the situation in the 'right' way, perhaps lest s/he annoy the supervisor.

Q6. *meil ponaejamaja sŏngjŏkp'yorŭl murŏbosyŏsŏ paro ponaedŭryŏnnŭnde 2chugakkai taedabi ŏpsŭsineyo tarŭnjiwŏnjadŭlgwa pigyorŭl hasinŭn kŏtkat'ŭnde kidaryŏyadoenayo? wŏllae irŏk'e hanch'amittaga taedabŭl haejusinŭn'gŏnji morŭgenneyo ㅠㅠ animyŏn kyosunimŭi tappyŏnŭl kidarigoittago hanbŏndŏ ponaeyahanayo.. chega chŏngmal kagosip'ŭnbunyarasŏyoㅠㅠ*

As soon as I sent an e-mail [to a professor, s/he] asked for the academic transcript, and I sent it to him/her straight away. However, I have received no reply from him/her for almost two weeks. I think s/he is comparing me with other applicants. Do I have to wait? I am not sure if taking this long for him/her to reply is usual. ☹ Or should I send him/her an email again saying I am still waiting for his/her reply? It's a field I really want to study. ☹

[GOH67, Code CT-W-R]

Sometimes these relational concerns were expressed very explicitly.

Q7. *phD op'ŏrŭl padatkuyo, 9wŏl ch'ulguk yejŏngimnida. chidogyosunimkke op'ŏ surak allyŏdŭrimyŏnsŏ kandanhi kamsa meirŭl tŭriryŏgo hanŭndeyo pot'ong op'ŏ padŭn hu ch'ulguk chŏnkkaji kyosuwa yŏllagi ŏnŭ chŏngdo sŏnkkaji ogoganayo? ajik ch'ulgugi hanch'am namannŭnde 'kŭrŏm hakkyoesŏ poepkessŭmnida' hagido mwŏhago kŭrŏneyo. ildanŭn ŏnjeŏnje ch'ulgukhal kyehoegida chŏngdo malssŭmdŭrigo kŭttaekkaji tto yŏllaktŭrigettago haryŏ hamnida. han'gugin chidogyosuman kyŏnghŏmhaebonjira sŏyangin chidogyosuwaŭi kwan'gyenŭn chom natsŏneyo. chom umun kat'kin hajiman kyŏnghŏm issŭsin pundŭl choŏn put'aktŭrimnida^^*

I have got the PhD offer, and I'm leaving in September. I will write a brief thank you email to the supervisor and let him/her know that I have accepted the offer. To what extent do you usually get in touch with your supervisor between the point you receive an offer and before you leave the country? I still have a lot of time until I leave, so I think it's inappropriate to finish off

the email saying, 'I'll see you at the university'. I think for now I will let him/her know when I would fly, and finish off the email saying, 'I'll contact you again'. Since I have only experienced Korean supervisors, I am not used to the relationship with a Western supervisor. It may sound like a silly question, but those who are experienced, please give me some advice 😊

[GOH146, Codes CT-W-R and MG-C]

As with Q2, this student referred explicitly to potential cultural differences. Once again s/he interpreted culture as a national-level phenomenon, expressing uncertainty about the type of supervisor–supervisee relationship that exists in 'Western' contexts, and wondering how that affects the frequency with which they make contact with each other.

Q7 also suggests some concern over the wording of their message. In fact, the content of their messages was also an issue of great uncertainty. Some wanted to know what they should include when initiating contact with a potential supervisor, as Q8 illustrates.

Q8. *naenyŏne yŏngguk taehagwŏn iphagŭl mokp'yoro chunbijungin haksaengimnida. kyosunimkke k'ŏnt'aekhanŭn kwajŏnge taehan choŏnŭl kuhagoja hanŭndeyo, k'ŏnt'aekhal ttae churo ŏttŏhan naeyongŭro kŭrŭl ssŏyahanŭnjiyo? chagisogaewa kwansimbunya, nonmunjuje kŭrigo chiwŏn yŏbu kanŭng hogŭn pulganŭng i chŏngdoro haesŏ ssŭnŭn'ge chohŭn'gŏnjiyo. ŏttŏn punŭn chasehage ssŭnŭn kŏsi chot'a, tchalge ssŭnŭn kŏsi chot'a hogŭnhagŏpkyehoeksŏna iryŏksŏ hogŭn nonmun p'ŭrop'ojŏrŭl ch'ŏmbuhanŭn kŏsi chot'a tŭngŭi malssŭmdŭrŭl hasinŭn kŏt kat'ŭnde kami chal sŏji anneyo. wŏdŭe chŏgŏboannŭnde 2chang pullyangi nawasŏ maeu tanghwangsŭrŏpsŭmnida.*

I'm a student who is preparing to apply for graduate school in the UK next year. I'd like to ask for advice on how to contact a professor. What should I write mainly about when I contact him/her? Is it better to include self-introduction, research interests, thesis topic, and ask whether I can apply for it or not? Some people say I should write it in detail, some others say it's better to write a simple email; while others say it is better to attach a SOP or a CV, or a proposal, but I am not quite sure. I wrote a draft in MS word and I'm panicking as it was about two pages long.   [GOH181, Code MG-C]

Others were uncertain how many questions they could ask on what topics and whether handling this inappropriately would convey a bad impression.

Q9. *kŭlgo changhakkŭmi yŏnggugenŭn kŏŭi ŏptajiman kŭraedo hoksi changhakkŭm padŭl su issŭlji irŏn'gŏtto munŭihaedo kwaench'anhŭlkkayo? sasil mutko sip'ŭn kŏsiya kŭoeedo sandŏmigat'chiman kyosunimhant'e sisik'olk'ol*

murŏbogido chom kŭrŏk'o kwaenhi ŏsŏlp'ŭge kyosuhant'e k'ŏnt'aekhaettaga ohiryŏ chiwŏnhagido chŏne isanghan aeranŭn;; nappŭn insang chulkkabwa kŏkchŏngdo toego

It is said there is almost no funding available [for Koreans] in the UK, but I wonder if I can ask if I can get some funding. There are lots of other questions I want to ask, but I think it is inappropriate to ask the professor about every detail. Also, I am worried if I'll rather give him the bad impression, even before I apply, that I'm a strange [student].   [GOH58, Code MG-A-F]

The link with impression management can be seen very clearly here. In other words, such students were concerned about the risk of annoying the supervisor through inadvertent inappropriate behaviour, and thereby negatively affecting their goals of obtaining financial support and building a positive relationship with the supervisor. Others wanted help in wording awkward or difficult messages – ones that could be annoying or offensive to the potential supervisor. Interestingly, they sometimes were concerned about conveying a bad impression, even if they were likely to decline any offer they received.

Q10.   *manil, chega k'aenada tŭngesŏ p'ulp'ŏndingŭl padasŏ op'ŏrŭl padŭn yŏng-guktaehagŭl najunge kaji ank'e toel kyŏngu, ige chom paesin^^i toenayo? sasil... chiwŏnhanŭn haksaeng ipchangesŏnŭn, t'ŭkhi paksaegenŭn p'ŏnd-ingdo chungyohan munjego, kŭraesŏ pulgap'ihage yŏrŏgosŭl chiwŏnhage toenŭnde.... irŏk'e meildo yŏrŏch'arye chugo patko risŏch'i p'ŭrop'ojaldo pon-aego hadaga an'gamyŏn waenji.... han'guk chŏngsŏsang koengjanghi mian-han nŭkkimi tŭnŭnde.... irŏn kŏn ŏttŏk'e taech'ŏhaeya hanŭn kŏnjiyo?*

If I manage to get full funding from somewhere else like [a university] in Canada and later decide not to go to the UK, will this be seen as a betrayal 😊? Actually... funding is important for students who submit applications, especially for PhD students, and it is inevitable that [students] apply to a few different universities... However, since I have communicated [with the professor and staff] through email a few times and sent my research proposal, being Korean, I somehow... [would] feel embarrassed and sorry if I decided not to go... What is the best way to deal with this situation?

[GOH221, Code MG-A-M]

Once again, we see an appeal to 'being Korean' and the tendency to contrast 'Korean' ways of doing things with behavioural patterns and concerns in countries like the UK.

In summary, many of the comments and questions posted on the websites reflected concerns over communication protocols, seeking to understand how best to communicate with their potential supervisor, in order to maximise appli-

cation success while also building/maintaining positive relations with them. Potential national differences in ways of relating were a common theme underlying the majority of the posts.

5. Discussion

5.1 Goals and issues of uncertainty

In concrete terms, the main goal of all the students was to handle successfully their applications for entry to UK higher education. This included their task-related goal of being offered a place with a suitable supervisor and the relational goal of making a positive impression on the supervisor. All their postings were aimed at acquiring the information they felt they needed in order to achieve these interconnected goals. We suggest that there were three interrelated facets to this, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Motivations underlying students' information-seeking behaviour

Motivational source of the postings		Issues of uncertainty
Useful background role-related information (for planning purposes)		– What the role labels refer to – What power the supervisor has in the application decision-making process
Relational management with Impression management	Avoidance of offence	– Whether one should make contact directly with the supervisor – When to make contact – What kinds of questions can be asked – What documents to send – Whether it is acceptable to send follow-up emails when some clarifications are needed or when no response has been received – How to handle awkward situations, like declining an offer – What terms of address to use – How best to avoid upsetting the supervisor
	Pro-active care for supervisor	– What presents to give to a supervisor

Firstly, some wanted role-related information, and especially about the decision-making power of the supervisor, for planning purposes. This was so they

could decide how far to focus on relating to their potential future supervisor. If the supervisor played a vital role in the application decision-making process, they would give greater priority to relating to the supervisor than if his/her role was more peripheral.

Secondly, many students assumed that it was important to manage the process of relating as effectively as possible, and so they asked questions with regard to that (see especially the comments and questions reported above on communication protocols). Avoidance of offence seems to be the primary motivation here: to create as positive an impression as possible, avoiding any unintended faux pas. They seemed to think that by managing the relationship effectively in this way, they would be maximising their chances of getting accepted on the one hand and, if they had already been accepted, of building a good initial relationship with their supervisor.

Thirdly, in occasional cases, students' uncertainties reflected care and concern for the supervisor – how best to pro-actively build the relationship. We explore this further below.

5.2   The impact of culture: Emic perspectives and 'being Korean'

A thread running through nearly all of the postings was a concern that the UK higher education system may be different from that in Korea, including the application and decision-making processes, and ways of relating to (potential) supervisors.

Kádár and Haugh (2013) point out that in cross-cultural/intercultural research, the unit of analysis is particularly important. Analysing politeness at the level of language, society or nation has been widely criticised (e.g. see Eelen 2001) and community of practice and relational networks have been suggested as alternatives (Kádár and Haugh 2013). However, neither of these possibilities fit the situation here, as the applicants and the supervisors are not yet part of the same social group. The students perceive themselves as out-group members, and in reality that is what they actually are. They themselves pitch their concerns in terms of possible national differences, and it is hard to see what an alternative affiliative perspective could be.

In line with theorising by Berger and Bradac (1982), Spencer-Oatey et al. (2019) and Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2020), the students were concerned about potential differences in various elements of Korean and British educational systems, including:

–   Professor–student role rights and responsibilities (e.g. Q1 & Q5);
–   Professor–student role relations in terms of P and D (e.g. Q2);

– Rapport management with professors, including for goal achievement (e.g. Q6 & Q8) and maintenance of smooth relations (e.g. Q7, Q9 & Q10).

This by no means is meant to suggest that these concerns are in any way unique to Korean students and that people from other national cultural backgrounds would not have such concerns. Rather, the argument is that the students were concerned about these matters and were unsure how far they applied in other contexts and how best to handle them. Their concerns were closely linked with their goal of being accepted onto the programme of their choice. In other words, if supervisors have decision-making power, and if relationships with superiors need to be constantly maintained and strengthened, then managing the initiation and ongoing frequency of interaction is clearly of central importance. This certainly emerged in our data.

Such concerns are likely to be universal. However, it is possible that the major focus the students placed on understanding the various facets of the professor-student role relations links with the emic Korean concept of *kibun*. This concept does not have a true English equivalent but literally means 'mood' or 'feelings'. Yet it represents far more than emotions and plays a vital role in communication interactions in the Korean context. This term has been used in many different disciplines and works (e.g. Bae et al. 2018; Lee and Mathur 1997; Robertson 2019), but Crane (1968, 7), in probably one of the first works that discusses this concept in relation to intercultural communication, defines *Kibun* as follows:

> The state of an individual's inner feelings, his prestige, his awareness of being recognized as a person, the defence he receives from his fellows – all these factors determine his morale, his face, or self-esteem, essentially his state of mind, which may be expressed in Korean by the word *kibun*.

Since establishing and preserving interpersonal interactions is vital in developing and maintaining harmonious relationships in Korea, grasping others' *kibun* and conserving it in the communicative context is widely regarded in Korean society as essential. DuBois (2004, 67) argues that "preserving proper *kibun* is essential to accomplishment" whilst disturbing or damaging interlocutor's *kibun* may result in termination of communication or may "cut off relationships" (Harris, Moran, and Moran 2004, 405).

Given that interpersonal and communicative relationships cannot be established face-to-face for the Korean students examined in this study, it is difficult for them to identify *kibun* over online interactions, thus it can be expected that uncertainty over how to manage the communicative situation is much higher than usual. In addition, reasons why students seek for information about when and how best to make contact, what questions can be asked, and how to handle awk-

ward messages, can be related to the concept *kibun*, in that upsetting a potential supervisor's *kibun* is regarded as a potential threat to the future relationship.

In terms of Haugh et al.'s (2011) argument that it is important to distinguish between two types of first-order perspectives, emic perspectives and participant perspectives, we would maintain that both elements are present in the postings. The very fact that the students are posting the questions demonstrates participant orientation, and the concerns reflected in the questions can be linked with the emic Korean concept of *kibun* as explained above.

5.3   Implications for interpersonal and intercultural pragmatics

What then are the implications of the findings from this study for interpersonal and intercultural pragmatics?

Firstly, we would argue that our findings throw new light onto people's motivations for politeness and the management of interpersonal relations. Many years ago, Kasper (1990, 194) argued that all the early politeness theories, such as those proposed by Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987), Fraser and Nolan (1981), and Leech (1983), conceptualised politeness as strategic conflict avoidance. A contrasting perspective was proposed by the Japanese linguists Ide (1989) and Matsumoto (1988, 1989) who argued that people's primary politeness motivation was to conform to social expectations. These contrasting positions have been argued from a universalist/culture-specific perspective, but there has been little debate of people's motivation for politeness. An exception is Spencer-Oatey (2008). She maintains that people can have different rapport orientations (rapport enhancement, rapport maintenance, rapport neglect, and rapport challenge) and argues that failure to handle appropriately the three bases of rapport (face sensitivities, perceptions of sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals) could disturb interpersonal harmony. Our study indicates that both strategic and social conformity motives are closely intertwined: students were motivated by the strategic goal of getting accepted but wanted to conform to 'UK norms' in order to achieve them.

Secondly, our current study draws attention to the importance of goals. There were several interconnected elements to this: transactional (application success), personal (self-presentation), and interpersonal (establishing/maintaining smooth relations). The students were particularly concerned about impression management (Leary 1995; Leary and Kowalski 1990). They feared that a bad impression might negatively affect their chances of success and/or might start the relationship off on a poor footing. While interpersonal harmony and impression management are clearly linked, we would maintain that they can be separated conceptually. For instance, a student might make a positive impression academically on a potential

supervisor, while not having any particular influence (either positive or negative) on their relational harmony. We would argue, therefore, that the notion of goals needs to be acknowledged more fully within interpersonal and intercultural pragmatics as an important factor (as argued by Spencer-Oatey 2008 in her rapport management model) and that impression management needs to be incorporated and addressed more fully. The issue of pro-active relationship building, such as through care and consideration for others, also needs more research, as Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2020) argue.

Thirdly, in the discursive approach to politeness (e.g. Watts 2003; Locher 2006), the emphasis is on analysing current interaction. For instance, Locher (2006, 262) states the following:

> The discursive approach to politeness stresses that we first of all have to establish the kind of relational work the interactants in question employ to arrive at an understanding of the then-current norms of interaction.

While analysing relational work as it unfolds is clearly extremely important, our data indicate that a very valuable complementary approach is to analyse metapragmatic comments on discourse planning. Usually, metapragmatic analyses are carried out on the discourse of unfolding interaction or on post-event reflections. In the case of our data, the majority of the metapragmatic comments are forward-looking and reflect concerns about future interaction, with a desire to avoid or prevent problems.

Finally, the study raises questions about 'role relations' and the extent to which they can be specified. The students' uncertainties ranged from relatively 'structural' elements to much more variable facets. For instance, the decision-making power of the supervisor is probably primarily an 'institutional' aspect of a supervisor's role, and there will almost certainly be institutional/departmental procedures around the documentation that a student needs to submit. However, in terms of contacting the supervisor (an issue that caused students great uncertainty and consternation), this is likely to be much more fluid, both personally and contextually. Supervisors probably have their own personal tolerance/interest thresholds in terms of things like frequency of email contact, and so whether that aspect of role relations can be specified explicitly is highly dubious. Moreover, such facets are likely to vary dynamically during the process of interaction, making any specification even more problematic. Yet the students treated all of these elements as potential areas of national cultural difference and were anxious to receive advice on all of them, both 'structural' and interpersonal. Some might argue that they are thereby wrongly taking an essentialist approach to culture, but if that is how they are orienting, this in itself needs to be addressed. As Turner (2002) points out, the key point is that if people are behaving *as if* role rights and

obligations can be specified, then this cannot be ignored. We would argue that more research is needed into role relations, including which aspects have some consensus and which are more fluid, for different types of role relations in different cultural contexts. Gelfand's (Gelfand 2018; Gelfand et al. 2011) concept of tight and loose cultures, in which details of rules and strictness of rule-keeping can vary across cultural groupings of different sizes, might offer some useful pointers.

6.   Concluding comments

This study has demonstrated that background information on role relations is of great importance for relational management and communication planning in high stakes intercultural interaction. A perceived lack of such information generated uncertainty in less powerful persons (in this case, student applicants) and led to the use of extractive strategies (Ramirez et al. 2002) to seek advice and guidance to overcome their perceived lack.

In this study, potential cultural variation in the perceived rights and obligations associated with a given role (in this case, PhD supervisor) and their implications for assessments of role relations were of central concern. However, very little is known about cultural similarities and differences in relation to this, including possible emic concepts and values, and we suggest that this would be a fruitful area for future intercultural pragmatic research. At present there is no clear framework for conceptualising the rights and obligations associated with social roles, and there is little information on the content of any such set. We thus suggest that interdisciplinary research, drawing on expertise in both pragmatics and psychology, could be a valuable way forward. Nevertheless, it will be important to keep a crucial caveat in mind: while certain 'structural' aspects of role rights and obligations (e.g. the power of a supervisor to make an application decision) may be specifiable, others (e.g. when and how to contact a supervisor) will be much more variable and probably impossible to specify meaningfully.

Acknowledgements

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