

# Contexting Koreans: Does the High/Low Model Work?

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*South Korea is assumed to be a high-context culture with extensive shared information and an emphasis on relationships in doing business. The following study reported here tests this assumption and illustrates similarities and differences between Korean and American writers in an attempt to document language differences between high- and low- context societies. Data in the texts studied did not confirm the high/low context features expected. South Korean texts showed more similarities to than differences from the American texts, and the language features found suggest a more complex context situation than the high/low context model may be able to accommodate.*

Key words: Intercultural, Korean, context, communication

**A**FTER WORKING FOR SEVERAL YEARS with middle managers in the Daewoo Corporation, one of South Korea's largest conglomerates and part of the Chaebol network of influential Korean companies, I became curious about the assumed differences between Korean and English communication styles. Most researchers believe that South Koreans have a high-context culture with extensive amounts of understood information and an emphasis on relationships in doing business. My Korean students, when presented with this assumption, agree with it and agree that knowledge of this characteristic is necessary in order to do business effectively with South Koreans. Using documents written by my South Korean students and comparing them with those written by my American students, I hoped to illustrate the linguistic differences between one high-context culture and a low-context culture.

The term *contexting* has been part of the business communication vocabulary for a number of years. Borisoff and Victor have defined the

word as "the way in which one communicates and especially the circumstances surrounding that communication" (Victor, 1992, p. 137). The term originated with and was developed by Edward T. Hall in several books (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983) in which he created a triangle model of shared information ranging from low to high. Victor has taken Hall's triangle model together with Rosch and Segler's continuum of cultures (Rosch & Segler, 1987, p. 60) to indicate which cultures are high and which are low (Victor, 1992, p. 143).

Business communication instructors have embraced this notion of high and low context as a good way to explain cultural differences in speaking and writing. In addition to the organizational studies that include the high/low context idea to help explain cultural differences, textbooks have begun to include this information in chapters on cultural diversity (Treece & Kleen, 1998; Berko, Wolvin, & Ray, 1997; Bovee & Thill, 1998). Even those authors who do not use the terms high and low context consider the words to mean that countries tend to fall somewhere on a scale from a collectivist to an individualist orientation. Hofstede coined the terms in the early 1980's and, along with others, such as H. C. Triandis, developed a theory of national culture that offers a way to compare and contrast various communication customs. Countries typically considered to be high context include Japan and Saudi Arabia; countries considered to be low context include Germany and the United States. South Korea is considered a high-context culture by all writers, and this assumption suggests that South Koreans value the community more than the individual, emphasize personal relationships, and use a number of face-saving strategies in doing business.

## **Background**

In 1994, the Daewoo Corporation and the University of Michigan negotiated a contract in which selected Daewoo middle managers would enter a specially designed Michigan MBA program. This program involves an intense 14-month period of study that combines on-site classes in South Korea, distance-learning classes, and an eight-month stay in Ann Arbor. Communication is an essential component of the Daewoo program; therefore, the Daewoo group of students take a writing assessment, take various communication classes and workshops, and write in most of their required courses. Those of

us who teach in these classes have used the concept of high versus low context to better help us explain communication concepts and varying expectations across cultures. In general, instructors in the program believe that the high/low context concept has been useful in their teaching.

The first group of Daewoo students who entered the program began their communication course with a writing assessment. Most of the students received a low evaluation on this assessment, primarily because of their language problems. What was interesting about this assessment, however, was that the papers did not conform to our expectations regarding organization and line of reasoning. Of the 40 members of this group, 39 were South Korean and one was Chinese. Thirty-one South Korean writers chose a direct organizational pattern and used a deductive line of reasoning that would have generated high assessment scores except for the language errors and weak supporting data. I was surprised but knew that the study was very small and not well organized. For the next group, I was determined to set controls and be systematic in my analysis.

As the second group of Daewoo students began, I was able to work with them at the beginning of their program. My research objective at this point was to define and illustrate the language characteristics of a high-context culture, such as South Korea, and compare these traits with a low-context culture, such as the United States. The texts I used in the study consisted of a set of 38 responses to a timed writing assignment. For comparison, I analyzed 29 American responses to the same timed writing assignment used for the Daewoo students. After this analysis, I reviewed two additional sets of papers written by Daewoo students: one set written in the first week of their communication course at the beginning of their program and the second written for an organizational behavior class toward the end of their program. I used these additional sets of papers to confirm or question the data from the first set.

## **Methodology**

Theoretical bases for this study include functional grammar and pragmatics. A functional approach to language as applied by M. A. K. Halliday and others tries to account for how the language is used in context, how meaning is created within this context, and how each

element in the language can be explained by its function in the system; therefore, this approach is commonly known as systemics (Halliday, 1985). Pragmatics deals with language as a "social action" consisting of "speech acts" (Beaugrande, 1993) and provides a way to look at writing features, such as politeness strategies, and put them in a context of meaning that constitutes action.

If the term *high context* suggests a group rather than individual orientation and a high level of understood information, then a message written by a "high context" individual should exhibit less contextual information, less detail (because the information is already known or understood), more general references to the overall situation, and often more politeness strategies. Because the information required by the timed writing case is negative in part and sensitive as a whole, the organizational pattern of the message is also important.

To test these assumptions, I looked at the following language characteristics: (1) overall level of specific versus general information; (2) contextual information; (3) politeness strategies, including modal auxiliaries passive constructions, and face-saving phrases; (4) level of accountability, indicated by the use of personal pronouns; (5) organization, whether direct (recommendation in the first sentence); modified direct (recommendation in the first paragraph); indirect (recommendation later in the message); (6) implicit versus explicit communication of negative news; and (7) line of reasoning, whether linear or recursive.

My intuitive assumptions regarding this group of South Koreans led me to expect some distinct differences between their writing and that of the American group. In studying the South Korean papers, I expected to find more general rather than specific information (with specifics understood by the context), more politeness strategies, including a greater number of modal auxiliaries and passive constructions, more indirect organizational approaches, including indirect and implicit communication of negative news, and more recursive rather than linear patterns of reasoning. I was surprised, and disappointed, by the results. These expectations were not confirmed by the data in the texts.

## Analysis

Students were asked to respond to a company crisis in the form of an oil spill and asked to choose a company spokesperson from among three candidates.

### Specific Versus General Information

Information on the candidates was provided so that the students could use data to support their recommendations. Much of this information was quite specific, including both positive and negative information on all three candidates. In reviewing the papers, I noted that both groups of writers, South Korean and American, used the specific data provided to support their recommendations more often than they used general information. For example, an American student wrote this to support her recommendation:

Gerald Samraj has excellent communication skills. Before joining STC, he spent many years in Canberra as Press Secretary for the Australian Prime Minister.

South Korean student wrote something similar:

It is important for the spokesperson to have excellent communication skills. Gerald Samraj has excellent skills. He spent many years in Canberra as Press Secretary for the Australian Prime Minister.

Examples of students who used more general information to support their points are:

(American) Gerald has excellent oral communication skills. He has also had a lot of experience and knows how to deal with international situations.

(South Korean) Successful communication can greatly help us overcome this crisis by making the press and people friendly with us. Mr. Samraj has very good qualification on this point.

Four students of the 38 South Koreans used only general information to support their points (11%). Four students of the 29 Americans used only general information to support their points (14%). The sense of what constitutes reasoning and support seems to be similar for both groups, although I expected the information given in the case to constitute a shared understanding in the Korean group. Therefore, I expected to see fewer specific references in the Korean documents.

### **Contextual Information**

In reviewing the exophoric references, or references to the overall context of the situation, I saw concrete differences between the South Koreans and the Americans. For example, a typical beginning for an American paper was the following:

In response to your request, I am writing this memo to suggest a public spokesperson for STC Corp. during the present crisis.

In contrast, the following was more typical of the South Korean writers:

I reviewed our crisis concerning the tanker oil spill off the coast of Florida, and I thought that I must be very careful to choose the company spokesperson who can influence how the public perceives our company for many years after the crisis is over and forgotten.

In the opening paragraphs, the South Koreans generally included more information on the context than the Americans. In the examples above, the American writer includes only a reference to a request for input and to the "present crisis." The South Korean writer includes information on what the crisis concerns and what the overall objective of the message is. Using this model, 20 of the 29 American writers (69%) opened with minimal contextual information. Of the 38 Korean writers, 16 opened with minimal contextual information (42%).

These results should not be confused with direct versus indirect organizational patterns. Although more context is included in more of the Korean writing, the major recommendation was most often direct. The question here is simply amount of context, and if the South Koreans are writing from a high-context perspective, then we might expect them to provide less rather than more explicit contextual information. In terms of high- and low-context cultures, we would expect the Americans, who come from a low-context culture, to have less need for explicit contextual information and, therefore, be brief in setting up the situation. But I had expected the South Koreans either to be brief or to focus on general rather than specific information because of their assumed shared understanding. The fact that more South Koreans than Americans provided explicit contextual information was a surprise.

### Politeness Strategies

Our assumption regarding people from high-context cultures is that they use more politeness strategies because of the need to save face, especially in negative situations. Brown & Levinson's work on politeness (1987) offers ways to isolate these strategies. The papers in the current study show three basic kinds of strategies: modal auxiliaries, passive constructions, and face-saving phrases.

As mentioned earlier, the case asked the students to recommend as spokesperson one of three candidates to handle the media during a company crisis involving an oil spill. In addition, students were to say why they did not choose the other two candidates. Modal auxiliaries are useful in giving negative news (e.g., "John may have a problem with ..." as opposed to "John is not as skillful in ..."). In these papers, both the Americans and the South Koreans used many modal auxiliaries. The average modal per paper for the Americans was 12.3; the average per paper for the South Koreans was 12.8. All writers used modal auxiliaries to some extent, but there was no real difference in usage between the Americans and the South Koreans. Because I expected the Americans to use fewer modals than the South Koreans, I was surprised. However, basing that expectation on the idea that Americans come from a low-context culture may have led me astray. Carol David and Margaret Ann Baker's article on compliance-gaining features in management memos (1994) provides a more complete view of the kinds of persuasion and politeness strategies actually used in managerial writing. This article suggests that relationships influence communication even in low-context cultures such as the U.S.

Use of passive constructions was the same in American and South Korean papers. Passives were used much less than modals in all the papers, the average in both American and South Korean papers being 2.6 per paper. Face-saving phrases, the third politeness feature I looked for in the papers, were prevalent throughout all the documents. An example of a face-saving phrase is the following (by a Korean writer):

Kosala Gooneratne has superb oral communication skills and competence in dealing with the press. However, because he is currently unfamiliar with day-to-day operations at STC, it would be difficult for him to address all the questions.

Half the South Korean writers (19 out of 38) used phrases similar to this one in explaining why they were not recommending certain candidates. Just under half of the American writers (12 out of 29) also used phrases such as this one to explain their recommendations. I was expecting tact to be more obvious in the Korean texts than the American texts. However, the American writers did not fulfill my high/low context expectations in this area, and I was beginning to suspect that my assumptions regarding American writing were as skewed as those regarding Korean writing.

### **Level of Accountability**

Passive construction use is related in part to the level of accountability. One way to evaluate accountability is to look at the use of personal pronouns. The overall difference in the papers in this regard can be shown by the following two ways of stating the required recommendation: (1) "It is recommended that John Cooke be chosen as spokesperson during this crisis." (2) "I recommend that John Cooke be chosen as spokesperson during this crisis." More South Koreans avoided personal pronouns than did Americans, but the overall number was not great. Four South Koreans avoided personal pronouns; only one American avoided them. As a politeness strategy, avoiding personal pronouns would allow a greater distance between writer and reader, thus appearing less confrontational. I expected a greater number of the South Korean writers to use this strategy.

### **Organization**

Although teachers of business communication usually speak of "direct" or "indirect" organization, I have added a category to these patterns because of the difficulty of deciding how far into the message a writer can go and still be "direct." The categories I have considered are "direct," meaning the recommendation came in the first sentence; "modified direct," meaning the recommendation came in the first paragraph; and "indirect," meaning the recommendation came later in the message. I had a strong expectation that the South Korean writers would be less direct than the American writers. In this area at least, I thought that my assumptions about high-context cultures would be confirmed.



Again, I was wrong. Of the American writers, 17 of the 29 used the direct approach (59%); but a relatively high percentage of the South Koreans also used this approach, 17 out of 38 (45%). Ten of the American writers used the modified direct approach (34%); fifteen of the South Koreans used this approach (39%). A greater percentage of the South Koreans used the indirect approach, but the numbers were not significant (6 writers at 16%); only two Americans used the indirect approach (6%).

Based on my understanding of high-context cultures and their emphasis on relationships and face-saving strategies, I was absolutely convinced that the majority of the South Koreans would choose an indirect organization for news that was sensitive and partly negative, as presented by the case. At this point, I was forced to question all my assumptions of high- and low- context cultures and how those cultures communicated.

### **Implicit Versus Explicit Communication of Negative News**

Because the case used in this study asked writers to explain why they did not choose certain candidates for the position of spokesperson, I knew I could get examples of communicating bad news. I was not interested so much in the amount of information given in the explanations or even in the strategies used as addressed by Campbell (1990) in the article "Explanations in Negative Messages," but rather whether the information was specific ("He has poor communication skills.") or general ("He may be uncomfortable dealing with the press."). The case provided a lot of specific information from which the writers could draw conclusions. My expectations were that the Koreans would use more general (implicit) information because that would be viewed as more polite by the reader(s) and that the Americans would use more specific (explicit) information because, as a low-context culture, we expect concrete data to support claims or recommendations.

The American writers used explicit data somewhat less than I expected: 16 students out of 29 (55%). The other 13 students chose implicit information. The Korean writers, however, overwhelmingly used explicit information in explaining their reasons for not choosing certain candidates. Out of 38 students, 30 (79%) chose to be explicit; only 8 (21%) were implicit. Why did the Koreans prefer to be so explicit? One possible answer is that they found it easier to take the

language directly from the case rather than formulating new sentences that generalized the data. There are other possibilities, though, that I will suggest in the discussion section.

### **Line of Reasoning**

The final feature I reviewed involved looking at whether the line of reasoning/recommendation and support/explanation was linear or recursive. My expectations on this issue were informed not only by my assumptions regarding high- and low-context cultures but also by John Hind's article, "Inductive, deductive, quasi-inductive: Expository writing in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai" (from Conner & Johns, 1990).

At this point, I had lost all confidence in my high/low context assumptions, but generally I expected the American writers to use a clear linear approach in making their points and the Korean writers to use a less linear approach. The Americans did use a linear approach: 26 out of 29 (90%). The surprise was that 3 students were clearly recursive in their presentation. The Koreans, though, also used a linear approach: 32 out of 38 (84%), with only 6 writers (16%) choosing a more recursive style. This result was one of the more intriguing of the study, and I will address the issue in the discussion section. Table 1 summarizes the data.

### **Discussion**

Why these documents did not yield the differences I was expecting from my definition of a "high context" culture is difficult to assess. Some possibilities include: (1) The case heavily influenced the information provided and the organizational and reasoning patterns of the responses; (2) The language difficulties of the non-native writers prevented responses in their usual style; (3) The South Koreans' perceptions of American communication styles (direct, specific, and the like) led to an attempt to write in that style; (4) South Korean communication styles are not as "high context" as we have assumed, or we are not interpreting "high context" features realistically.

Language difficulties could have influenced the amount of specific versus general information, the amount of contextual information, and the explicit versus implicit negative news. The case provided a lot of detail that the writers could use to support their recommendation.

Even if a writer would not ordinarily communicate so plainly, a non-native writer would be tempted to use the explicit words of the case because of the difficulty of restating them in a more diplomatic way. The other interpretation of the South Koreans' specific and explicit use of the information is that they are more straightforward than we would expect from a high-context culture.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Analytical Results on Seven Language Characteristics**

Feature Reviewed	South Koreans (38)	Americans (29)
Specific/General Information	Specific = 34 (89%) General = 4 (11%)	Specific = 25 (86%) General = 4 (14%)
Contextual Information	Minimal = 16 (42%)	Minimal = 20 (69%)
Politeness Strategies:		
Modals	12.8 average per paper	12.3 average per paper
Passives	2.6 average per paper	2.6 average per paper
Face-saving phrases	Used = 19; not used = 19	Used = 12; not used = 17
Level of Accountability	4 writers avoided personal pronouns	1 writer avoided personal pronouns
Organization	Direct = 17 (44%) Modified direct = 15 (39%) Indirect = 6 (16%)	Direct = 17 (59%) Modified direct = 10 (34%) Indirect = 2 (6%)
Giving Negative News	Explicit = 30 (79%) Implicit = 8 (21%)	Explicit = 16 (55%) Implicit = 13 (45%)
Line of Reasoning	Linear = 32 (84%) Recursive = 6 (16%)	Linear = 26 (90%) Recursive = 3 (10%)

The use of politeness strategies by the South Koreans is not surprising. However, the fact that the American writers used these strategies to the same extent is unexpected if we accept the stereotype of American communicators as explicit and direct to the point of rudeness. This study suggests a more complex situation in regard to politeness strategies in both high- and low-context cultures than has been addressed.

The two linguistic features that indicate the strongest challenge to our notions of high and low context are the organization patterns and the lines of reasoning by both the South Korean and American writers. The American writers in this instance fulfill our expectation of a low-context culture. Ninety-three percent of them use a direct or

modified direct organizational pattern; ninety percent are linear in their reasoning. Although a high-context culture, such as South Korea, would suggest that South Korean writers would have used more indirect organization and a more recursive line of reasoning, that was not the case in these documents. Eighty-three percent of the South Korean writers used a direct or modified direct organizational pattern; eighty-four percent were linear rather than recursive in their reasoning.

Because this result surprised me, I decided to look at some additional data from the first group of Daewoo students (the present study uses the second group of Daewoo students) who had been in my managerial writing class in the winter of 1996. There were sixteen of these students, nine from the Daewoo group and seven others. In a survey I had prepared on the issue of organization, fifteen South Koreans said that, in general, they would use the direct approach when making a recommendation in their company, even if part of the message was negative. The one who did not agree said that his approach would depend on the personality of his reader.

A follow-up exercise that asked the students to place various pieces of information in the order they thought optimal resulted in all sixteen organizing the information in a linear reasoning pattern. I looked at the nine Daewoo students' original writing assessments to determine if they had used linear reasoning and discovered that they had. However, seven of the first group of Daewoo students had used a recursive line of reasoning in their original writing assessment tests.

## **Conclusions**

Because this study is limited in a number of ways, involving a relatively small number of writers and documents in an academic context, conclusions have to be presented carefully. The first group of 39 papers raised questions; the second group of 38 students and their 114 papers confirmed that the questions were legitimate and strongly suggest that our interpretations of the high/low context model in terms of text are in error. The strongest implication I see from the study is that, although South Korea does fit the high-context profile, South Koreans' communication styles vary from other Asian high-context countries. South Koreans appear to be more direct and straightforward in their communication styles than, say, the Japanese. The pre-

sent results contradict Hinds's study on organizational patterns in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai, in which all the documents studied showed a "quasi-inductive" organization. The reason for this is probably the nature of the documents studied: Hinds's documents were essays, and although he makes excellent points regarding writing in general in these cultures, writing in managerial contexts is quite different due to the increased importance of the context and the relationships involved.

The other implication of this study is that the situation regarding context in cultures is too complex to make generalizations. David Victor, in *International Business Communication* (1992), quotes DeMente (1988) about Korean business attitudes: "In Korea, as in many other Asian countries, business is a personal affair. The product, the profit, and everything else takes a backseat to personal relations." Well, maybe. Relationships are important, but profit is equally so. The following quotation from the Chairman of Daewoo shows a slightly different perspective: "... business is more than making money; losing less money is sometimes important, too ... when you're in a losing period, the healthy thing is managing to cut the losses. So I travel to get immediate, up-to-date information and make decisions on the spot" (Kim, 1992).

As the need to teach intercultural communication grows, so does the need to investigate the complexities of communicating across cultures. The notion of high- and low-context cultures is useful at a macro level, but it becomes problematic when applied to text. All of my interviews with the South Korean students reveal a pragmatic, common-sense approach to doing business with a strong focus on the bottom line. This approach is revealed in their written text. Certainly more data and further studies are needed to confirm or deny the evidence so far and to explain the South Koreans' unique communication characteristics.

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