What is Behind "Face-Saving" in Cross-Cultural Communication?*

Kun-Ok Kim

Chung-Ang University

The term 'face' and the face itself play a vital role in Korean culture and in language behavior. Koreans believe that everything concerning one's birth, degree of education, sophistication, and fate is related to face.

Emotions and feelings are undoubtedly universal. However, the expression of emotions is socioculturally influenced. In a society in which there is an elaborate hierarchy based on age, sex, seniority, rank, and prestige, the culture plays a key role in social communication.

Koreans have been educated and conditioned through their culture to comprehend the essence of the spoken message, and the unspoken message as well, by means of reading faces. Face for Koreans serves as more than a place for the direct revelation of emotions. Face is also a place for concealment of a given emotion. Therefore, in the eyes of outgroups, a Korean may appear to be a fine actor who utilizes the conventional means of emotional expression without actually experiencing the emotion; as a charlatan who does not employ coherent, corresponding facial expressions; or as a 'ghost' who does not experience any emotion or feeling at all. Koreans use uniquely secretive tactics on the face during their communication which outgroups may not appreciate: shame and guilt may be intermingled, sadness and smiles coexisting, attachment and detachment interwoven, and self-control and social control combined.

The word 'face' is one of the most frequently used words in idioms and idiomatic expressions. 'My face is wrinkled' means I am ashamed or discredited; 'You have smeared my face with black ink' means you have disgraced my dignity; 'His face is wide' means he has many influential friends; and 'one has no face to see' means he is very sorry for what has happened. 'His face is even or smooth' means he is nice-looking in a derogatory way; and 'My face itches' is used in a context in which a person receives an

exaggerated compliment or service. In case a person does not meet another's expectation, he is often referred to being a person 'not worth even his face value.' To indicate an impudent person, 'he has thick facial skin' or 'even a weasel has a face' is frequently used. An imprudent person naturally has 'thin facial skin.'

In the Korean language, 'face' is one of the words which has numerous synonyms tailored for specific social discourse purposes. *Nattsak*, *sangpandeki*, and *ssangtong* are used for 'face' in the pejorative sense; *yong-an* and *jon-an* are used in a sense of expressing deference.

It seems quite natural, and at the same time sounds logical, that face -reading is one of the most frequently practiced fortune-telling devices. Face-readers are hired by some of the Korea's leading businesses to help them select from among job-applicants. Face-readers are present during job interviews of college graduates in some of the nation's leading companies.

This paper will show how 'face-saving' is intertwined with language behavior. Korean culture, which inhibits self-disclosure, has produced a breath-taking language behavior which relies not only on the eyes and the ears, but, most of all, on the senses. In other words, the language behavior of Koreans puts great importance on face and its saving.

Confucianism and its emphasis on respect for the head have long prevailed in the Korean culture. Any part of the head, such as the face or the beard, is given importance and respect. Consequently, snatching off top hats or headbands would be considered to be far more offensive than any other form of physical assault. In the past, it was taboo for Korean females to expose their faces in public. They either covered their faces with a long mantle, or they could not leave the house until after sunset. Their faces were not even exposed even after their death. It was easy to tell the sex of a body drifting down the river: A body with the face down was a female's. One of the most authentic and original devices of seeking death at one's own hand used by Koreans was to cover the face with several layers of wet, durable paper. As the paper dried, it would eventually stop breath. By doing this, the Korean was able to preserve his precious inheritance, the body, for ancestors. The following anecdotes illustrate how Koreans have treated the head with honour and respect.

Shin Che-ho (1880-1936), a historian and journalist, always wet his apparel whenever he washed his face using a water basin because he refused to bow his head before such a mean, trivial thing as a basin. He only bowed his head before his parents, seniors, and ancestors. Kim Kweng-pil (1454-1504), father of Korean Ethical Codes, died with his precious combed beard in his mouth. Woo Nam-Yang, a scholar during the Lee Dynasty, neither combed his hair, nor bowed his head during his entire life, except during the ritual ceremony for the deceased (Lee Kyu-Tae, 1987). Wearing a foreign object, such as glasses, was forbidden before anyone of a higher rank. The author of this paper experienced the same that she was not allowed to put on glasses before her

parents-in-law during the first three years of her marriage, regardless of her near-sighted vision. Even today, taxi drivers are reluctant to take in a spectacled man as their first rider. Some refuse to let a spectacled woman ride in their taxi early in the morning. It is a common practice for Korean restaurants to refuse to receive a female or a spectacled person as their first customer. Wearing a foreign object on the face even includes a heavy mustache and beard. Thickly bearded Koreans are not likely to be spotted on the streets.

The face is the most important and suitable place to show a Korean's good educational and family background, and, at the same time, is the best place to conceal emotions. In a culture where self-disclosure is not appreciated, the direct and candid revelation of emotional expressions is discouraged and taboo in certain social contexts.

It is second nature for Koreans to cover the mouth when they smile or laugh. This is most frequently done by Korean females. The first thing Koreans do in a situation of shock, embarrassment, grief, or fear is to cover the face with the hands. Koreans believe that turning heads will ultimately save another's face. Koreans frequently turn their heads if they happen to see something embarrassing. Koreans turn their heads to pretend that they have not witnessed an embarrassing scene; for instance, foreigners' kissing in public. By turning away, Koreans believe they save the foreigner's face from embarrassment. Shimchong, the main character in *Shimchongjun* novel from Lee Dynasty, covered her face with her long skirt before she jumped into the Imdanngsoo to earn money worth three hundred bags of rice; and the seamen who were at the scene with Shimchong turned their faces, as if they had not witnessed her action, It is still a practice that a Korean woman does not lift her face during match-making. A Korean bride at her wedding walks toward the altar with her eyes cast downwards. Some Koreans still hold the superstition that a bride who smiles on her wedding day will have hardship for the rest of her life. The majority of Korean males regard it as a breach of etiquette if a female shows her face in public without wearing make-up. Naturally, one of the immediate goals and great interests of female high school graduates is to learn how to apply make-up.

In psychology, defense mechanisms protect self-esteem, especially when a person guards himself against supposed threats, excessive anxiety, or negative consequences. The purpose of such defense mechanisms is maintaining and enhancing self-esteem and at the same time avoiding self-degrading or social rejection. Many defense mechanisms take the form of disguise. In a Western culture, where self-esteem concerns an individual's own self-esteem, this defense mechanism is for the benefit of the speaker or user who actually employs the tactic. Therefore, the defense mechanism works as a strategy to restore the loss-of-face. In other words, face-saving involves the interactants' own self-esteem. However, a Korean adaptation of this psychologically universal behavior in a situation, such as frustration, anxiety, and conflict, is manifested in a reversed interpretation and application. In Korean culture, where 'I' is buried within 'we'

(O-Young Lee, 1967, cited in Park), the defense mechanism for the purpose of face-saving or self-defending is regarded as a device employed by a lesser man. The self-effacing characteristic of the Korean culture is counterbalanced with a distinct disclosure of deference, priority, and consideration for a person in a higher hierarchy. In other words, the highest person in a vertical structure is given primary attention and fidelity. Koreans employ face-saving tactics in a completely reversed order; the face-saving mechanism for the sake of others, but not for the individual, A Korean applies the defense tactics in order to maintain and enhance the other's self-esteem and to give others credit for merits, A Western concept of face-saving may be based on, humorously speaking, 'good me,' 'bad me,' but 'not me'. In a Korean culture in which self-effacing is given primary importance, the concept of face-saving is humble me, honourable You, and never You.

As seen above, 'face' in Korean culture plays a very elusive, however, very important role. Consequently, saving a face 18 one of the most valued codes of conduct. Behind the ostensible intent of face-saving tactics lies the essence of a self-effacing culture: the intrinsic intent of face-saving strategies is to protect others from the consequences of loss-of-face,

Face-saving has been regarded as far more valuable to many Koreans than any other asset, including life itself, There are numerous stories in which Koreans prefer 'loss of life' to disgrace. During the the war against Japan in 1592, a Korean woman watched from her hiding place as the soldiers brutally killed her two sons who were held as hostages. The mother chose the sons' deaths because she knew that becoming a rape victim would disgrace her husband's family, ancestors, and offspring for many generations (Kyu-Tae Lee, 1987), In an extreme case, a Korean female was killed by her own family or killed herself simply because there was a rumor that she might have been unfaithful to her long-deceased husband.

Old-time Koreans believed that becoming an object of rumors was a crime punishable by death. By choosing death, the family was able to prove that the rumor was false and at the same time to restore the family's good standing. Thus, death has been a primary means of communication for Koreans to prove themselves innocent when they are falsely judged and accused.

Even today Korean youth choose death before dishonour, for example. when they are falsely accused of stealing a classmate's money or when they cannot maintain excellent school work. They prefer death to dishonour for fear that they may disgrace the family's good name. In most cases, they leave a note of their reason for suicide stating that they feel guilt for their inability to meet their parents' expectations or to fulfill their dreams, and they are mortified by the humiliation their family may receive after their death. Thus, failure to conform to social requirements or ethical codes and failure to meet the family s expectations are considered a loss-of-face which in turn results in suicide. Fusé (1980) reports that selflessness and strict conformity are regarded as supreme

virtues among the Japanese, and the weak individual ego-formation in personality structure is considered a major contributing factor to suicide.

The following elucidates some delicacies involved in the non-verbal and verbal art of face-saving.

Some polite Koreans smile when they announce a beloved family member's death. They smile out of pity for others and out of guilt for causing distress as if their announcement will cause others great sadness and misery. In order to lessen the burden, they render a small smile. Koreans sometimes smile when they attempt to make amends for the errors or wrongdoings. Even if a daughter-in-law had not got along well with her mother-in-law in Korea, she will wail loudly at the mother-in-law's funeral in order to save her mother-in-law's face as well as her own. A wife who has been badly beaten by her husband will answer the door with a big smile in order to save her husband's face. Koreans often demonstrate silence and blankness over situations which are out of their hands. A daughter-in-law's tacit protest against heavy housework or against a hateful mother-in-law is often manifest in her baby's or dog's outcry of pain. There are two classic sayings referring to a Korean's face-saving: "A scholar who has starved for three days shows himself picking his teeth" and "a noble man who has an apparel of hemp shows himself on a freezing day pretending that he perspires from warmth."

It is one of the most frequently practiced tactics for Korean mothers not to show happiness or pleasure over their children's exceptional school reports lest their visible emotional expression may spoil the child's good behavior. The mother usually makes a stern face and tells him that he should keep up his good work. The mother believes that not to show happiness on her face is a way to let him know that his mother knows how to control emotions and feelings.

For the sole purpose of her husband's face saving, a highly qualified and talented wife will not seek a job to support her starving family, especially during the period in which her husband is out of work. She saves her husband's face by telling others that they cannot accept an invitation to dinner on the grounds that her husband is very busy working even at night. She urges her husband to take his time finding a job by telling him that they have enough money to last a long time, despite the fact that they can survive only a few days with what they have. A very faithful and good wife never tells her own mother that her son-in-law is out of work; however, she also manages to borrow money,

The following episode (D. Kosofsky, 1990) excerpted from Korea Journal expresses the essence of a Korean's verbal behavior of 'face-saving '.

While at the office, Mr, Cho had received a telephone call from his mother-in-law that his wife had entered the hospital for what appeared to be a premature delivery. When a second phone call informed him of apparent complications, he promised to come to the hospital immediately after work. Needless to say, he was preoccupied and worried, looking forward to quitting time. However, a few minutes before six o clock, his boss

stopped by his desk and asked if he would be willing to stay late, perhaps very late, in order to put the finishing touches on a proposal for an important advertising contract. Mr. Cho, worried and rattled as he was, answered, "Of course I'll work late. I'm feeling fine and I'm eager to see that proposal completed."

In this case, 'very late' ran well past midnight, and it was not until three o'clock the next morning that Mr. Cho finally made it to the hospital. His anxiety, frustration and helplessness during that long night in the office, can readily be imagined.

By saying 'yes' to his boss's request, Mr Cho was able to save the boss's face, not only from the boss's guilt feeling over the truth (if it had come out), but also from his ignorance of his subordinate's difficult situation. At the same time he was able to tell himself and ultimately save his face that he was not such a small person as to fret over such a 'petty' thing as his wife's medically complicated delivery.

In an attempt to save another's face, a Korean is willing to deny a reality which is advantageous to himself, and willing to become a scapegoat. In an attempt to save another's face, he is eager to go along with others, despite the negative consequences. In an attempt to have the other's face without his realization, he is willing to be a victim of mistrust, miscomprehension; and sometimes leads himself to self-depreciation and self-destruction.

Koreans often use paradoxical expressions. A subordinate may answer his superior, 'How would a person like me know the answer? I do not have the slightest idea,' despite the fact that everybody knows he is the only person who has the answer. A Korean father in the hot spring water will say in the face of his child, 'Wow, it is cool.' A Korean guest may say to his host's offer of lunch, 'I am very full,' in spite of his hunger.

Koreans frequently use evasive expressions, such as 'I am all right,' 'It is all right,' or 'I don't know what I should say,' especially when they do not wish to reveal their direct, however, prompt answers.

Koreans use a cliche of course most willingly to show blind deference, regardless of its positive or negative personal consequences.

Koreans live with dangling expressions, such as 'You are perfectly correct, but---,' I cannot agree with you more, but---,' 'I am mortified to say, but---,' 'Of course, I will definitely do it, but---,' 'I don't know anything, but---,' and most of all, 'I do not know what and how I should bring this up, but ---"

Socio-cultural variants influence the modes of emotional expressions and emotional reactions, especially when they are involved in undesirable and negative consequences. The characteristic of such modes is manifested in the manner of both verbal and non-verbal language behavior. Korean society, which is rooted on a hierarchy based on sex, age, seniority, rank, and prestige, has traditionally determined, regulated, and reinforced the culture of self-effacing. The culture of self-effacing in turn predisposes a Korean to maximize the private self and at the same time to minimize the public self (Kyu-Tae Lee, 1987). In consequence, self-interest is regarded as something in opposition to group

interest, and self-control is likely to be identified with self-punishment. Koreans draw the conclusion that self-interest and self-control aim at the establishment of group interest and group control.

In a society where self-interest is taken for selfish, unethical conduct, the practice of taking blame for other's troubles is considered one of the virtues of social morality. It is taken for granted that a Korean mother takes the whole blame for her son's poor school marks before his teacher or his family. The Minister of Home Affairs of Korea bears the blame for a brutal murder and hands in a letter of resignation: this is done to save the face of his superior, the President,

It is interesting to observe the subtleties in emotional reactions when one loses face. Berk (1977) reports that individuals (his subjects were Americans) experience extreme discomfort, hurt, or anger when they lose face. On the other hand, the most immediate and distinctive emotional reaction for Koreans in an identical situation is represented by a hybrid term of shame and guilt.

A mother who has a high school drop-out son will lament that she is ashamed, that she is the one who should feel guilt, and that her wrong education has brought the family a bad name. A mother will torment herself over her old-maid daughter's staying out all night and say,' I am humiliated in the face of others. This is my 'karma.' When a Korean girl slips on the icy road, she softly yells, 'Oh, how I am humiliated. I hope no one has witnessed this embarrassing scene.' Koreans will react with shame in many situations in which Westerners would feel no guilt; they would feel guilt in the situations in which Westerners would react with embarrassment; and they would react with a coalescence of shame and guilt in situations where Westerners would feel sorrow or even sheer joy. In other words, shame and guilt are not necessarily an ethical accompaniment to moral conscience of wrong-doing or fault.

Above all, it is significant for Westerners to bear in mind that Koreans take into account another's loss-of-face and designate priority to others' well-being and interests. Furthermore, Koreans realize that loss-of-face brings shame and guilt to individuals which in turn may lead them to self-destruction. Face-saving mechanisms displayed by a Korean speaker's acts and language behavior in a cross-cultural communication setting are not premeditated. They are rather conventionalized behaviors nurtured, patterned, and cherished as products of education and family background, and they exist for the sake of others' self-esteem. The cross-cultural communication setting for Korean speakers is considered in a context paralleling a vertical situation in which Korean communicants act in the presence of a higher hierarchy of sex, age, seniority, rank, and prestige.

Westerners are likely to make naive judgments about Koreans' verbal and non-verbal language behavior which is really founded upon Korean's self-effacing nature in human relationships. Consequently, the self-defense strategies or the means of expiation of wrong-doing in the Korean culture are different from those of Westerners. A Westerner's interpretation and comprehension of a Korean's language behavior solely in

terms of the ostensible verbal and non-verbal evidence would be too risky to account for cultural discrepancies. Cultural discrepancies which are socio-culturally specific are the products of cognitive structures as well as the idiosyncrasies of particular socio-cultural resources shared and valued among ingroups of many generations. The socio-cultural discrepancies are often labelled as eccentricities from the outgroup's standpoint.

A Korean would feel guilt and shame simultaneously over his son's failure of a college entrance examination. A Korean spinster would feel guilt towards her family for remaining unmarried. A Korean woman would let go of her beloved on the grounds that she is too much in love with him to hold him. A Korean wife would appreciate her husband's silence as a means of his repentance. A Korean grandfather would whip his body before his ancestors' graves for his grandson's wrongdoing. A Korean mother would make a stern face over her child's exceptional school records and would laugh for happiness secretly in the bathroom. A Korean would blindly say to his superior, 'Yes. I will work overtime to help finish the project.' overriding the fact that his sick wife is waiting to be operated on in the hospital. A Korean would order the same dish that his American host does, even though the dish may turn his stomach. A Korean would blindly agree to his ancestors' ancient lessons and would willingly go to hell with them. Above all, a Korean would smile over a tragedy, a humiliation, an insult, or an injustice while he weeps inside for sorrow, shame, guilt, and remorse. Thus, within a Korean, two conflicting entities of human nature and emotion co-exist compatibly, simultaneously, and transcendentally: shame and guilt intermingled, sadness and smile coexisting, attachment and detachment interwoven, and self-control and social-control intertwined.

* *This paper was supported in part by 1992 Chung-Ang University Research Funds.*

References

Baummeister, R. F. & Tice, D. M.
1985 Self-esteem and responses to success and failure: Subsequent performance and intrinsic motivation, *Journal of Personality,* 53 (2), 450-467.

Berk, B.
1977 Face-saving at the singles dance, *Social problems*, 24 (5), 530-544.

Brockner, J., Rubin, J., & Lang, E.
1981 Face-saving and Entrapment, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 17 (1), 68-79.

Chick, K.

1986 Interactional perspectives on communicative needs of Zulu work seekers, *Journal of Multilingual and multicultural development*, 7 (6), 479-491.

Choi, Min-Hong

1980 *Comparative Philosophy: Western and Korean Philosophies Compared*, Seoul, Korea: Seong Moon Sa.

Fusé, T.

1980 Some characteristics of suicide in Japan, *Psychiatric Journal of the University of Ottawa,* 5 (2), 89-94.

Kim, Jin-Man

1981 *Ugly Korean.* Seoul, Korea: Tam Koo Dang.

Klopf D. W. & Myung-Seok Park

1982 *Cross-Cultural Communication: An Introduction to the Fundamentals,* Seoul, Korea: Han Shin.

Kosofsky, D.

1990 Exploring Korean culture through Korean English. *Korea Journal* 30 (11), 69-83.

Lee Kyu-Tae

1987 *Consciousness Structure of Koreans*, Seoul Korea: Shinwon Moonwha Sa. Vols. 1-4.

Park, Myung-Seok

1979 *Communicative Styles in Two Different Cultures: Korean and American.* Seoul, Korea: Han Shin,

Protinsky, H, & Maxwell, J,

1977 The refusal to behave rationally. *Rational Living*, 12 (1), 28-30.

Shin, Chang-Soon

1984 *Korean Grammar Study.* Seoul, Korea: Parkyongsa.

Shin, In-Chul

1977 *A Study on Korea.* Seoul, Korea: Tamkoodang.

Stedje, A.

1983 Deception and dissociation markers as indicators of communication strategies. Unpublished paper from a conference in Stockholm, Sweden, and Abo. Finland, October 25-26, 1982.

Yoon, Tae-Rim

1986 *Personalities of Koreans,* Seoul, Korea: Tongbang Doseo.