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# Cultural Differences in the Use of Hedges in Japanese and Korean

## — Case Study of “omou” and “sayngkakhata” —

日本語と韓国語のヘッジ使用の文化的な相違

— 「思う」と「생각하다」を事例として—

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### Abstract

A hedge is generally known as an expression that softens affirmations or direct expressions, is a universal concept in any language, and exists in both Japanese and Korean. However, when using languages, the amount of appropriate hedge is known to vary from culture to culture. In this research, we use the politeness of Brown & Leivinson (1978,1987) as a theoretical framework for "omou" of Japanese acting as a hedge and the corresponding Korean "sayngkakhata" Consideration was made. Analysis result, Japanese "omou" was found to be used as a hedge in many cases compared to "sayngkakhata" in Korean.

**Keywords：** hedge, Japanese, Korean, omou, sayngkakhata

### 要旨

ヘッジは、一般的に断言や直接的な表現を和らげる表現として知られており、どの言語にもある普遍的な概念であり、日本語でも韓国語でも存在する。ところが、言語使用の際に、適切なヘッジの量は、文化によって違うことが知られている。本研究では、ヘッジとして機能している日本語の「思う」とそれに対応する韓国語の「생각하다(sayngkakhata)」を事例とし、理論的な枠組みとして Brown&Leivinson(1978,1987)のポライトネスを用いて考察を行った。分析結果、日本語では、韓国語より多くヘッジが使われ、「思う」は韓国語の「생각하다(sayngkakhata)」に比べて、多くの場合にヘッジとして使われることが解った。

キーワード：ヘッジ、日本語、韓国語、思う、생각하다

## 1. Introduction

Hedges are one of many ‘mitigating devices’ to reduce the force of speech acts. (Lakoff, 1972; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Caffi, 2007). Hedges are known to soften affirmative statements or direct expressions. According to Itani (1996: 30), hedging is a pragmatic phenomenon by which the speaker communicates that the speaker has limited conviction in or commitment to a proposition communicated by one’s utterance. This characteristic of hedging helps to mitigate force of speech acts which may be unwelcomed by those who hear them (referred to as hearers). Hedges do not form a natural class within linguistic expressions, but exist as a universal concept in any language.

The Japanese word “omou (思う)” and its corresponding Korean word “sayngkakhata (생각하다)” both function as a hedge (Lee, 2009). Both of these words weaken the illocutionary force and are utilized as means of negative politeness strategy. However, their usage varies between the two languages. In the following example, (2ab) in Korean respectively corresponds to (1ab) in Japanese.

Example:

- (1) a. 日本の今の医療制度は間違っていると思う。 (森山 1992:110)  
(nihono imano iryouseidoha machigatteiru to omou.)  
b. 乾杯したいと思います。 (森山 1992:112)  
(kanpai sitaito omoimasu.)
- (2) a. 일본의 현재 의료제도는 잘못되었다고 생각해.  
(ilbon-ui hyonjay uilyoceyto-nun calmostoy-ess-tago saynggakha-y.)  
b. ?건배하고 싶다고 생각합니다.  
(gonbaeha-go sip-tago sayngkakha-pnita.)

In the example above, “sayngkakhata” was used in (2a) as an equivalent to “omou” in (1a). However, using the same for (2b) as an equivalent to (1b) becomes quite awkward. (Ogoshi, 2008; Lee, 2008). The disparity in the use of “omou” in (1ab) versus “sayngkakhata” in (2ab) is due to the cultural differences that exist between the Japanese and Korean languages, and also the differences in politeness strategy when using hedges. Existing studies on hedges lack a systematic analysis of these differences. This Study aims to examine the similarities and differences of using “omou” and “sayngkakhata” from the perspective of politeness theory.

The outline of this study is as follows: chapter 2 will briefly review existing studies, and chapter 3 will explain politeness theory which is the theoretical framework for the

analysis. Method of analysis will be provided in chapter 4, and the results will follow in chapter 5. Finally, this study will be summarized as conclusion in chapter 6.

## 2. Existing Studies

In the field of comparative research, little attention was given to the analysis of “omou” and “sayngkakhata.” In 2005, Chun was the first to notice the difference in the usage of the two words, and many studies followed suit (Jung, 2006; Ogoshi, 2008; Lee, 2008). Chun (2005) pointed out that “omou” is an indirect expression typically found in the Japanese language, and is not always simple and clear in its translation into Korean language. Jung (2006) studied a number of Japanese novels which were translated into Korean, and found that many expressions or words other than “sayngkakhata” existed in the Korean language which all corresponded to the Japanese word “omou.”

More recently, Ogoshi (2008) and Lee (2008) have both identified the differences of using “omou” and “sayngkakhata.” Ogoshi (2008) and Lee (2008) have each pointed out that the method of using “sayngkakhata” in correspond to “omou” by Moriyama (1992) is partly inconclusive, and that further study is required. This paper aims to examine the similarities and differences of using “omou” and “sayngkakhata” as hedges in Japanese and Korean languages, based on the politeness theory as theoretical framework for the analysis.

## 3. Politeness Theory

Politeness is a key concept in defining the characteristics for similarities and differences of “omou” and “sayngkakhata.” In this paper, I define politeness as ‘actions to establish and maintain amicable human relationships’ according to Usami (2002:100).

Studies on linguistic expressions based on politeness theory have been carried out by scholars in various parts of the world, and more recently have been introduced to the fields of comparative research of Japanese and Korean languages. Among existing politeness models, the most influential and comprehensive one is Brown & Levinson’s now classic “face-saving” model (Usami, 2002; Huang, 2007).

Brown & Levinson’s theory of politeness is founded on Goffman’s (1967) sociological notion of “face.” Simply put, “face” is ‘the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). Furthermore, there

are two aspects to “face.” First, there is “positive face,” which represents an individual’s desire to be accepted and liked by others. Positive politeness is oriented to preserve the positive face of others. When one uses positive politeness, one tends to choose speech strategies that emphasize one’s solidarity/union with the hearer. Second, there is “negative face,” which refers to an individual’s right to freedom of action and his or her need not to be imposed by others. Negative politeness is oriented to maintain the negative face of others. When one employs negative politeness, one tends to opt for speech strategies that emphasize one’s deference to the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987:70).

Many types of speech acts such as apologizes, complaints, disagreements and requests intrinsically threaten face. Hence, they are called “face threatening acts (FTAs).” Since similarities and differences of using “omou” and “sayngkakhata” is influenced by strategies to save face, this paper will use Brown & Levinson’s (1978, 1987) “face-saving” model as theoretical framework for the analysis.

#### 4. Method of Analysis

For theoretical framework of analysis, we will apply the “weightiness (W) of a face-threatening act (FTAx)” from theory of politeness by Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987). The “weightiness (W) of a face-threatening act (FTAx)” is unlikely to be quantified, but Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987) suggests that in aggregate, it is defined by 3 factors across all cultures, and is formularized as following.

$$(3) \quad W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x \quad (\text{Brown \& Levinson, 1978, 1987:76})$$

$W_x$  is the numerical value that measures the weightiness of the FTAx,  $D(S,H)$  is the value that measures the social distance between speaker (S) and hearer (H),  $P(H,S)$  is a measure of the power that (H) has over (S), and  $R_x$  is a value that measures the degree to which the FTAx is rated an imposition in that culture (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987: 76). More specifically,  $R_x$  is a culturally and situationally defined ranking of imposition by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent’s want of self-determination or of approval (his negative-and positive-face wants) (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987:77).

Our analysis will utilize these 3 variables of social distance (D), power relations (P), and ranking of imposition ( $R_x$ ) mentioned in the “weightiness (W) of a face-threatening act (FTAx)” in politeness theory. Similar to the prior studies by Ogoshi (2008, 2012), D will be configured into 3 levels of social distance: far,

intermediate, and near. The same method in prior studies by Ogoshi (2008, 2012) will be applied to P, where P will remain equivalent since it will not affect the usage of “omou” and “sayngkakhata.” As for Rx, the ranking of imposition will be configured according to the level of value of relationship: when Rx is high, it will involve such actions as confinement, contract, or handling high-priced articles, and when Rx is low, it will involve gratuity or handling free articles.

In other words, analysis will be based on the assumption that P is equivalent in all situations, D configured into 3 levels, and Rx into 2 levels. In addition, Rx will have the same level of value relationship as D. According to previous research (Lee, 2014), “omou” co-occurs with sentences of assertives, directives, and commissives illocutionary force, whereas “sayngkakhata” only co-occurs with sentences of assertives illocutionary force. There is a clear distinction in this disparity when we examine with the variables of D, P, and Rx.

Table 1 shows the configuration of each illocutionary act in relation to D, P, and Rx, which will be the framework for examining co-occurrence of “omou” and “sayngkakhata.”

**Table 1. Configuration of Illocutionary Act and Rx, D, P**

Illocutionary Acts	No.	Rx	D	P
Assertives	1	high	far	equivalent
	2		intermediate	equivalent
	3		near	equivalent
	4	low	far	equivalent
	5		intermediate	equivalent
	6		near	equivalent
Directives	1	high	far	equivalent
	2		intermediate	equivalent
	3		near	equivalent
	4	low	far	equivalent
	5		intermediate	equivalent
	6		near	equivalent
Commissives	1	high	far	equivalent
	2		intermediate	equivalent
	3		near	equivalent
	4		far	equivalent

	5	low	intermediate	equivalent
	6		near	equivalent

(Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987) presented D, P, R in this order, but here, for convenience of explanation, R, D, P are shown in this order. (Lee2014:146-147))

For example sentences, judge the appropriateness of speech based on introspection of 3 Japanese native speakers and 3 Korean native speakers.

This paper assumes that when D is far, psychological distance exists, and thus, polite expressions such as “です/ます (desu/masu)” and “니다/습니다 (pnita/supnita)” are used normatively. When D is intermediate or near (relationships such as friends or family), we assume that casual/blunt expressions are used. Therefore, when D is far, casual/blunt expressions will not be used as a norm, and when D is near or intermediate, “です/ます (desu/masu)” or “니다/습니다 (pnita/supnita)” will not be used in the same sense.

From this, we will discuss the similarities and differences of using “omou” and “sayngkakhata,” and also the differences in the use of hedges in Japanese and Korean languages due to variables of D and Rx even under same speech acts. Due to time constraint, we will examine sentences with assertive illocutionary force which display the use of “omou” and “sayngkakhata” as examples.

First, we will look at an example when Rx is high and D is far. Speaker (S) and hearer (H) are both university professors who have just gotten to know each other and thus, have psychological distance. The university is holding a faculty meeting regarding relocation of school campus. They are involved in a discussion to relocate the school campus closer to the city since the number of student applicants failed to meet the university’s enrollment quota. (S) is in favor of the argument and supports it, whereas some of the (H) are against it. Following example is the statement made by (S). First, we will examine the example in Japanese language.

Example:

- (4) a. ここまで定員割れが続く以上、キャンパスを移転した方が望ましいと思います。  
(kokomade teinwarega tudukuizou, kyanpasuwo idensita houga nozomasii to omoimasu.)
- b. ここまで定員割れが続く以上、キャンパスを移転した方が望ましいです。  
(kokomade teinwarega tudukuizyou, kyanpasuwo idensita houga nozomasii desu.)

As shown in (4ab), (S) is going against the negative face of (H) by suggesting that

his/her thoughts or opinion is right and pushing it forward. This is an example of an FTA which threatens the other person's values or thoughts (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987: 65-66). In addition to using the normative word “です/ます (desu/masu)” which indicates high psychological distance, it is possible to convey one's opinion with respect to the negative faces of those who are against it by using “omou” in (4a). By doing this, it also indicates that what (S) is insisting is merely a personal opinion in the presence of (H) with high psychological distance. In other words, the assertive illocutionary force is weakened by adding “omou” as a hedge and negative politeness strategy is achieved. In contrast, (4b) has ended the sentence with just the polite expression of “です/ます (desu/masu).” By doing this, (S) is assertively expressing his/her opinion and the position in favor of relocating the school campus candidly without any reservation in (4b). In this case, negative politeness strategy is used without any hedges.

Next, we will examine the example in Korean language. (5ab) in Korean respectively corresponds to (4ab) in Japanese.

Example:

- (5) a. 여기까지 정원미달이 계속되는 이상, 캠퍼스를 이전하는 게 바람직하다고 생각합니다.  
(yeki-kkaci cengwen-mital-i kyeysok-toynun isang, kampuhsu-lul icen-ha-nun key paramjikhah-ta-ko saynggakha-pnita.)
- b. 여기까지 정원미달이 계속되는 이상, 캠퍼스를 이전하는 게 바람직합니다.  
(yeki-kkaci cengwen-mital-i kyeysok-toynun isang, kampuhsu-lul icen-ha-nun key paramjikha-pnita.)

Similar results are found in the case of Korean language as well. By using “sayngkakhata” in addition to “ㅂ니다/습니다 (pnita/supnita)” in (5a), (S) is able to soften his/her assertion and convey opinion with respect to the negative faces of (H). In contrast, when ending the sentence with just the polite expression of “ㅂ니다/습니다 (pnita/supnita)” as shown in (5b), (S) is assertively expressing his/her judgment and thoughts without any reservation, and is not taking into consideration (H) with opposing opinions.

Therefore, when Rx is high and D is far in sentences with assertive illocutionary force, “omou” and “sayngkakhata” may be used respectively as hedges in both Japanese and Korean languages, and negative politeness strategy with hedging is achieved.

Second, we will look at an example when Rx is high and D is intermediate. (S) and (H) are friends of similar age, and both belong to the same club at the school. They both



practice at the designated club activity room, but are trying to practice elsewhere due to some problems with the facility. First, we will examine the example in Japanese language.

Example:

- (6) a. こうなった以上、練習場を移した方がいいと思う。  
(kounattaizyou, rennsyuzyou wo idousita houga iito omou.)  
b. こうなった以上、練習場を移した方がいい。  
(kounattaizyou, rennsyuzyou wo idousita houga ii.)

As shown in (6ab), (6a) which uses “omou” and (6b) which does not use “omou” are both acceptable and sounds natural, but are slightly different in its meaning. In (6a), “omou” is used as a hedge and what (S) is insisting is merely a personal opinion in the presence of (H). By doing this, negative politeness strategy is achieved with a hedge that respects the thoughts of (H). In contrast, (6b) depicts a situation where (S) is strongly conveying a move to a different practice room. It indicates that there is no other choice but to move regardless any opinions (H) may have, thus, implementing a negative politeness strategy without any hedges.

Next, we will examine the example in Korean language. (7ab) in Korean respectively corresponds to (6ab) in Japanese

Example:

- (7) a. 이렇게 된 이상 연습장을 옮기는 게 낫다고 생각해.  
(ile-key toy-n isang yentupchang-ul olm-kinun key nat-ta-ko saynggakhata-y.)  
b. 이렇게 된 이상 연습장을 옮기는 게 나아.  
(ile-key toy-n isang yentupchang-ul olm-kinun key na-a.)

Different results are found in the case of Korean language. As shown in (7ab), (7a) which uses “sayngkakhata” is quite awkward, whereas (7b) which does not use “sayngkakhata” is more acceptable and sounds natural. We can learn that when D is intermediate in a relationship and arguments arise with high Rx, it is unacceptable and vague to use “sayngkakhata” as in (7a), and advisable to use negative politeness strategy without any hedges as in (7b).

As we have witnessed, in sentences with assertive illocutionary force, when Rx is high and D is intermediate, differences exist between Japanese and Korean languages. In Japanese, “omou” is used as a hedge in negative politeness strategy, whereas in

Korean “sayngkakhata” cannot be used and negative politeness strategy without any hedges is advised. Due to space restrictions, only a limited number of examples were presented. However, from this method of analysis, we can derive a comprehensive table of co-occurrence of “omou” and “sayngkakhata” for different illocutionary acts.

## 5. Result of Analysis

Based on the analysis, a comprehensive table of co-occurrence of “omou” and “sayngkakhata” for different illocutionary acts can be found as below.

**Table 2. Co-occurrence of Illocutionary Acts in Japanese and Korean**

Illocutionary Acts	No.	Rx	D	P	Japanese				Korean			
					omoi ma su	ma su/ desu	om ou	φ	sayng gak hap nita	bnita/ supni ta	sayn ggak hata	φ
Assertives	1	H	F	E	O	O	—	—	O	O	—	—
	2		I	E	—	—	O	O	—	—	X	O
	3		N	E	—	—	O	O	—	—	X	O
	4	L	F	E	O	O	—	—	O	O	—	—
	5		I	E	—	—	O	O	—	—	X	O
	6		N	E	—	—	O	O	—	—	X	O
Directives	1	H	F	E	O	O	—	—	X	O	—	—
	2		I	E	—	—	O	O	—	—	X	O
	3		N	E	—	—	X	O	—	—	X	O
	4	L	F	E	O	X	—	—	X	O	—	—
	5		I	E	—	—	X	O	—	—	X	O
	6		N	E	—	—	X	O	—	—	X	O
Commissives	1	H	F	E	O	O	—	—	X	O	—	—
	2		I	E	O	X	—	—	X	O	—	—
	3		N	E	—	—	O	O	—	—	X	O
	4	L	F	E	O	O	—	—	X	O	—	—
	5		I	E	—	—	O	O	—	—	X	O
	6		N	E	—	—	O	O	—	—	X	O

Note 1 : H=high, L=low, F=far, I=intermediate, N=near, E=equivalent

Note 2 : O represents “co-occurrence,” X represents “no co-occurrence,” and  
 – represents “not applicable” respectively.

(Lee2014:169-170)

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examined the use of hedges in Japanese and Korean, specifically focusing on examples of “omou” and “sayngkakhata.” Using Brown & Levinson’s (1978, 1987) formula of “weightiness (W) of a face-threatening act (FTA<sub>x</sub>)” as theoretical framework for the analysis, the following results were obtained.

First, in sentences with assertive illocutionary force, assuming P is equivalent, “omou” and “sayngkakhata” is used as hedges for negative politeness strategy in examples: 1) Rx is high and D is far, and 2) Rx is low and D is far.

Second, in sentences with directive illocutionary force, “omou” is used as a hedge for negative politeness strategy by co-occurring in three examples: 1) Rx is high and D is far, 2) Rx is low and D is far, and 3) Rx is high and D is intermediate. However, “sayngkakhata” is constrained when used as a hedge in sentences with directive illocutionary force, regardless of D and Rx.

Third, in sentences with commissive illocutionary force, “omou” is used as a hedge for negative politeness strategy in all examples, regardless of D and Rx. However, “sayngkakhata” is constrained when used as a hedge in sentences with commissive illocutionary force, regardless of D and Rx.

According to Itani (1996), “cultural aspects play an important role since the ‘appropriate’ amount of social hedging varies from culture to culture.” Using “omou” and “sayngkakhata” as hedges support this observation, and it can be witnessed in the context of both languages - Japanese and Korean.

For future studies, a survey on the actual usage of “omou” and “sayngkakhata” is highly recommended. To compensate for the shortcomings of the analysis based on examples of artificially made sentences, empirical evidences are required in future research. At the same time, regarding the actual usage of hedging, it is considered that there is a difference in generations and gender, so it is necessary to deepen further consideration with these points in mind.

## Appendix

This paper is based on the doctoral thesis I submitted to the Graduate School of International Media and Communications, Hokkaido University in 2014, and it is noted here that it is summarized and modified in English.

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