

# Disagreement as an interactional resource for affiliation in South Korean conversation

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## Abstract

This study investigates how South Korean speakers employ expressions of disagreement to promote social solidarity and convey affiliation. Using a conversation-analytic (CA) approach, it examines expressions of disagreement in naturally occurring Korean conversation drawn from the LDC CallFriend Korean telephone corpus. Prior CA research has generally treated disagreement as a dispreferred action, typically associated with resistance, opposition, or rejection in conflictual contexts. The present study explores how disagreement can be interactionally mobilized as a preferred action in South Korean conversation. By foregrounding the affiliative uses of disagreement in a specific cultural context, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of disagreement as a culturally variable and socially adaptive interactional resource.

Keywords: disagreement, South Korean conversation, conversation analysis, preference organization

## Introduction

Prior conversation analytic research on expressions of disagreement has generally treated disagreement as a dispreferred action, typically associated with resistance, opposition, or rejection, with much of the literature focusing on its relation to epistemic stance and mitigation practices in conflictual sequences (Heritage, 2012; Pomerantz, 1984). In such contexts, particularly in English, Japanese, and South Korean conversations, disagreements are frequently delayed, mitigated, or preceded by devices such as initial agreements, pauses, or repetitions in order to manage the dispreferred nature of the action (Ha, 2018a; Ha, 2018b; Mori, 1999; Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2007). In South Korean conversation specifically, expressions such as *kuntey* 'but,' silence, laughter, and the [agreement + disagreement] format are commonly used to delay or soften the force of disagreement (Ha, 2018).

In this study, we argue that in South Korean conversation, disagreement is used not only to express divergent opinions in conflictual environments but also as a resource for enhancing social affiliation in non-conflictual contexts. We focus on these practices particularly in the environments of responding to compliments and responding to self-deprecation. Pomerantz (1978) showed that in English conversation, compliment responses typically involve agreement and avoiding self-praise. In contrast, studies of Korean interaction report a higher frequency of deflecting or downgrading responses (Kang, 2004). In English

conversation, self-deprecation has been examined as a social action that invites affiliative uptake, often prompting recipients to counter it with disagreement, reassurance, or upgraded praise (Speer, 2019; Pomerantz, 1984).

## Data and methodology

This study employs a conversation-analytic (CA) approach to examine naturally occurring South Korean conversation. CA is a well-established qualitative methodology for analyzing social interaction, aiming to describe and understand talk-in-interaction through topics such as turn-taking, preference organization, and sequence organization (Sidnell, 2011). The data for this study come from the CallFriend Korean telephone corpus, which consists of naturally occurring conversations between native speakers of South Korean. All conversations were transcribed using standard CA transcription conventions, which enable the fine-grained, moment-by-moment analysis of interactional practices. A two-line transcription format is used in this study.

## Data analysis

In this study, we focus on two interactional practices through which such disagreements function to reinforce social solidarity rather than to create conflict: disagreement in response to compliments and disagreement in response to self-deprecation. Excerpt (1) illustrates an example of a common interactional practice in South Korean conversation, in which speakers reject compliments directed at themselves or their family members. The excerpt presents a segment of conversation between two female speakers, Mijin and Bori, discussing Mijin's daughter. In (1), Mijin expresses disagreement with Bori's compliment about her daughter.

(1) Disagreement to compliment (Ko\_6510)

01 Mijin: tantanhi kyoyuk sikhi-ko iss-tako

**(I)'ve been disciplining (my child) quite strictly**

02 hakkyo ka-se chinkwu-tul-hako chakha-key ha-lako::

**to be nice towards (her) friends at school.**

03 Bori:→ = a chakha-ci:: haha

**(Your child) is a good:: haha**

04 Mijin:→ °kulay?° way:: kulayto tto ci mamtaylo ha-llyeko kule-canha-yo.

**°Do you think so? ° Well still (she) keeps trying to do things  
her own way**

In the excerpt, Mijin talks about her daughter's school life and how she is disciplining her to behave at school (line 1). Upon hearing Mijin downgrading her daughter, Bori gives a compliment by saying a *chakha-ci: haha* '(Your child) is good' (line 3). Mijin immediately disagrees with this compliment in line 4. In this

non-conflictual context, the South Korean speakers achieve the interactional goal of solidifying social solidarity by both praising and rejecting the praise.

Excerpt (2) illustrates another common practice: the way a South Korean speaker expresses disagreement with an interlocutor's self-deprecation. In this example, two male friends, Minhø and Hajun, discuss their schooling and career choices. Here, Minhø disagrees with Hajun's self-deprecatory utterance, demonstrating how disagreement can function to affirm solidarity rather than express conflict.

(2) Disagreement to self-deprecation (Ko\_6334)

01 Hajun:→ haha hwuhoy-lul manhi hays-e

**haha (I) already regretted a lot**

02 :→ ai ssi akka-we cwuk-keys-ci sikan-i.

**Damn it It's a total waste of time.**

03 Minhø:→ mwe ceki (I sam nyen?) te ha-myen toy-nuntey mwe

**Well (you) just need to (study) (two or three years?) more**

04 ku- ku piyong-ppwun-i te an tul-canha.

**The only thing is to pay for the cost.**

In lines 1 and 2, Hajun says that he regrets having wasted so much time attending college. In response to this self-deprecation, Minhø immediately disagrees, saying that Hajun simply needs to continue his schooling a bit longer and that what is really required is only the cost of schooling (lines 3 and 4). As Minhø resists Hajun's self-criticism, the topic of their conversation shifts to the expenses associated with attending school, such as rent and tuition, as their conversation progresses. As this excerpt demonstrates, disagreeing with an interlocutor's self-deprecation can serve to reframe the situation more positively for the interlocutor and, in doing so, reinforce social solidarity.

## Conclusion

The present study has examined how disagreement can be interactionally mobilized as a preferred and affiliative action in South Korean conversation. Specifically, the analysis demonstrates that South Korean speakers may deploy disagreement in non-conflictual contexts, such as in responses to compliments and self-deprecation, not to initiate conflict, but to foster social solidarity. Furthermore, unlike disagreements in conflictual environments, disagreements in these non-conflict contexts are often produced without delay or mitigation. These findings show that disagreement, typically treated as a dispreferred action, can serve affiliative functions depending on the type of preceding action (e.g., compliments or self-deprecation) in South Korean conversation. Although the current dataset is limited, future studies should incorporate a larger corpus of conversational data to examine the various contexts in which disagreement is

mobilized to express affiliation, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of how this practice is organized and functions across different cultural contexts and social interactions.

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