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Second Language knowledge of pragmatic meanings: What do learners of Korean know about the Korean pronouns *ce* and *na*?



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined two related aspects in pragmatic knowledge: namely, knowledge of the contexts in which certain linguistic forms are prototypically used (i.e. form-context mappings), and the indexical meanings which are produced when a form is used in a particular context. We employed one-to-one metapragmatic interviews with 30 L1 Korean speakers, 28 L2 Korean learners in the UK as well as eight group interviews with 26 of the learners. The interviews focused on the participants' understanding of the Korean first-person honorific pronoun *ce* in relation to its non-honorific equivalent *na*. The findings revealed that, while the learners' understanding of the contexts in which *ce* is normally used was fairly similar to L1 speakers, the indexical meanings that they associated with the form-context mappings differed saliently from that of L1 speakers. In addition, the learners struggled to align with the L1 speakers' meaning interpretations and made unsuccessful attempts to incorporate them into their existing indexical systems. The findings thus demonstrate that form-context mappings represent only one part of L2 learners' pragmatic competence. Future research and pedagogical efforts are encouraged to take into consideration the indexical meanings that underly language usage and help learners make more informed linguistic choices.

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1. Introduction

One important aspect of pragmatic competence, defined by [Kecskes \(2015, p. 4\)](#) as “the ability to produce and comprehend utterances (discourse) that is adequate to the L2 socio-cultural context in which interaction takes place”, is the ability for L2 learners to understand, produce and negotiate pragmatic meanings. Studies have shown that L2 learners differ from L1 speakers in the ways that they understand various layers of pragmatic meanings related to areas such as politeness ([Brown, 2011](#); [Cook, 2001](#)), appropriateness ([Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016](#)) gender ([Kinginger and Whitworth, 2005](#); [Ohara, 2001](#); [Siegal, 1996](#)) and so forth.

In this paper, we look at L2 learner's understandings of two related aspects of pragmatic meaning: (1) form-context mappings (i.e., knowledge of which forms are prototypically used in which contexts) and (2) the indexical meanings

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which are produced when a form is used in a particular context. To take an example, in order for an L2 learner to understand the pragmatics of the English address form “Dr. Smith”, they would need to know that (1) this form maps onto contexts such as encounters with medical professionals and academics, and (2) when used in these contexts, it produces indexical meanings related to respect and expertise.

As pointed out by McConachy (2019), the SLA literature to date has tended to adopt a somewhat narrow approach to the ways that learners develop the ability to interpret pragmatic meanings. McConachy (2019), following Meier (2003), notes a tendency for studies to treat context in a fairly static way and for pragmatic awareness to be judged against normative behaviours of L1 speakers. In addition to this (and of particular relevance to our study), discussions of pragmatic meanings in L2 contexts tend to be limited to form-context mappings, and rarely discuss the ways that L2 learners develop knowledge of the indexical meanings that arise when forms are used in context, or indeed out of context. At times the assumption seems to be that learners can improve their pragmatic competence merely via training in matching linguistic forms to the contexts where they are used (e.g., Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Garcia, 2004), without any developed knowledge of the actual meanings produced. In contrast, the results of the current study will demonstrate that knowledge of form-context mappings does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with native-like understanding of indexical meanings. Also, we will show that L2 learners are active agents in creating and negotiating the meanings that are attached to the contextualized use of pragmatic forms.

In this study, we probe learners’ metapragmatic awareness of form-context mappings and indexical meanings, which demonstrates their emic linguistic understanding. We also compare their emic knowledge with that of L1 speakers. To do this, we conducted metapragmatic interviews with learners of Korean based in the UK as well as L1 speakers of the language. The interviews focussed on understandings of the Korean first-person pronoun distinction between *ce* and *na*. Although both of these words may translate as “I” or “me”, *ce* is prototypically used in interactions with elders, superiors, or adult strangers, whereas *na* is used towards intimates, children and, in some contexts, towards those of lower status or younger age (Yeon and Brown, 2019, p. 74). The understanding of *ce* and *na* by UK-based learners of Korean is a suitable focus for researching pragmatic meanings in L2 development, since it represents a linguistic contrast not found in English (and the other European languages spoken by our participants) and involves potentially unfamiliar form-context mappings and indexical meanings. We analyse how the learners of Korean and the L1 speakers understand *ce* and *na*, and we take the additional methodological step of asking the learners for their reactions to the L1-speaker interview results.

Our goal is to explore how learner knowledge of pragmatic meanings extends beyond simply knowing which form is prototypically used in which context and involves complex culturally-embedded knowledge of indexical meanings that learners play an active role in negotiating and creating. Accordingly, we aim to answer two questions:

- (1) How do learners understand the pragmatic meanings (form-context mappings and indexical meanings) of *ce* in relation to *na*, and how does this compare to L1 speakers?
- (2) Also, how do learners understand L1 speakers’ interpretations of pragmatic meanings?

The findings of the research are meaningful both to L2 pragmatics and to the growing body of im/politeness research that probes metapragmatic understandings of im/politeness-related concepts and semantic fields.

In the sections below, we begin by reviewing the contents of pragmatic meanings, L2 learners’ understanding of pragmatic meanings, and previous studies of Korean pronouns *ce* and *na* (Section 2). After overviewing the methodology in Section 3, the findings are presented in Section 4. Discussions and conclusions follow in Sections 5 and 6.

2. Background

2.1. Pragmatic meanings

Pragmatic meanings here are understood as perlocutionary effects that arise via the co-occurrence of pragmatic forms with pragmatic contexts (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014; Terkourafi, 2005). Metapragmatic awareness of pragmatic meanings includes at least two types of knowledge: (1) knowledge of form-context mappings and (2) knowledge of indexical meanings that arise when a form is used in a given context.

Knowledge of form-context mappings is “co-occurrence expectations” (Gumperz, 1982, p. 162) about the linguistic forms that typically occur in given contexts. This concept is analogous to what Nelson (1986, 1996) refers to as “Mental Event Representations (MERs)” and Hall (2018) calls “schemas of expectations”, and is also consistent with Terkourafi’s (2005) “frame-based” view of politeness. These expectations, representations or frames are learned during repeated interactive experiences and “form part of our habitual and instinctive linguistic knowledge” (Gumperz, 1982, p. 162).

Studies of L1 socialization show that children begin to learn form-context mappings from a young age and are also rigorously socialized into them. During interactions in their communities of practice, children “acquire knowledge of both contextual frames for interpreting actions and metacommunicative markers indicating which frames should be supplied” (Ochs, 1988, p. 10). From early on, children are socialised to use the most preferred linguistic forms for specific situations (Ochs, 1988, p. 13). For English, Greif and Gleason (1980, p. 162) found that American parents insisted that children provided the preferred form *thank you* when receiving a gift, observing that children were remarkably compliant but also that parents

insisted relentlessly if children refused to supply the form. The question remains, however, about how L2 learners build up this kind of “habitual and instinctive linguistic knowledge”, particularly if their exposure to the L2 is rather limited.

At the same time as speakers develop stereotypical beliefs of how pragmatic forms are related to certain contexts, they also acquire another layer of pragmatic meanings, namely, the indexical meanings of the pragmatic forms. This layer of meanings involves the language user's understanding of the “appropriate” message delivered by using a linguistic form normatively in its stereotypical contexts (i.e. the *n*-th order indexical meaning, Silverstein, 2003, p. 193). These *n*-th order indexical meanings are connected to more specific interpretations at the macro-social level, for example, assigning the speaker to a specific social category (e.g. a well-educated person), referred by Silverstein (2003) as *n*+1th indexical meanings. Indexical meanings may convey a variety of social dimensions, such as the speaker's relationship with or attitude towards the interlocutor (friendly, respectful, hostile, subservient, etc.), the social context of the interaction (formal, informal, etc) or the way that an utterance is intended (serious, playful joke), as well as factors such as the speaker's character (e.g., arrogant, funny, etc.) or identity (gender, social class, status) (Blommaert, 2005, pp.11–12).

The current paper also adds to a growing body of research that investigates im/politeness-related indexical meanings. Research in this area has paid particular attention to how polite meanings are created, negotiated, and evaluated by speakers in context (e.g., Haugh and Hinze, 2003). There are also studies that investigated participants' emic understandings of politeness at the metapragmatic level. They have used surveys and interviews to probe how speakers understand politeness-related metalexemes (e.g., Pizziconi, 2007; Su, 2019) and associated concepts such as attentiveness and empathy (e.g., Fukushima and Haugh, 2014). These studies reveal important cross-cultural differences in metapragmatic understandings of im/politeness; for example, Pizziconi (2007) showed that ‘friendliness’ was homologous with politeness in British English, whereas Japanese speakers associated politeness with modesty and restraint. Understanding emic accounts of im/politeness has become increasingly important, given the shift towards researching im/politeness from a participant-oriented perspective (Eelen, 2001).

2.2. L2 development of pragmatic meaning

Previous studies of learners' understanding of pragmatic meanings tend to adopt a fairly static approach (McConachy, 2019) and tend to focus on form-context mappings rather than indexical meanings. Learners' pragmatic competence has been examined mainly as their ability to produce “appropriate” speech strategies in given contexts (e.g., Moody, 2014), or to “correctly” identify normatively used pragmatic forms from a repertoire of speech strategies provided, based on comparisons with fairly static L1 speaker norms. For example, Allami and Naeimi (2011) examined English language learners' pragmatic competence by comparing their refusal strategy choices on a DCT to the choices made by L1 speakers. Cook (2001) examined the ability of second-year learners of Japanese in the US with selecting the best candidate for a job that required “polite Japanese” from four audio-recorded self-introductions. Over 80% of participants selected the speaker who failed to use Japanese honorifics correctly in her introduction (but satisfied all other criteria). From this result, Cook (2001, p. 15) concluded that learners “failed to notice the pragmatic meaning.” Other studies have looked at areas such as the ability to “correctly” infer the illocutionary force of indirect speech acts (Takahashi, 2010), identify dispreferred speech act realization strategies (Schauer, 2006) or evaluate their appropriateness (Safont Jordà, 2003; Taguchi, 2006).

A few studies of the form-context mappings involved components of examining or raising learners' metapragmatic awareness. For example, Kinginger and Farrell (2004) examined learners' understanding of *tu/vous* pronouns with “language awareness interviews”, where the researchers asked the learners which form they would use in six hypothetical encounters, prior to and after study abroad. They found that the learners developed a more delicate age-related metapragmatic framework in relation to pronominal use, although the indexical meanings that such metapragmatic frameworks entailed were not discussed. Shirinbakhsh et al. (2018) adopted a six-step process of metapragmatic instruction from Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2006), which included learners' reflections on both their L1 and L2 refusal strategies and their reasoning for using certain L2 strategies in given contexts. Meanwhile, Takimoto (2012) found that Japanese learners of English developed richer knowledge of request downgraders from participating in metapragmatic discussions with peers. While these studies have shown that metapragmatic tasks are effective in raising learner awareness of pragmatic features, learners' pragmatic competence was still assessed based on form-context mappings, instead of their ability to process indexical meanings during language use.

In comparison to the attention to form-context mappings, studies of the L2 development of indexical meanings have been rather piecemeal to date. Using interviews and observations, Shahri and Minakova (2021) found that labelling and typifying (e.g., naming registers as normal, educational, formal, slang) were the most common practices in assigning indexical meanings used by EFL learners. These discursive practices were “amorphous improvisations” (Shahri and Minakova, 2021, p. 5) that scattered around or away from the conventional understanding of registers. The learners' assignment of indexical meanings was influenced by their positioning of norms, their learning environment, multiple language ideologies, and their life trajectories. Meanwhile, Li and Gao (2017) found in retrospective interviews that Chinese ELF learners monitored their choice of request strategies with awareness of various contextual variables as well as indexical meanings, such as friendliness. Their choice of strategies was self-evaluated against the identities they claimed, including their cultural identity of being Chinese. Despite the small number of studies looking at indexical meaning acquisition, we should highlight that both of these studies employed metapragmatic interviews, a similar trend to the increasing inclusion of metapragmatic components in studies of form-context mappings.

Previous studies also show that acquiring knowledge of pragmatic meanings does not necessarily result in L2 speakers simply replicating L1 norms. Rather, learner experience struggles between these new pragmatic norms and their pre-existing identities and ideologies (e.g., Brown, 2013b; Chen, 2022; Ishihara and Tarone, 2009; Li et al., 2020). At times, learners may experience “pragmatic resistance” (Chen, 2022) towards using pragmatic features in the contexts where they are expected, if the indexical meanings created are hard to align with their pre-existing beliefs. For example, L2 Korean learners from English-speaking backgrounds may resist asymmetrical use of honorifics (i.e., they use non-honorifics to someone younger than them who in turn needs to use honorifics to them) and instead choose to reciprocate honorifics because of their egalitarian beliefs (Brown, 2013b). It is unclear in such cases, however, whether this “egalitarianism” as an indexical meaning created by the L2 learners is recognizable to their L1 interlocutors. Nevertheless, these studies show that learners are active agents in negotiating meaning-making practices in L2 (Shahri and Minakova, 2021).

In this study, therefore, we intend to gain insight into how L2 learners frame form-context relationships for creating their own and interpreting others' indexical meanings. We follow Verschuere (2000, p. 439) in seeing metapragmatic awareness as the reflexive awareness crucial “behind the meaning-generating capability of language in use”. It is culturally shaped, namely, when learners “notice” co-occurrences of pragmatic forms, contexts and meanings, this is not simply the detection of input, but “depends partially on what they are primed to notice based on their L1-based pragmatic awareness ... and other assumptions about the material and social world” (McConachy, 2019, p. 170). As such, learners' pragmatic awareness is not built on “a tight normative system centred primarily on form-function-context mappings”, but is fundamentally intercultural in its nature (McConachy, 2019, p. 173).

2.3. Korean first-person pronouns *ce* and *na*

The current study collects and compares emic understanding of L1 and L2 participants in regard to the first-person pronouns *ce* and *na*.

The contrast between *ce* and *na* represents a suitable context for investigating L2 awareness of pragmatic meanings since it involves form-context mappings and indexical meanings that are likely to be unfamiliar to speakers of English and other European languages who participated in our study. *Ce* is prototypically used in interactions with elders, superiors, and non-acquaintance, where it takes on indexical meanings such as being humble or “self-lowering” (Yeon & Brown, 2019, pp. 74–75). *Na*, on the other hand, can be used towards intimates, children and, in some cases, with status subordinates. Grammar books tend to describe it as a “plain” form (Yeon & Brown, 2019, p. 74). Depending on the context, it can take on conventional meanings related to intimacy or condescension. Since Korean is a language that prefers to omit pronouns when the referent can be identified via context (Lee and Ramsey, 2000), first-person utterances that contain no first-person pronouns are also common. However, previous studies show that speakers often include these pronouns even in optional contexts in order to evoke social meanings related to humility and intimacy, as well as other pragmatic effects (see Lee, 2022).

The distinction between *ce* and *na* fits within a wider indexical system whereby speakers of Korean apply contrasting linguistic and paralinguistic behaviour when addressing elders and superiors, compared to when addressing intimates and children. As noted by Yeon and Brown (2019, p. 74), *ce* usually occurs alongside grammaticized honorifics, which are highly developed in the Korean language, whereas honorifics are often not needed with *na* (see Brown, 2015; Lee and Ramsey, 2000, Ch. 7 for a description of Korean honorifics). The speech addressed to elders and superiors also tends to have distinct acoustic properties (Winter and Grawunder, 2012) and is accompanied by distinct nonverbal behaviours (Brown and Winter, 2019).

Although *ce* (and other components of the Korean indexical system) conventionally index meanings such as humility and deference, their contextual usage is dynamic and complex. For example, Kim (2018) showed that Moon Jae In, the previous South Korean president, frequently used *ce* in his speeches, despite his high social position. By “lowering himself”, Moon was able to establish an identity as a loyal president serving his people. Chen and Lee (2021) subsequently demonstrated that these context-specific meanings of *ce* (e.g., loyalty) are constructed on the basis of stereotypical indexical meanings (e.g., “self-lowering”) (see also Okamoto, 2011 for discussion of stereotypical versus context-specific meanings).

Thus far, not much is known about the acquisition of pragmatic meanings by L2 learners. Brown (2011, p.170) notes that L2 learners use *ce* strategically to reaffirm hierarchical relationships and perform politeness during sensitive speech acts. Jung (2006) observes that L2 learners of Korean tend to include more first-person pronouns in general, whereas these forms can be omitted in Korean. Korean language textbooks and curricula, with their tendency to focus on polite registers of Korean (Brown, 2010), tend to feature *ce* in most materials.¹

3. Methodology

We employed one-to-one metapragmatic interviews to collect data from 30 learners of Korean, as well as 30 L1 Korean speakers. Two interview recordings were excluded due to technical issues, leaving 28 learners in one-to-one metapragmatic

¹ In the *Sogang Korean* (Sogang University Press), for examples, *na* does not appear until non-honorific language is introduced in Chapter 3 of book 2B, the fourth book in the series. In *Integrated Korean* (Hawaii University Press), although *na* is mentioned in the introduction to first book (Beginning 1), non-honorific language and regular use of *na* does not appear until Chapter 6 of the fourth book (Intermediate 1).

interviews. 26 of the 30 learners participated in follow-up group interviews during which we collected their reactions to the L1-speaker results.

3.1. Participants

The 30 learners were all studying Korean at a university in the North of England. All of them had completed at least two years of formal Korean study, and their average experience learning Korean was 3 years and 10 months, including self-study before coming to the university.

All the learners were aged between 20 and 29. There were 24 females, 3 males and another 3 were non-binary. This gender imbalance reflected the Korean program at this university, where female students far outnumbered other genders. Twenty-four of the participants had English as their first language, 2 had L1 Hungarian, and 1 each for Bulgarian, Croatian, Portuguese, and Romanian. Those European L1 participants had an advanced level of English, while four English L1 participants had an advanced level of another European language (i.e., German, Greek, Italian, and Kurdish).

The 30 L1 Korean speakers were recruited from local volunteer groups in the greater Seoul area, South Korea. They were stratified by three age ranges: 30–39, 40–49 and 50–59 (10 in each group), and each group was divided equally between females and males. The involvement of different age and gender groups was intended to gather communal understandings of the pronouns from members of the speech community. What the learners' data were compared to was thus a relatively generalizable knowledge of the L1-speaker group.

In the analysis that follows, participants are referred to by their group L (learner) or NS (native) followed by their participant number (e.g., L_01, NS_01). Consents have been obtained for using their data.

3.2. Data collection

The learners participated in both one-to-one and focus-group interviews, while the L1 group took part only in one-to-one interviews. As outlined in Section 2.2, metapragmatic interviews have been widely used in studies of L2 pragmatic knowledge. They have also been used extensively in metapragmatic studies focussed on L1 speakers (e.g., Fukushima and Haugh, 2014; Ogiermann and Suszczyńska, 2011) and studies comparing speakers of different languages (e.g., Chang and Haugh, 2011).

One-to-one interview started by asking the participants what they know about *ce* and *na*. This was followed by another question about how the two pronouns are normally used. Following these two general questions, the interviewer also asked specific questions based on the participant's answers, to ensure that the participants had the opportunity to articulate their understanding of the pronouns.

Each focus-group interview involved one interviewer and three to five of the learners (8 groups in total). At the beginning of the interview, participants were briefed on the benefits of sharing different perspectives of *ce* and *na*. The participants were then encouraged to contribute their own understanding of these two pronouns and provide their reactions to the understandings of other students. The interviewer worked with the students to formulate a list of descriptions on which all interviewees agreed. After summarizing these agreed items, the interviewer shared summaries of the L1 speaker interviews with the learners. The learners were prompted to compare the two summaries, discuss the similarities and differences, provide reasons for the differences, and elucidate their reasoning processes.

For the learner interviews, two research assistants trained by the first author acted as interviewers, with the first author acting as a mediator. The research assistants were also Korean language learners and females in their 20s. One was an L1 English speaker and the other was an L1 Romanian speaker with fluent English. They were peers of the participants and had taken classes with 12 of them before. We chose to use peers as the interviewees in order to encourage more open and detailed responses from the participants, given that the identity of the interviewer is known to affect the responses produced in interviews (e.g., Mori, 2012). The focus-group interviews were hosted by the first author, a female university lecturer of the Korean language who is Chinese and in her 30s. The L1 speaker interviews were carried out by a Korean language teacher, who was a female South Korean in her 40s.

All of the interviews were carried out as part of a larger project investigating various aspects of *ce* and *na*. The parts of the interviews that were relevant to this project had durations of around 10 min for one-to-one interviews, and around 30 min for the groups. All interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed.

3.3. Data analysis

We coded and analyzed the one-to-one interview data according to two overarching categories: the participants' descriptions of the stereotypical contexts in which *ce* is normally used and the indexical meanings that they assigned to *ce*. These categories complied with the two layers of pragmatic meanings, namely, the form-context mappings and indexical meanings.

For each of the stereotypical contexts and indexical meanings, we first identified the recurring explanations that L1 speakers and learners used, respectively, and scrutinized the data iteratively for any remaining explanations. We then grouped the same or similar explanations and formulated themes that accounted for the L1 speakers' and learners' meta-pragmatic descriptions. With an awareness of potential correlations between two or more indexical meanings, such as

respect and politeness, this study preserved as much as possible the original terms that the participants adopt. In other words, if participants mentioned both “respect and politeness”, we treated them as two concepts, instead of one. Precisely, this study carried out cross-group comparisons by following the participants’ emic understanding. Two coders, the first author and another Korean linguist, worked independently, using NVivo, to analyze the one-to-one interview data according to the formulated themes. A kappa test showed an 88.49% inter-coder agreement. The remaining discrepancies were discussed until a 100% consensus was achieved.

A Welch t-test was adopted to provide an overview of cross-group differences in the occurrences of different form-context relationships. Then, qualitative analysis was performed with the one-to-one data to gain an insight into the ways that the learners and L1 speakers rationalized their identification of form-context relationships and indexical meanings.

Focus-group interviews were also analyzed qualitatively. The analysis focused on the ways that the learners understood the form-context relationships and indexical meanings of *ce* and how they interpreted L1 speakers’ understanding.

4. Findings

We start with a quantitative overview of the form-context relationships (Section 4.1) and indexical meanings (Section 4.2) in the learner and L1 speaker groups. We then qualitatively explore the L1 speaker (Section 4.3) and learner (Section 4.4) understandings of these pragmatic meanings, before concluding by discussing learner reactions to the L1 speaker results (Section 4.5).

4.1. Quantitative analysis of form-context relationships

The coding revealed that both the learners and L1 speakers mapped their use of *ce* to the same stereotypical contexts, with ‘older people’, ‘higher-status’, ‘non-acquaintance’, ‘group audience’, and ‘institutional settings’ emerging as the codes for both groups (Fig. 1). Differences were found in the salience that they placed on each form-context relationship, and these differences reached statistical significance ($t = 4.0211, df = 80.951, p = 0.0001293$). Specifically, the learners mentioned ‘higher status’ most frequently (mentioned by 29% of learners), while the L1 speakers prioritized ‘older people’ (mentioned by 31%). ‘Non-acquaintance’ was the second most popular context on both the learners’ and L1 speakers’ lists. The third frequent context was ‘older people’ in the learners’ data (20%), but ‘higher status’ in the L1 data (16%). In other words, the most frequently mentioned items in the L1 and L2 data were the same (namely, ‘older people’, ‘non-acquaintance’, and ‘higher-status’), but the order was reversed.

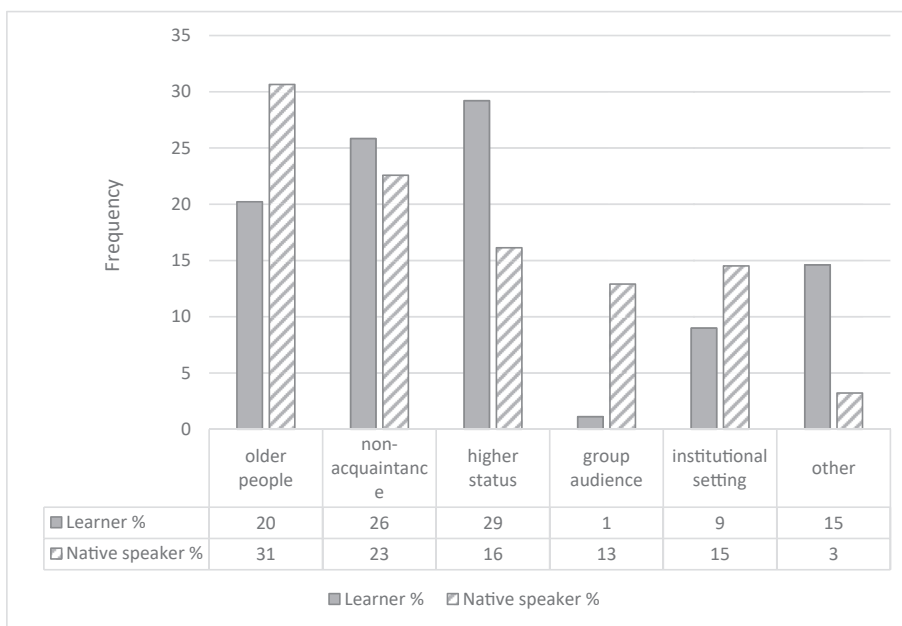


Fig. 1. Frequencies of form-context relationships.

Looking at the remaining factors, we found that L1 speakers referred to ‘group audience’ much more frequently than the learners did. On the other hand, the learners outnumbered the L1 speakers in the category of ‘other’, which contained single contexts that were not covered by other categories. For example, only one learner reported that *ce* could be used in important documents, and another one reported it was used when arguing with others. These discrete interpretations represent

individualized perceptions of form-context relationships that particular learners developed, which are not attested either in the L1 data for this paper or in previous descriptions of *ce*.

4.2. Overview of indexical meanings

Whereas the previous section showed that the learners and L1 speakers identified the same stereotypical contexts (albeit in different orders), the indexical meanings that arose from the form-context relationships differed greatly across the two groups.

Table 1 and Fig. 2 display the actual politeness-related metalexemes used by the participants to describe the indexical meanings of *ce*. As reported in Fig. 2, the learners predominantly perceived *ce* as indexing formality, followed by politeness and respectfulness. In contrast, the L1 speakers understood *ce* as indexing ‘lowering oneself’, ‘elevating others’, and ‘expressing manners’ (예의의 표현) the most. The incompatible lists of indexical meanings made it impossible to conduct any statistical comparison between the two groups (see Table 1).

Table 1
Indexical meanings.

Learner	L1 speaker
(<i>ce</i> is) formal	(<i>ce</i> is) lowering oneself (자신을 낮춘다)
(<i>ce</i> is) polite	(<i>ce</i> is) elevating others (상대방을 높인다)
(<i>ce</i> is) respectful	(<i>ce</i> is) expression of manners (예의의 표현)
(<i>ce</i> is) standard	(<i>ce</i> is having/keeping) formality (격식을 갖춘다/지킨다)
(<i>ce</i> is) humble	(<i>ce</i> is) polite (공손) (<i>ce</i> is) venerative (공경) (<i>ce</i> is) humble (겸손)

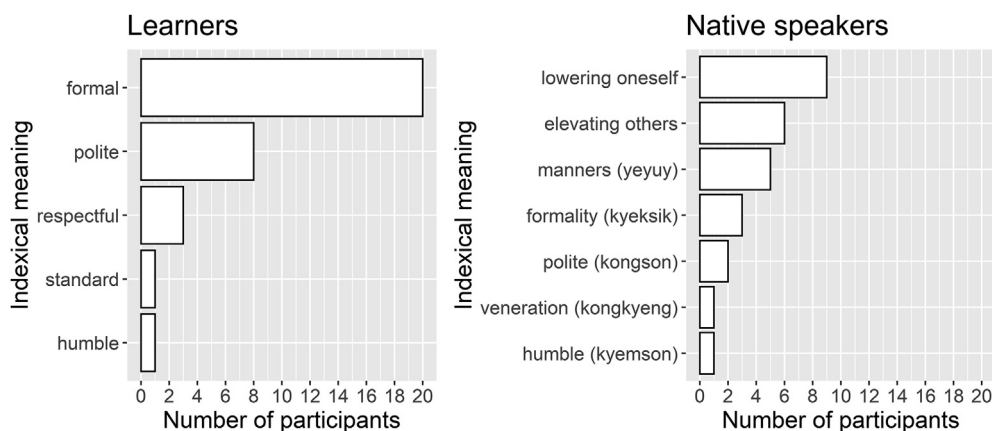


Fig. 2. Counts of indexical meanings.

The two most frequent items in the L1 data (lowering oneself, elevating others) barely occurred in the learner data (one token of lowering oneself, none for elevating others). In contrast, formality was mentioned by 20 learners, whereas its translational equivalent ‘keeping formality’ (격식을 갖춘다/지킨다) was only mentioned by three L1 speakers. Also, whereas three learners described *ce* as “respectful”, this term never appeared in the L1 data. In sum, although the learners’ knowledge of form-context relationships was similar to that of L1 speakers, their knowledge of the indexical meanings of *ce* appeared to be very different. We explore these differences in more detail over the next three sections.

4.3. L1 speakers' understanding of pragmatic meanings

As mentioned above, the most salient features of L1 speakers' understandings of *ce* were 'lowering oneself' and 'elevating others'. The L1 participants described these features as the 'meanings' (*uyimi*; 의미) generated by using *ce*:

Excerpt (1): NS_01 (00:38)

저라는 의미가, 나를 낮추고 상대에게, 상대를 높이고 나를 좀 낮추는 의미로 저라는 그런 단어를, 그런 말을 쓰는데...
The meaning of *ce*, this word, this expression is used with the meaning of lowering myself, elevating others and lowering myself...

According to the participants, the indexical meaning of 'lowering oneself' emerged when *ce* was used in three stereotypical contexts, namely, addressing 'higher-status' people, 'older people', and 'group audience'. Excerpt (2) exemplifies the link between the meaning 'lowering oneself' and the contexts of addressing 'older people' and 'group audience':

Excerpt (2): NS_30 (00:27)

상대를 나이로 봐서 좀 아래인 경우도 있고, 또 단체 앞에서 무슨 이야기를 할 때 단체의 구성원들 전체를 했을 때 나를 낮춘다는 의미에서 '저'라는 표현을 사용할 때도 있습니다.
The expression *ce* is used with the meaning of lowering oneself when you are the younger one, compared to the other's age, and also when you need to speak in front of a group and you need to address all the group members as a whole.

'Elevating others', on the other hand, was associated with *ce* being used in the contexts of 'institutional setting' and to 'older people' (Excerpt 3). Interestingly, when specifying the meaning of lowering themselves or elevating others, the participants did not report any expectation for receiving *ce* in return from interlocutors, in other words, they did not expect their use of *ce* to be linguistically reciprocated. Without overt reciprocation, L1 speakers' use of *ce* seems to form a self-contained cycle of reciprocity (Excerpt 4).

Excerpt (3) NS_08 (00:29)

업체를 만났을 때에도 업체를 높여주기 위해서 저라는 표현을 쓰거나, 어른들한테 저라는 표현을 쓰 (inaudible) 동생들한테 저라는 표현을 안 쓰지요.
When I was meeting with a business partner, I use *ce* to elevate them, or use this expression *ce* to elders (inaudible) I don't use *ce* to people younger than myself.

As shown in Excerpt (4), NS_20 describes 'lowering oneself' as "having good manners" (*광장히 예의가 있고*), expressing understanding (*ihay*; 이해) and consideration (*paylye*; 배려) (line 1), and recognition for the other person's social standing (line 3). By maintaining these manners of lowering oneself and raising others, ultimately both the speaker and the hearer together are "raised" (line 4). NS_20 emphasizes that this reciprocal cycle of "lowering ourselves" in order to "elevate others" and "raise ourselves together" was rigorously taught at home and in school as "correct behaviour" (line 4), hinting that this culture would be difficult for those lacking such an education to acquire. Indeed, NS_20 specifically references in line 4 that "Western people" lack this culture.

Excerpt (4): NS_20 (01:42)

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | NS_20 | 왜냐하면 자기를 낮추는 것이 굉장히 예의가 있고, 또 상대방에 대한 이해와 배려라고 설명을 '저는'이라는 표현에서 대변하는 것 같습니다.
Because lowering oneself is having good manners, also it seems that the expression ' <i>ce-nun</i> ' represents your understanding and consideration for the other. |
| 2 | Interviewer | '저는'이라는 말을 함으로써 그런 게 내포되어 있는 거군요.
By using the expression ' <i>ce-nun</i> ' such things are implied. |
| 3 | NS_20 | 그렇지요. '나는 당신과 적대하는 관계가 아닙니다. 나는 당신을 깔보지 않습니다. 당신을 배려합니다.' 이런 표현의 하나인 것 같아요.
Yes. 'I am not hostile to you. I don't look down on you. I consider you.' It seems to be one of these expressions. |
| 4 | | 그리고 어렸을 때부터 그 게 일종의 예의라고 배워 왔고, 그것이 체화가 되어있지요. 서양 사람들은 그것을 그런 문화가 없으니까 우리는 자기를 낮추는 것이 상대방을 높이고 자기를 또한 함께 높이는 거라고 교육이나 가정 교육이나 학교 교육이나, 사회공교육들이 그렇게 가르치지요. 또 그 게 맞는지를 알고 있고, 생활하다 보니 성년이 되어서도 그 게 당연한 거지요.
And since I was little, I learnt it as a kind of manners, it becomes embodied. Western people don't have such a culture, so home, school, and social education teach that [the acts of] lowering ourselves, elevates others and ultimately raises ourselves together. And I learnt this as the correct way in my life, it became natural when I grow up. |

Regarding the reasons for needing to maintain good manners, participants saw awareness of the 'gaze' of others as being a crucial factor. "I've learned always to be conscious of the gaze of others (*다른 사람의 시선*)", explained NS_15, noting that this was connected to concerns with 'face' (*체면*).

Whereas formality was the most frequent indexical meaning in the learner data, only three L1 speakers referred to it, and we noted differences in how the learners and L1 speakers understood the concept in relation to *ce*. Whereas the learners saw the concept of formality as having a very wide scope (see Section 4.4 below), L1 speakers saw the translational equivalent in Korean *kyeksik* (격식) as being related only to two stereotypical contexts, namely 'group audience' (excerpt 5) and 'institutional setting' (excerpt 6):

Excerpt (5): NS_15 (00:19)

대중들 앞에서 설 때 격식을 갖춰야 하는 자리 그 정도 (hh)

Like a situation where you have to be formal when standing in front of the public (hh).

Excerpt (6): NS_23 (00:32)

- 1 NS_23: 직장이나 또 음, 이렇게, 어떤 특별한 모임이나 이런 데에 있어서는 나이가 어린 사람들인 경우에서도 항상 저 이렇게 저는 보통 그렇게 해요.
At work or, hmm, like this, some special gatherings, even with younger people, I always use *ce* like this.
- 2 Interviewer: 응, 그러니까, 본인이 어린 사람들과 만날 때에도 만약에 어떤 격식 [있는 자리라면]
Um, so, even when you meet with young people, [if it is a] formal [situation]
- 3 NS_23: [있는 자리라면] 저 그렇게 사용해요.
[If it is a formal situation], I use *ce*.

The limited connections that the three L1 speakers made between formality and the stereotypical contexts of *ce* usage presented a sharp contrast to the learners' understanding, which we now turn to.

4.4. Learners' understanding of pragmatic meanings

In contrast to the L1 speakers, 20 of the 28 learners associated *ce* with the indexical meaning of 'formality'. Whereas L1 speakers saw formality as being connected only to the stereotypical contexts of 'group audience' and 'institutional setting', learners associated formality with all five of the stereotypical contexts that emerged in the data. For example, in excerpt (7), L_29 links formality to three stereotypical contexts – 'older people' (line 6), 'higher status' (line 7) and 'institutional setting' (line 6):

Excerpt (7): L_29 (Group interview 1, 1:30)

- 1 L_29 So *na* would be used in more informal situations compared to *ce* would be more formal.
- 2 Interviewer What kinds of situation can we say is formal?
- 3 L_29 Depends who you're talking to, I think.
- 4 Interviewer Yeah.
- 5 So what- could you elaborate a little bit.
- 6 L_29 So maybe someone who is older than you or an employer or a teacher.
- 7 Someone who is higher up the social ladder than you are.
- 8 Higher in social hierarchy.
- 9 A sign of respect.

In contrast, whereas L1 speakers also noted a connection between *kyeksik* 'formality' and 'institutional setting', they did not relate 'older people' and 'higher status' to *kyeksik*. Rather, L1 speakers connected 'older people' and 'higher-status' to 'lowering oneself' and 'elevating others'. It is notable that L_29 relates the notion of being formal to 'older people' and 'higher status' via the idea that acting formally is "a sign of respect" (line 9). This connection between formality and respect is not found in the L1 data; indeed, the indexical meaning of "respect" is not mentioned at all.

In addition to associating formality with a wide range of contexts, the learners also connected it to the concept of "etiquette". When discussing this connection, they made reference to a long list of semiotic markers both from Korean and British cultures, including both linguistic and non-linguistic devices. For example, L_04 in group interview 3 argued that "a good synonym of formality is probably etiquette" and exemplified the concept of etiquette with British table manners and the Korean practices of bowing and turning one's body to the side when drinking alcohol in front of status superiors. L_22 in group interview 7 specified that "speaking formally" in English was to remove contractions and slang from one's speech, whereas formal speech in Korean concerns "what you add or what you replace almost", such as the choice between *ce* and *na*.

After formality, the second most frequently cited indexical meaning for the learners was politeness (mentioned by eight participants). Interestingly, some learners even assigned rudeness to *na* (Excerpt 8, line 6), while assigning politeness to *ce* (line 5).

Excerpt (8): L_18 (Group interview 5, 15:41)

- 1 L_18 I feel like because you know when you start learning a new language
- 2 Well in this case Korean.
- 3 You're kind of taught *ce* is used in this aspect and *na* is used in this aspect.
- 4 As L_19 said it's kind of just you know-
- 5 If I want to be polite and respectful I will use *ce*.
- 6 And if I'm going to be rude which I don't ever plan to be then I would use *na*.

We see in this excerpt that *ce* and *na* are associated with politeness (as well as respect) and rudeness, respectively, in a straightforward and absolute fashion: *ce* is used "to be polite and respectful", whereas *na* is used "to be rude". These straightforward connections appear to differ from both the conventional understanding and the actual usage of these

pronouns, particularly given that *na* is the normatively appropriate choice in interactions with intimates. There also seem to be in-group variations. Several L2 participants argue that there is not a linear relationship between the use of *ce* or *na* and the meaning of being polite or not (e.g., L_26 and L_28), while nearly 30% of the L2 learners (8 learners) still believe that using *ce* creates politeness.

More interestingly, L_18 in Excerpt (8) mentioned politeness together with respectfulness. L_29 in Excerpt (7) associated formality to respect. In addition, some learners made a connection between formality and politeness, as noted in the explanation of L_23, “especially like in British cultures we’re only usually polite in more formal situations”. Since these learners mentioned formality and politeness first and then respect, it appears that they perceive the link between respect and *ce* to be indirect and mediated through these other meanings. There were also three learners who mentioned “respect” directly without referring to formality or politeness, making it the third most frequently mentioned indexical meaning.

Although it might be tempting to view respect as being somewhat equivalent to the L1 speaker concepts of ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’, this connection was not made by the interviewees. Rather than a vertical concept (i.e., respect for elders and status superiors), the learners conceptualized respect as mutual and reciprocal. In Excerpt (9) below, for example, L_27 self-evaluated her use of *ce* as “just being respectful” (line 4) and “respect[ing] everyone regardless” (line 11). Although she mentions being respectful to people who are older or of higher status (line 3), as well as non-acquaintances (line 2), she stresses that these people should also reciprocate the respect (‘I’m going to hope you’re going to be respectful to me’ – line 7). Crucially, she states that she does not see her use of *ce* as “lowering myself to them”(line 5) but rather as placing everyone “on an even playing field” (line 8) where everyone is respected “as equal” (line 10):

Excerpt (9): L_27 (Group interview 8, 17:19)

- 1 L_27 With me when I say like it's a respectful term.
 2 And like because I don't know the person.
 3 Because they're like higher status in the job than me they're older.
 4 For me, personally, that's just being respectful.
 5 And I don't really see it as lowering myself to them.
 6 I kind of just see as I'm being respectful to you.
 7 I'm going to hope you're going to be respectful to me.
 8 And it's kind of like everyone's on an even playing field because I'm not being rude.
 9 So I'm not kind of putting myself above you.
 10 I'm just kind of seeing us all as equal.
 11 And I'm just going to respect everyone regardless.
 12 That's how I kind of see it as a foreigner.
 13 Because of the like- kind of strive for equal likeness within me but yeah.

Participant L_27 linked her efforts to “respect everyone regardless” as being linked to her identity as a “foreigner” (line 12). This reveals an understanding that her “equal” interpretation of *ce* usage was perhaps different to L1 speakers due to the influence of her own cultural beliefs and background. It could also be interpreted as acknowledging a lack of cultural expertise or authority when speaking Korean, which would make it difficult (or perhaps inappropriate) to “[put] myself above you.”

Equating the use of *ce* with formality and respectfulness as well as with the sense of equal-ness in an absolute sense appears to result in some learners departing from L1 speaker norms in their use of first-person pronouns. In Excerpt (9) above, L_27 notes that she will “respect everyone regardless” (line 11) by using *ce*. Another three learners (L_04, L_18, L_19) reported that they still chose to use *ce* even after their Korean friends started to use *na* and told them to drop their honorifics. They intentionally chose to maintain *ce* usage because of the need for maintaining “mutual respect” (L_04, group interview 3). In addition, ‘lowering oneself’ was associated with “having good manners” by L1 speakers (see Excerpt 4), and manners (예의) was their third most frequent indexical meaning. In contrast, none of the learners had associated their understanding of ‘formality’, ‘politeness’ or ‘respect’ to manners. Neither did they mention ‘humbleness’ (겸손) and veneration (공손). It appears that not only the concept of politeness and the ways of expressing politeness are culturally variable, but also its links to other concepts are understood differently by different language groups.

In sum, the results presented so far have shown that the language learners differ from the L1 speakers in the indexical meanings that they assign to the use of *ce*, even though their pragmatic knowledge of the contexts where *ce* is normatively used was fairly similar to the L1 speakers. Whereas the L1 speakers saw *ce* as indexing the rather specific meanings of ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’, the learners viewed *ce* as marking formality, politeness and respect, which they understood as fairly global concepts. Crucially, they did not conceptualize *ce* as being used to place themselves “below” the interlocutor. In the following section, we probe the ability of the learners to understand the indexical meanings of ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’.

4.5. Learners’ understanding of L1 speakers’ pragmatic meanings

During the group interviews, the learners were presented with a summary of L1 speakers’ understanding of pragmatic meanings, including both form-context relationships and indexical meanings. We took this extra step to assess how L2 learners understand the indexical meanings identified by L1 speakers.

When presented with the unfamiliar concepts of ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’, learners tended to rationalize these as Korean culture-specific ways of showing respect. In the following excerpt (10), L_08 explicated that, by using *ce* to indicate lowering oneself and elevating others, L1 speakers were “projecting” a feeling of respect to their addressee (line 5):

Excerpt (10): L_08 (Group interview 1, 10:14)

- 1 L_08 Well, I can understand why it's used in that way.
- 2 I don't know whether it's like, as part of the culture I can understand why.
- 3 I think it's just based around respect I think.
- 4 Because if you're lowering yourself.
- 5 Or elevating someone you're projecting sort of your feelings of respect to that person.
- 6 By using *ce* instead of *na*.

However, when the learners attempted to explain how ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’ were linked to their concept of respect, they struggled to match the two concepts (Excerpt 11). This was because, as noted in Section 4.4, they conceived of respect as a horizontal and mutual concept that placed everyone on a level playing field. As noted by L_16, whereas elevating and lowering are “just about their age and what job they have” (line 12), her own concept of respect as someone from the UK (line 4) was “nothing to do with social position” (line 5) and rather “more about ... general character” (line 7):

Excerpt (11): L_16 (Group interview 4, 21:44)

- 1 L_16 I think like the concept of respect.
- 2 And the two concepts of elevating and lowering.
- 3 I don't think they quite match at all.
- 4 I think because I think in the UK.
- 5 Our concept of respect has nothing to do with social position.
- 6 If you know what I mean.
- 7 It's more about what you think their general character.
- 8 Whereas this sort of elevating and lowering to me it's like a form of respect.
- 9 But it's not like- it's not got anything to do with their character.
- 10 Or their characteristics.
- 11 Or who they are as a person.
- 12 It's just about their age and maybe what job they have.
- 13 So I think they're sort of difficult to compare in that sense.

Learners struggled to map the concept of ‘lowering oneself’ onto any specific equivalent cultural practice in British or European society. In group interview 1, L_08 described ‘lowering oneself’ as “a difficult concept to grasp” and L_09 commented that “it almost sounds crazy to say out loud you lower yourself.” In addition, these two participants noted that “lowering yourself” in European culture would imply that, as L_08 put it, “you're in the wrong” and “you're having to apologize to someone.” L_09 put a further twist on this by saying that “lowering yourself” “sounds like you're apologizing for something when you were in the right”, intensifying the “craziness” of using language in this way.

Furthermore, learners associated ‘lowering oneself’ with negative personal characteristics, including being servile, entitled, pretentious and vain. L_04 connected self-lowering with the negative image of an English servant working in a wealthy English household described as being “posh” (line 2) and located in Surrey (line 3):

Excerpt (12): L_04 (Group interview 3, 18:34)

- 1 L_04 I feel like in terms of language it's- it's the kind of language I would expect like (hh) an English servant to use.
- 2 Like a really posh- (hh) yeah.
- 3 So like the- the dialect one would expect someone who lives in perhaps like Surrey or maybe someone who like (hh) works under a household.
- 4 That's the kind of image I have when I'm thinking of oh if someone's humbling (L_01 nodding) their own language rather than pushing someone's status up.

Although dictionary definitions of the word “posh” (line 2) might feature words such as “elegant”, “refined” or “upper class”, the word is typically used in a derogatory or satirical sense in British English when critiquing the upper classes. Here, the satirical reading of posh is emphasized by the intensifier *really*, and also the laughter that this description drew from other participants in the group interview. The reference to Surrey (a wealthy county in the South of England) in line 4 also appears satirical, since this is a geographical location stereotypically associated with poshness. Surrey is geographically and socially distanced from the students, given that they attend university in the North of England, which is typically perceived in the UK as being of a lower class than the South. In short, L_04 constructs an image of a person who would “lower themselves” as detached and remote from herself and her peers, and not an identity they would aspire to.

Since the use of self-lowering language took on indexical meanings related to “posh speech”, learners viewed “lowering yourself” as a form of fake or failed humility. At least in the British context, a person who uses self-lowering speech would be perceived as someone who is trying (unsuccessfully) to flaunt their refined command of polite language and parade their high status. As L_06 puts it, people would simply conclude that “you love yourself a lot” (line 3):

Excerpt (13): L_06 (Group interview 3, 16:38)

- | | | |
|---|-------------|--|
| 1 | Interviewer | So do we have any- any anything that we can use to humble ourselves in English? |
| 2 | L_06 | I'm not sure. |
| 3 | | In English, if you humble yourself people think that you just love yourself a lot. |
| 4 | L_04 | Yeah. |
| 5 | L_06 | People don't have a lot of modesty in English. |
| 6 | | Because people look at them weird if they think highly of themselves. |
| 7 | | But in Korean, it's not weird to think highly of yourself in that manner. |
| 8 | | Because it's sort of normalized there. |

In this extract, L_06 equates the use of “humble” language and “modesty” with “thinking highly of yourself” (line 6), which is considered “weird” in the UK (line 6), but is “normalized” in Korea (line 8).

On the face of it, the association of *ce* with “thinking highly of yourself” appears to be a stark contradiction to the self-lowering that our L1 participants associated with this form. However, it should be remembered that back in Excerpt 4, NS_20 described the act of “lowering ourselves” as one that not only “elevates others”, but also “raises ourselves together”, in other words, which promotes the group as a whole. The difference is that the idea of “raising ourselves together” is more group-oriented than “thinking highly of yourself”, and moreover, it is certainly viewed as positive by NS_20. Although both groups agree that self-lowering can elevate the self, this is only perceived as desirable by the Korean L1 speakers.

5. Discussion

The findings revealed a noteworthy difference in learners’ understanding of pragmatic meanings, that is, native-like knowledge of form-context mappings does not necessarily lead to a native-like understanding of indexical meanings. As overviewed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, the learners mapped their use of *ce* to the same list of form-context relationships as L1 speakers but associated these contexts with a different range of indexical meanings. This indicates that previous research focusing on the development of learners’ pragmatic competence through form-context mapping tasks (Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Cook, 2001; Martínez-Flor and Fukuya, 2005; Moody, 2014; Schauer, 2006; Takahashi, 2010) might not have fully depicted the complete trajectory of pragmatic development. Especially when we consider learners’ pragmatic competence as their ability of meaning processing instead of acquiring linguistic codes (McConachy, 2019), examining pragmatic development will need to extend the research focus from form-context mappings to learners’ understanding and production of indexical meanings. Whereas L1 speakers tended to connect different form-context mappings of *ce* to specific indexical meanings, such as ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’, learners associated all the reported form-context mappings with the meaning of ‘formality’. Whereas ‘formality’ was only a peripheral meaning for L1 speakers, the learners treated it as the generalized n-th order indexical meaning (Silverstein, 2003), which then led to other n+1st indexical meanings such as respect and politeness. The results suggest that language learners might rely on more generalized indexical meanings, which are taken to explain a vast range of different form-context mappings via some form of “indexical bleaching” (Squires, 2014).

Crucially, these differences in understanding indexical meanings resulted in at least some of the learners reporting the use of *ce* and *na* which is markedly different from L1 speakers. This included avoiding *na*, which they viewed as “impolite”, and sticking to the use of *ce*, which they saw as “respectful”. For these learners, the concept of “respect” was a reciprocal and horizontal concept, fundamentally different from the L1-speaker concepts of ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’. The learners were not oblivious to the difference, but they seemingly struggled to integrate these L2 ideologies with their existing beliefs about human interaction. ‘Lowering oneself’, in particular, was regarded as a “hard concept” or even as “crazy” behaviour in such struggles. Although learners attempted to accept this concept, and even somewhat followed the L1 speakers in viewing self-lowering as a way of promoting the self, culture-specific frames of reference made them view self-lowering as something fake or subservient, and the speech of someone who was pretentious or privileged. These struggles are in line with previous findings of L2 learners’ pragmatic resistance (e.g. Brown, 2013b; Chen, 2022; Ishihara and Tarone, 2009; Li et al., 2020). That is, L2 learners intentionally choose to resist L1-speaker pragmatic norms when these norms clash with their identities or personalities, particularly for learners with close-knit social networks (see Li et al., 2020). At the same time, the finding also supports the argument of McConachy (2019) that pragmatic awareness of L2 learners is fundamentally intercultural. L2 learners’ understandings and production of pragmatic meanings are not only based on their understanding of L2 norms, but also heavily rely on their existing linguistic and cultural knowledge.

The comparisons made in this paper between L1 and L2 emic understandings of indexical meanings also make important contributions to the growing body of literature on im/politeness metapragmatics (e.g., Fukushima and Haugh, 2014; Pizziconi, 2007; Su, 2019). The results clearly show that our European L2 participants (who mostly speak English as L1) talk about politeness-related meanings using a metalanguage that differs from their L1 Korean counterparts. For instance, the European participants used the term ‘formality’ to span a wide range of different contexts, including addressing people who are older or of higher status and the application of ritualized etiquette. In contrast, the Korean speakers reserved the translational equivalent 격식 ‘formality’ for group audience and institutional setting. These results suggest that cross-linguistic equivalents of politeness-related metalexemes tend to occupy different semantic mappings, as shown previously in Pizziconi’s (2007) comparison of Japanese and English politeness terms.

Of some importance, our research suggests that L1 Korean speakers tend not to use “respect” as a metalexeme for describing the indexical meaning of *ce* and, more broadly, the use of humble and deferential language towards status superiors. Instead, this mode of behaviour is described emically simply as ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘raising others’. This finding is consistent with the results of metapragmatic interviews conducted by Brown et al. (2022), who found that ‘respect’ (존경) was understood by Korean participants in terms of mutual consideration for others as fellow human beings rather than veneration for status superiors. However, it calls into question the numerous references to “respecting elders” that can be found in descriptions of Korean politeness.

The findings also contribute metapragmatic evidence to recent discussions of the different ways in which reciprocity works in different cultures (Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021; Tantucci et al., 2022). The L2 learners have a clear expectation for L1 pronouns to be used reciprocally so that mutual respect can be realized via language choice. In contrast, although the L1 speakers believe that the use of *ce* does not necessarily need to be directly reciprocated, *ce* initiates a different kind of reciprocal cycle whereby lowering oneself elevates others and eventually raises both the speaker and the hearer. Previously, Chen (2020) also identifies that L1 speakers of Chinese, Japanese and Korean are inclined to claim self-indebtedness (e.g., “I owe you a favour from a long time ago”), instead of requiring the other to reward. They take the repayment of their debt as a new favour. Consequently, they construct a paying–repaying cycle of reciprocity, which enables them to establish enduring social relationships.

Thus far, previous studies of interlanguage pragmatics have paid more attention to L1 speakers’ perceptions of learners’ performance, including L1 speakers’ evaluation of the appropriateness of learners’ choice of speech strategies (Safont Jordà, 2003; Taguchi, 2006). In this study, we adopted a different approach by asking learners for their understanding of L1 speakers’ metapragmatic interpretations during the group interviews. This ‘reversed’ approach led to fruitful findings regarding how the learners attempt to interpret L1 speakers’ indexical meanings by incorporating them into their existing indexical systems, although not always successfully. Learners struggled to align the concepts of ‘lowering oneself’ and ‘elevating others’ with their L1 conceptualizations of respect, and also with how humility was perceived in British and European culture.

The findings have important pedagogical implications. Namely, the results of the study show that any teaching of pragmatics that focusses solely on instruction of L1-speaker form-context mappings would have notable limitations. Although students may be able to successfully connect pragmatic forms to stereotypical contexts in native-like ways, this does not necessarily reflect native-like knowledge of indexical meanings, and does not address intercultural and multicultural aspects of pragmatic competence. Due to the pragmatic resistance noted above, it may not be feasible or even desirable to expect language learners to apply pragmatic features in native-like ways. Nevertheless, language instruction can still seek to educate learners regarding the deep-lying and culturally-imbued indexical meanings that underly language usage so that learners can make more informed linguistic choices. In addition, language educators are encouraged to provide explanations to account for both L1 speakers’ ‘insider’ perspectives and L2 learners’ agentive language choices. Although a detailed discussion of how this kind of pedagogy can be achieved is outside the scope of the current paper, an emerging body of literature shows how media sources can be used to critically teach important social meanings of linguistic forms in Korean and other East Asian languages, including scripts (Kumagai, 2007), multimodal aspects of politeness (Brown, 2017) and non-honorific speech (Brown, 2013a).

6. Conclusion

In the current paper, we have advanced the study of second language knowledge of pragmatic meanings by showing that form-context mappings represent only one part of pragmatic competence, and that indexical meanings also need to be considered. When indexical meanings are included in research design, we find learners’ pragmatic knowledge may differ from that of L1 speakers in quite fundamental ways. In addition, the study of indexical meanings in the L2 context reveals the fundamentally intercultural and multicultural nature of pragmatic development.

The findings open a new avenue for exploring further L2 learners’ development of the ability to generate and interpret pragmatic meanings. In this paper, we have focused mostly on the L2 learners’ knowledge of the stereotypical usage patterns and indexical meanings of *ce* and *na*, whereas we plan to investigate context-specific meanings in future studies. Another future step would be to examine the means by which we can improve the abilities of L2 learners to recognise indexical meanings. A potential direction would be to investigate whether providing L2 learners not only with instruction on native-like form-context mappings, but also with L1 speakers’ interpretations of indexical meanings, would enrich their formulation of pragmatic meanings. Also, future research can investigate whether enriching learner understanding of conventionalized pragmatic meanings (i.e. the *n*-th order indexical meanings, Silverstein, 2003) can help learners’ ability to interpret more context-specific meanings. Research of this kind will help to reveal the dynamic formation process of L2 pragmatic knowledge and the ways that learners apply pragmatic knowledge to actual communicative practice.

Credit author statement

Both the authors are equal first authors to this article. They have made equal contributions.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Transcription conventions (adapted from Ochs et al., 1996, 461–465)

[The point at which overlapping talk starts
]	The point at which overlapping talk ends
-	Stammer
=	Contiguous utterances after an interruption
(.)	Short pause
...	Omitted part
<u>word</u>	Stress or emphasis indicated by loudness or high pitch
<>	Slow talk
(hh)	Laughter
(word)	Bodily movement
()	Indistinct/inaudible part
((word))	Transcriber's remark

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