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# Topic Initiation by Korean and Chinese Speakers on Reality Dating Shows

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## Abstract

This study examined topic initiation in first encounters in an underexplored language pair – Korean and Chinese. It focused on the beginning stage of intimate relationships documented on two reality dating shows, *Sun Da Bang* in South Korea and *Find Me The One* in mainland China. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted to compare the focus of topics, the shift between them, and the influence of gender. Significant differences were found in topic orientation across the groups and in the effect of gender on topic initiation in Korean.

## Keywords

topic initiation – first encounter – gender – Korean – Chinese – reality shows

## 1 Introduction

Topic initiation refers to beginning a new topic and/or switching to a new topic. Topic initiation by previously unacquainted interlocutors in first

encounters has rarely been studied in contrastive pragmatics studies, although unexpected topic switching in informal contexts can be considered inappropriate in one culture (Goldberg, 1990) but appropriate in another culture (Zhu, 2019a). One of those few studies was Iwata (2010) who uncovered cross-cultural differences in topic management that might have caused misunderstandings between American English speakers and Japanese learners of English. Cross-cultural differences between Korean and Chinese conversational skills have been understudied, although the demand for research along these lines has been increasing owing to the surge in heterosexual intermarriages between South Korean and Chinese nationals (Kim, 2010). To promote mutual understanding between people from these two cultures and to prevent miscommunication and misperceptions (Boxer, 2002), it would be beneficial to study how to initiate a conversation topic with a stranger in Korean and Chinese on the first date successfully. The success can lead to future dates and eventually marriage.

In this study, we attempt to reveal native Korean speakers' and native Chinese speakers' topic initiation behavior in first encounters on blind dates. Through active topic initiation (Liu, 2012), one party can achieve conversational engagement (Goodwin, 1981). Undoubtedly, active topic initiation by both parties can lead to mutual engagement (Merritt, 1982). "Competence in initiating and developing topic is vital to the regulation of everyday conversation" (Barron and Black, 2015: 115) because topic initiation serves as a valuable mechanism that effectively enables conversational participants "to partake, appreciate, and take pleasure in the full experience of a conversation" (Wong and Waring, 2010: 103). It would be interesting to explore how native Korean and Chinese speakers (male or female) initiate new topics and engage in a conversation to avoid awkward silences and to get to know each other on their first date.

Therefore, in what follows, we explore how native Korean and Chinese speakers conduct conversations in their first encounters on reality dating shows and in particular, how they initiate new topics and whether gender plays a role in topic initiation. First, we summarize what has been discussed in the literature concerning topic initiation, first encounters, and contrastive pragmatics between Korean and Chinese, before we introduce our research methodologies. Then we move on to present the differences, as well as similarities, of how the native Korean and Chinese speakers under study began new topics in initial interactions. We also examine the linguistic forms of topic initiation and the potential association between gender and topic initiation in Korean and Chinese respectively. When interpreting our findings, we discuss

relevant social factors and implications of the findings. At the end, we point out the limitations of the study and future direction along these lines.

## 2 Theoretical Background

In this section, we review previous works on topic initiation, first encounters, and contrastive pragmatics between Korean and Chinese because this study contrasts how native Korean speakers begin and switch topics when they meet for the first time with how native Chinese speakers initiate new topics in their first encounter.

### 2.1 *Topic Initiation*

For contrastive pragmatics research, House and Kádár (2021) presented an analytical framework in which one of the three units of analysis, including expressions, communicative acts, and the discourse, is often examined in a ritual frame. Ritual frame indicating expressions are used by interlocutors with an awareness of their rights and obligations in standard situations where participants have established expectations and perceptions of social roles. Communicative acts are often realized in conventionalized linguistic patterns, which imply normative language use. Both expressions and communicative acts are embedded in discourse that “can only be approached rigorously across linguacultures if it is somehow broken down into comparable components” (House and Kádár, 2021: 134).

One of the components is topic initiation, a pragmatically relevant form of behavior in interaction. A discourse topic refers to a stretch “of discourse, with an identifiable and sustained focus, and bounded by specific moves that led to a recognizably complete or partial change of focus” (Morris-Adams, 2014: 152). Ideally, we start a topic after the speaker mentions it, the addressee acknowledges it, and one of them continues it (Geluykens, 1993). We expect to develop topics coherently based on prior talk (Tannen, 1990). Things that are not developed over at least three speaker turns are not considered topics. To signal the change of topic, the second speaker should deploy “an explicit (either verbal or nonverbal) digressive marker” (Giora, 1998: 80). The digressive marker functions to prepare interlocutors for a new topic.

In reality, topic initiation might or might not be built on prior talk. When a new topic maintains “a lexical or propositional connection to the previous topic” (Barron and Black, 2015: 115) but gradually moves away from the old topic and “creates a shift of focus” (Morris-Adams, 2014: 154), Barron and

Black (2015) called it topic transition. In contrast, when a new topic emerges abruptly and “bears no propositional or linguistic relation to the previous topic”, Barron and Black (2015) called it topic change. Topic change is what Zhu (2019a) termed unexpected topic switching, which “occurs when the second speaker brings up a new topic without providing any cues, discourse markers, or smooth transitions before the current speaker signals the completion of the current topic. The new topic has not been mentioned in the preceding talk” (p. 166). It has been claimed that topic transition is preferred but topic change is “marked” and dispreferred (Levinson, 1983: 313) because unexpected topic switching may be viewed as an “interruption” (Coon and Schwanenflugel, 1996: 6) which is deemed inappropriate (Goldberg, 1990; Murata, 1994) or problematic (Schegloff, 2001). However, Zhu (2019a) argued that unexpected topic switching in Chinese in the informal context may not be an issue, based on her empirical study of naturalistic conversations. In this study, both topic transition and topic change/unexpected topic switching are categorized as topic initiation.

To start an interactional conversation, interlocutors would initiate various topics such as “setting topics” (Svennevig, 2014: 305) which concern speakers’ immediate situation or physical environment, “encyclopedic topics” (Svennevig, 2014: 305) which cover knowledge about the world outside the setting, and personal topics, hoping that these topics can help build or manage common background knowledge. Personal topics can be oriented towards oneself or the other party. Self-oriented topic initiation allows the current speaker to keep the floor while turning the ongoing conversation to a different direction. The new topic must involve what the current speaker likes or is interested in, thus making him/herself an authoritative speaker (Morris-Adams, 2014). When speakers move away from small talk and initiate topics that are oriented toward themselves, they often disclose their personal information that is related to their individual characteristics or social memberships (Svennevig, 2014) in order to invite the other party to reciprocate (Pillet-Shore, 2011) or to establish interpersonal relationships (Jenks, 2009; Korobov, 2011; Haugh and Carbaugh, 2015; Strambi and Tudini, 2020). Nonreciprocity indexes disaffiliation between speakers (Stokoe, 2010). Other-oriented topic initiation means offering the floor to a different speaker, which is often realized in the form of a question and gives the questionee more power and authority (Schegloff, 2007). Other-oriented questions prefer elaborated answers to short responses (Korobov, 2011) because minimal answers indicate disinterest in interaction. Among the aforementioned topics, setting topics and other-oriented personal topics appear more common than encyclopedic topics and self-oriented

personal topics because the latter two are “more restricted in their conditions of introduction” (Svennevig, 2014: 305–306).

The initiation of the setting, encyclopedia, or personal topics by native Korean and Chinese speakers can be analyzed in House and Kádár's (2021) cross-cultural pragmatics framework. According to this framework, different types of talk (Edmondson and House, 1981) involve different communicative acts. For instance, Opening Talk has the acts of Greet, How-Are-You, Welcome, Disclose, and Remark in ritual interaction, while Small Talk tends to contain Remark, Tell, and Disclose. Typical communicative acts deployed in Business Talk include Request, Suggest, Invite, Resolve, Offer, Promise, and Permit, whereas those in Patch-up Talk are likely to be Complain, Excuse/Justify, Apologize, Forgive, Offer, and Request. Some of these communicative acts can possibly compose the reciprocal interaction of initiating a new topic and retaining it for at least three speaker turns, although it seems implausible to reduce ways of starting new topics to only a few conventionalized expressions in either Korean or Chinese due to the large variety of topics and the complex form of topic initiation by nature.

To be more specific, when speakers initiate new topics on a blind date, they might perform some communicative acts such as Remark, Disclose, Request, Tell, and Opine (House and Kádár, 2021). The communicative act Remark is a type of phatic communication that occur in the beginning of a conversation. It could be a comment on the weather or the surrounding, which is typically a part of a setting topic. If speakers want to create a social bond, they need to conduct the act of Disclose to share information about their biography, hobbies, jobs, mate preferences, among others. If self-disclosure does not entail reciprocity, speakers might explicitly or implicitly request their date to share more things or discuss more topics because this can benefit the exploration of their relationship. Upon requests, speakers can perform Tell to inform their date of some interesting and relevant facts and promote growth in their nascent relationship. In this process, they or their date might realize the act of Opine by expressing opinions, making comments, and negotiating meanings.

## 2.2 *First Encounters*

How to initiate a new topic is crucial to the development of first encounters. First encounters among previously unacquainted people decide whether these people are going to meet up again and establish friendships (Sanders, 1997). Prior studies on first encounters have investigated how people exchange information (Riggs and Cantor, 1984; Benoit and Follert, 1986), disclose themselves (Svennevig, 2014; Haugh and Carbaugh, 2015), pay or respond to compliments

(Sims, 1989), explain things (McLaughlin et al., 1983), or boast (McLaughlin et al., 1995) in everyday settings, online contexts (e.g., Lipinski-Harten and Tafarodi, 2012), or speed-dating shows (e.g., Tal-Or and Hershman-Shitrit, 2015). They have also examined conversation openers (e.g., Sinkeviciute and Rodriguez, 2021), backchanneling (e.g., Ohashi, 2021), topic expansion (e.g., Barron and Black, 2015), humor (e.g., Vittengl and Holt, 2000; Haugh, 2010, 2011; Korobov, 2011; Sprecher et al., 2013; Treger et al., 2013; Morse and Affi, 2015), and (im)politeness and (dis)affiliation in initial interactions (e.g., Haugh and Sinkeviciute, 2021). Most of the prior research has focused on first encounters in English with only a few in Japanese (Usami, 2002; Ohashi, 2021), Swedish (Svennevig, 1999, 2014), or Chinese (Haugh and Chang, 2019).

Although there is a lack of research on topic initiation in first encounters among previously unacquainted interlocutors in contrastive pragmatics studies, the findings from the few studies on this subject are enlightening. Iwata (2010) disclosed cross-cultural differences in topic management in English by American English speakers and Japanese learners of English. The American English speakers dominated the collected conversations and switched topics more frequently than the Japanese learners of English who appeared to be quiet and passive. The speakers' disparate ways of managing topics might have made them feel uneasy and even unhappy in their conversations, leading to confusion and misunderstandings. Likewise, Haugh and Carbaugh (2015) revealed that in their study, the American participants, though not being prompted by other-oriented questions, self-disclosed more frequently than the Australian participants in "joint topical talk or narrative tellings by the other participant" (p. 480). These findings call for more contrastive pragmatics studies along the lines.

### 2.3 *Contrastive Pragmatics between Korean and Chinese*

Despite a plethora of scholarship that has investigated the similarities or differences in pragmatics between different languages (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Bruns and Kranich, 2021; Ren and Fukushima, 2021; Zhu and Boxer, 2021), a limited number of contrastive studies between Korean and Chinese have been conducted (Wang et al., 2023). Among these studies, some have focused on the differences between Korean and Chinese in sounds (e.g., Hong, 2011; Deng, 2018), words (e.g., Fan, 2013; Liu, 2017), and grammatical structures (e.g., Cao, 2013; Wang, 2016), while others have examined some aspects of pragmatics including discourse markers (e.g., Min and Zhang, 2016), address terms (e.g., Kim, 2008), communicative acts (e.g., Rue and Zhang, 2008), (in)directness (e.g., Chen and Wang, 2021), conceptualization of politeness (Tao et al., 2016), and so on. Since discourse markers, address terms, communicative acts,

(in)directness, and politeness are more relevant to contrastive pragmatics and could be a part of how and why a conversation topic is initiated, we review only these studies here.

Among the few contrastive pragmatics research on Korean and Chinese, Min and Zhang (2016), comparing the discourse markers *좋다* 'O.K.' in Korean and *好* 'O.K.' in Chinese, discovered that *好* has a wider range of pragmatic functions than *좋다*. For instance, *好* can be used to make a concession, change a topic, or end a conversation in the beginning, middle, or end of an utterance, which *좋다* cannot. When Kim (2008) discussed the address terms for young women *아가씨* 'Miss' in Korean and *小姐* 'Miss' in Chinese. She demonstrated the changes of the two terms over time and argued that both terms have been associated with sex-related professions and given a derogative connotation recently. Therefore, people in some regions might feel offended by these terms.

Interestingly, researchers conducting contrastive studies on requests in Korean and Chinese have not reached a consensus. Ying and Hong (2020) employed discourse completion tests to compare requests by Korean, Chinese, and French speakers. They revealed that the Korean and Chinese speakers used more query preparatory and mood derivables than the French speakers and that they were also more hierarchical and collectivistic than the French speakers. But Zou (2015) contended that Chinese speakers are more direct than Korean speakers in requesting by comparing requests in Korean dramas with requests in Chinese revealed in prior research. In contrast, Rue and Zhang (2008) derived data from role-plays and natural conversations. They posited that Chinese speakers make more indirect requests than Korean speakers. Chinese speakers deploy various strategies, such as address terms and supportive moves, to mitigate requests more often than Korean speakers (Choi, 2008; Kim and Kim, 2011). One of the reasons for the contradictory research findings could be that the data were collected from disparate sources and the requests were situated in differing contexts.

Unlike requests, refusals, disagreements, and suggestions are relatively less studied communicative acts in contrastive pragmatics between Korean and Chinese. One of these few studies was Cai (2015) who pinpointed similar refusal strategies employed in Korean and Chinese dramas. But Zou (2015) quantified refusal strategies and uncovered that their Chinese speakers used more tokens of direct refusals than the Korean speakers who often came up with good excuses to avoid refusals. Choi et al. (2021) had Korean and Chinese college students conduct role-plays to collect disagreement expressions. Their results showed that the Chinese speakers preferred explicit disagreement strategies, whereas the Korean speakers employed implicit disagreement



utterances predominantly. Schmidt et al. (1996) found that implicit suggestions were favored in both Korean and Chinese advertisements. The Korean suggestions were given in a less formal but inclusive way through 읊시다 'let us', whereas the Chinese suggestions were presented more formally with the polite word 请 'please' and the honorific pronoun 您 'you'.

When accounting for the (in)directness of Korean and Chinese speakers, Chen and Wang (2021), based on a five-point Likert Scale, a discourse completion test, and a focus group interview, stated that "different East Asian language communities have different ways of managing their relational webs, which causes variation in their practice of indirectness" (p. 325). Although both the Korean and Chinese speakers prioritized networking with important figures for access to more resources in the future, the Korean speakers seemed to perceive directness in networking with outsiders as inconsiderate, while the Chinese speakers deemed directness with acquaintances sincere and indirectness as deceitful. These results can explain why Korean speakers provide grounders before making requests (Byon, 2004) and Chinese speakers tend to disagree directly with acquaintances and friends in mundane conversations (Zhu, 2014; Zhu and Boxer, 2021).

The understanding of the concept of politeness may vary across languages. Although Korean and Chinese speakers both associate honorifics and polite expressions with politeness (Chao, 2014; Shi, 2014; Tao et al., 2016), Korean speakers appear to deploy honorifics to show deference in public, whereas Chinese speakers use more informal address terms 亲 'dear' to bond (Cheng, 2020). Tao, Yoon and Nishijima (2016) maintained, on the basis of survey results and dictionary definitions, that 恭遜 'politeness' in Korean has fundamental differences from 礼貌 'politeness' in Chinese. The notion of politeness retains close ties with the honorifics system in Korean. Not using honorifics on a senior or superior indicates impoliteness (Kim, 2011). In contrast, Chinese is not rich in honorifics anymore. Mao (1994) claimed that politeness in Chinese has more to do with attending to others' face, while Gu (1990) contended that politeness in Chinese refers to respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement.

In brief, although contrastive pragmatics between Korean and Chinese has been studied with regards to discourse markers, address terms, honorifics, requests, refusals, suggestions, disagreements, (in)directness, and politeness, little contrastive analysis has been carried out to compare topic initiation in first encounters by Korean speakers and Chinese speakers. Therefore, we conduct this study to contribute to the extant research on contrastive pragmatics between Korean and Chinese.

### 3 Methodology and Data

For this study, we chose to examine reality dating shows because: (1) There is an increasing number of intermarriages between South Korean and Chinese nationals; (2) We can find reality dating shows in Korean and Chinese that are authentic and comparable. Some research has been conducted on dating shows in terms of the historical development of the shows (Wang, 2017), the authenticity of the shows (Shei, 2013; Chu, 2020), the politics that involves the shows (Guo, 2017), the social issues that are reflected in the shows (Li, 2015; Luo and Sun, 2015; Duan, 2016; Chen, 2017; Peng, 2018), the cultural values that are associated with the shows (Song, 2020), as well as participants' pragmatic behavior such as females' refusal strategies (Wang, 2015; Ren and Woodfield, 2016) and hosts' teasing tactics (Bi and Marsden, 2020). Nevertheless, none of them has investigated participants' topic initiation on their first date which would pave the way for their short-term goal of getting a second date and for the long-term goal of getting married.

Therefore, we collected ten first encounters among the native Korean speakers who participated in the Korean reality dating show, *선다방 Sun Da Bang*, from <http://www.bilibili.com>, and another ten first encounters among the native Chinese speakers who participated in the Chinese reality dating show, *你好另一半 Find Me the One*, from <http://www.iq.com>. We selected *Sun Da Bang* and *Find Me the One* over other dating shows for the following reasons.

Above all, these two dating shows are comparable in terms of production such as non-celebrity participants, meeting venues, and meeting length. Specifically, *Sun Da Bang* focuses on only two ordinary people meeting up in a café each time. This arrangement allows the 'couple' to take time building an incipient relationship and to pose questions to each other without being distracted by other people. The 'couple' is matched up according to their answers to the questions on an online survey, which involves their dating histories and mate preferences (Korobov, 2011). The recording of each first date is approximately ten to fifteen minutes long.

Likewise, *Find Me the One* features ordinary people who are matched up based on their mate preferences that are derived from questionnaires and interviews. The 'couple' meets up at various places, including a restaurant, a pearl company, or a pet store. The design of the show gives the 'couple' the time, space, and freedom that they need to explore a new relationship. The recording of each first date ranges from ten to fifteen minutes.

Both shows are natural, normal, and authentic. Participants date in natural settings without house rules or host control. They are non-celebrities who

normally need to ask questions to obtain each other's background information, instead of celebrities whose basic information has been in the public eye and does not need to be obtained. Non-celebrities tend to stay true to their feelings and display moments of authenticity (e.g., Chu, 2020) more than celebrities who may well perform to maintain their image.

The forty participants (see Table 1) from *Sun Da Bang* and *Find Me the One* were all heterosexual strangers who went to blind dates to seek intimate relationships. They initiated a new topic 277 times, trying to get better acquainted without discussing each topic in detail. All the conversations were transcribed in accordance with a revised version of an advocate of interactional sociolinguistics' – Deborah Schiffrin's (1987) – conventions (See Appendix).

When analyzing and interpreting the participants' topic initiation behavior, we employed interactional sociolinguistics (Tannen, 1989; Schiffrin, 1996; Gumperz, 2005, 2006). Interactional sociolinguistics is an approach to discourse analysis that examines both the immediate linguistic context and the broader social context that goes beyond the immediate linguistic context. Concerned with the relationship between society, culture, and language, interactional sociolinguistics analyzes audio or video recordings and reveals how language users create meaning via social interaction. It deals with modes such as gesture or gaze, as well as linguistic features, in the social context. We did not neglect non-verbal features of speech behavior when looking into central linguistic features. For instance, body language such as leaning towards the current speaker can indicate a hearer's willingness to join the ongoing conversation. Silence or lack of backchannels implies that it is time to change topics. All contextualization cues call for both linguistic- and culture-based analyses because language and culture are not separate entities but are processes that work hand in hand. Interactional sociolinguistics provides interpretive analysis of situated interactions and examines the effects of speakers' strategies on interaction in various cultures.

We created a coding scheme (see Table 2) based on previous research (e.g., Schegloff, 2007; Korobov, 2011; Morris-Adams, 2014; Svennevig, 2014;

TABLE 1      Participants

| Language |        | Korean | Chinese |
|----------|--------|--------|---------|
| Gender   | Female | 10     | 10      |
|          | Male   | 10     | 10      |
| Age      |        | 27–38  | 23–44   |

TABLE 2     The coding scheme for topic initiation

|                   |                               | Korean   | Chinese   |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Topic orientation | Setting topic                 | 아근데 오늘 날씨가<br>(interrupted)<br>'Ah but the weather today<br>(interrupted)'<br>뭐 시키시겠어요? (passes the menu)<br>'What will you order?' (passes the menu)    | 你之前来过这家饭馆吗?<br>'Have you been to this restaurant?'<br>他们这酒吧呢, 我比较熟。<br>'This bar, I'm very familiar with.'  |
|                   | Self-oriented personal topic  | 그래서 저는_ 꼭 예술 가를 만나려고요.<br>'So I_ I really want to meet an artist.'<br>저는 그쪽에도 관심이 많아요 패션뷰티!<br>'I have a lot of interest in the area of fashion/beauty!' | 像以前, 男朋友在我面前吃那个小龙虾 (pause)<br>'Like before, my ex-boyfriend ate shrimp in front of me (pause)'<br>像我之前, 不喜欢太示弱什么的, 北方人嘛。<br>'Like I didn't like to be vulnerable. I'm a northerner.'          |
|                   | Other-oriented personal topic | 택이 어디세요?<br>'Where do you live?'<br>그러면_ 남자친구가 생기면 하고 싶은 거 있으세요?<br>'Then_ if you get a boyfriend, is there something you want to do?'                   | 北京人?<br>'From Beijing?'<br>哎_ 你找另一半有什么要求吗?<br>'Um_ what are you looking for in your life partner?'  |
|                   | Encyclopedic topic            | N/A  | 你觉得生活中的哪些苦是值得反复去回味和品尝的?<br>'What misery in life do you think deserves suffering repeatedly?'<br>大部分情况在社会里确实是一个一直不断升级的一个状况。<br>'In most cases, people continue climbing up the social ladder.' |

TABLE 2     The coding scheme for topic initiation (*cont.*)

|                 |           | Korean   | Chinese  |
|-----------------|-----------|--|--|
| Linguistic form | Statement | 미술 좋아하신다고 들었<br>고!네 ... (nods)<br>'I heard that you like art! Yeah ...<br>(nods)'<br>유학생 (indistinct) 들었어요<br>지금.<br>'A foreign student (indistinct)<br>I heard just now.' | 人家说 (pause) 呃_ 越大了<br>越难找 (shakes head)。<br>'People say (pause) uh_the<br>older you get, the harder to<br>find a mate (shakes head).'<br>我之前有去学高_ 高尔夫<br>球嘛。<br>'I used to take g_ golf<br>lessons.' |
|                 | Question  | 혹시 어떤 일 하시는지 여쭙봐<br>도 될까요?<br>'May I ask you what kind of work<br>you do?'<br>혹시 자전거 탈줄 아세요?<br>'By any chance do you know how<br>to ride a bike?'                         | 你_ 这个_ 是做哪行的?<br>'What_is_ your occupation?'<br>你_ 你家庭条件是不是挺<br>好的?<br>'Your_ your family condi-<br>tions are good, aren't they?'  |

Strambi and Tudini, 2020). Following this scheme, two researchers coded topic orientation (i.e., setting, self-oriented, other-oriented, or encyclopedic topics), the linguistic form of topic initiation (i.e., statement or question), and the gender of the topic initiator (i.e., male or female). After finishing the initial coding with 83.5 percent agreement, they discussed discrepancies, reached a consensus, and achieved interrater reliability. Since we believe that descriptive statistics can help us understand an observational study better, we also utilized R to perform a number of statistical tests, such as Chi-square tests and one-sample Z-tests, to investigate whether there is a potential association between gender and topic initiation in Korean and Chinese respectively and whether the proportion of one category of topic initiation is significantly larger than that of another one in this study. But we do not intend to make inferences to the whole population of Korean and Chinese speakers. Note that the observed significance level (*p*-value) is set to 0.05 or less.

4 Results

In this section, we attempt to demonstrate how setting topics, self-oriented personal topics, other-oriented personal topics, and encyclopedic topics are distributed and whether there is a potential association between topic initiation and gender from a quantitative perspective as well as how the Korean and Chinese speakers initiated these topics in their first encounters from a qualitative perspective. When describing topic initiation in specific examples, we disclose the linguistic forms, such as statements or questions, that the specific types of topic initiation are realized in.

4.1 *Distribution in Topic Initiation*

The Korean speakers and the Chinese speakers initiated at least 30% more other-oriented personal topics than self-oriented personal topics (see Table 3). They posed at least 17% more questions than statements when initiating the topics (see Table 4). One sample Z-test results show a significantly higher quantity of other-oriented topic initiation than that of self-oriented topic initiation, setting topic initiation, or encyclopedic topic initiation ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ). The results also reveal a significantly greater number of questions for topic initiation than that of statements for topic initiation ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ).

Nevertheless, the Korean and Chinese speakers differed greatly in gender role in topic initiation. The Korean male speakers initiated 85 new topics while the Korean female speakers initiated 38 new topics (see Table 5). As Figure 1 shows, the Korean male speakers initiated approximately 38% more topics than the Korean female speakers. One sample Z-test results show that

TABLE 3 Frequency and proportion of topic orientation

| Language | Topic Orientation |                |             |              |
|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|
|          | Self-oriented     | Other-oriented | Setting     | Encyclopedic |
| Korean   | 30 (24.39%)       | 76 (61.79%)    | 17 (13.82%) | 0            |
| Chinese  | 38 (24.68%)       | 87 (56.49%)    | 22 (14.29%) | 7 (4.54%)    |
| Total    | 277 (100%)        |                |             |              |

TABLE 4      Frequency and proportion of linguistic forms

| Language | Linguistic Form |             |
|----------|-----------------|-------------|
|          | Statement       | Question    |
| Korean   | 51 (41.46%)     | 72 (58.54%) |
| Chinese  | 58 (37.66%)     | 96 (62.34%) |
| Total    | 277 (100%)      |             |

TABLE 5      Gender and topics

| Language | Gender |        |
|----------|--------|--------|
|          | Male   | Female |
| Korean   | 85     | 38     |
| Chinese  | 78     | 76     |

this difference is significant. This indicates the men's dominating role in the Korean conversations. On the contrary, the Chinese male speakers initiated 78 new topics while the Chinese female speakers initiated 76 new topics, meaning that they initiated approximately the same number of topics (see Table 5). No significant difference was detected between them, which suggests a relatively equal status in their roles in topic initiation. Chi-square test results ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ) demonstrate a significant gender difference in topic initiation by the Korean speakers and the Chinese speakers. This confirms Martin and Craig's (1983) study on the influence of gender in same-sex and mixed-sex initial interactions.

4.2      *Realization of Topic Initiation*

We detect differences, as well as commonalities, in the topic orientation of the Korean and Chinese speakers. Although both the native Korean speakers and Chinese speakers employed setting topics and personal topics, only the Chinese speakers used encyclopedic topics, such as *what love is*. A few of the Chinese speakers pointed out the awkwardness of the blind date while some of the Korean speakers mentioned that they were nervous about the blind date. But most of the speakers started their conversations with similar

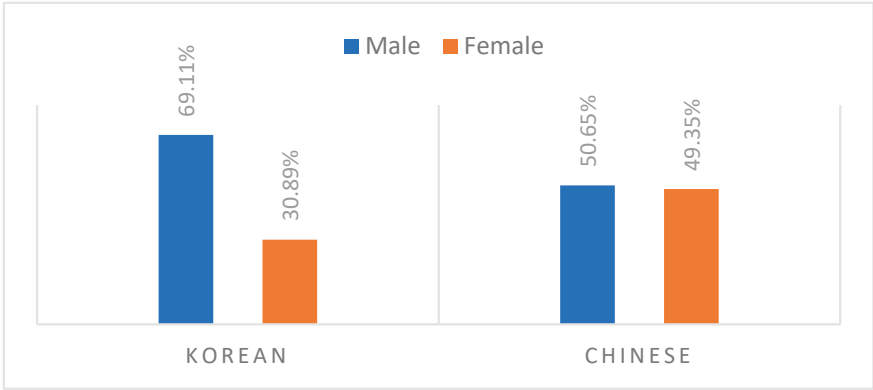


FIGURE 1 Gender and topic initiation

setting topics on the initial phase (Svennevig, 2014), before diving into relatively more sensitive personal topics such as jobs, hobbies, past experiences, mate preferences, and personality. Along with other-oriented personal topics, they also oriented topics to themselves and disclosed personal information voluntarily.

Regarding personal topics, a close examination reveals that the native Korean speakers explored a few different topics from the native Chinese speakers. For instance, the Korean speakers were more interested in the information about the place of residence – where people currently live – while the Chinese speakers often asked questions about the hometown – where they were originally from. The female Chinese speakers were curious about their date’s income and parental economic status, whereas none of the female Korean speakers brought up this topic. Some of the male Chinese speakers manifested their belief in machismo and their dominating role in family life although some of the female Chinese speakers expressed concerns about machismo. But this topic did not emerge on the Korean blind dates at all.

In what follows, we demonstrate how the native Korean speakers and/or native Chinese speakers initiated setting topics, personal topics, and encyclopedic topics on their blind dates. At the same time, we describe the communicative acts, which the speakers performed when developing these topics, and put their names in brackets according to House and Kádár’s (2021) framework.

4.2.1 Setting Topics

It is not surprising that both the Korean and Chinese speakers discussed the informal settings where dating took place. Their setting topics concern the



physical environment (e.g., a café or a restaurant), immediate situation (e.g., weather, time, drinks, snacks, pets in a pet store, or pearl picking in a pearl company), among others. This “noncommitting level of talk” (Svennevig, 2014: 304) is engaging, diverse, and geared toward communion, which can contribute to rapport building (Coupland, 2014). Take Excerpt (1) as an example.

Excerpt (1) (Couple 10)

1. 재성: (To waiter) 메뉴판이.  
Jaeseong: (To waiter) Menu.
2. 차울: 메뉴판?  
Chayul: Menu?
3. 재성: 네. (Waiter hands over a menu; Jaeseong gives Chayul the menu)  
Jaeseong: Yes. (Waiter hands over a menu; Jaeseong gives Chayul the menu)
4. 차울: 고맙습니다. 같이 봐요.  
Chayul: Thank you. Let's read it together.
5. 재성: 아, 예.  
Jaeseong: Ah, yes.

In Excerpt (1), right after Jaeseong (male) takes a seat, he initiates a setting topic and ask for a menu [Request] (line 1), which somehow surprises Chayul (female) who repeats 메뉴판 ‘menu’ with a rising tone (line 2). Chayul seems to expect more interpersonal communication before ordering drinks or snacks. Chayul’s surprise neither makes Jaeseong stop to discuss his decision with her nor prevents him from being firm on his request with 네 ‘yes’ [Okay] (line 3). Jaeseong’s quick decision and firm request could indicate that he assumes a dominating role in this conversation. Conversely, when Chayul receives the menu, she thanks Jaeseong [Thank] and then suggests that they read the menu and place an order together [Suggest] instead of making a decision on her own (line 4). This shows her being more considerate and less controlling in their interaction. Also, doing things together as a direct mutual experience is a great way to build rapport on the common ground (Geurts, 2019) established by means of copresence heuristics (Clark and Marshall, 1992).

Likewise, the Chinese speakers often commented on the physical environment or immediate situation. Excerpt (2) is an instance. Shiqing Zhang (female) and Jun Wang (male) have their first date in a lively pet store. The pets in the store naturally become their setting topic.

Excerpt (2) (你好另一半20210423)

1. 张诗情:好多狗@。

Shiqing Zhang: A lot of puppies @.

2. 王琨:啊, 你好你好 ..... 我我我应该劝劝架吗? (plays with dogs and cats) 哎呀, 来吧, 宝贝们! 我这啥也没做呢, 就都来了……哎呀, 都这么黏人吗?

Jun Wang: Ah, hello hello ..... Should I I I I break up the fight? (plays with dogs and cats) Aya, come here, baby! I haven't done anything yet. You all came ..... Aya, are you all so clingy?

3. 张诗情:是@。刚刚已经跟它们玩了一圈了, 超可爱的。

Shiqing Zhang: They are @. I've played with them for a while. They are super cute.

4. 王琨: (plays with dogs and cats) 哎呀, 哎呀。你不怕这些是吧? 猫狗啊什么的。

Jun Wang: (plays with dogs and cats) Aya, aya. You're not afraid of them, are you? Cats and dogs, and the like.

5. 张诗情:不怕。我家有三只狗……

Shiqing Zhang: No. I have three dogs at home .....

In Excerpt (2), it is the woman Shiqing Zhang who initiates the setting topic happily with the expression 好多狗@ 'a lot of puppies @' [Remark] (line 1). After saying hello [Greet], the man Jun Wang displays his gentle personality by calling the pets 宝贝 'baby' and describing them as clingy [Opine] (line 2). He smartly moves from questions towards the pets (line 2) to a question towards Shiqing Zhang seeking information from her [Request] (line 4). Shiqing Zhang's active engagement in answering the questions about the pets (line 3) and the question about her (line 5) makes their meeting interactive and meaningful. In her answers, she confirms Jun Wang's remark [Okay], comments on the cuteness of the pets [Opine] and tells him about her three dogs [Tell]. Moreover, Shiqing Zhang's laughter (lines 1 and 3) and Jun Wang's joy of playing with the pets (lines 2 and 4) manifest the cheerful nature of their interaction and reveal the contribution of a good setting topic to the establishment of a new relationship. This setting topic about the pets gets developed over turns (lines 1–3) and then into something that Jun Wang is interested in knowing about Shiqing Zhang (lines 4–5) – pet loving – which is also the common ground that Jun Wang shares and the foundation of their nascent relationship.

#### 4.2.2 Personal Topics

Following a setting topic are personal topics through which the Korean and Chinese speakers really learned about their date. The speakers initiated the

personal topics in the form of questions or statements. They oriented the topics towards themselves or the other party. By discussing a wide variety of personal topics, the speakers got acquainted and developed their relationships gradually. See Excerpts (3)–(6) for examples of personal topics, among which Excerpts (3) and (4) show self-oriented topic initiation while Excerpts (5) and (6) display other-oriented topic initiation.

Excerpt (3) (Couple 8)

1. 경호: 원래 아메리카노 못 먹었는데 다이어트한다고 아메리카노 하루에 세 잔씩.

Kyeongho: I couldn't drink Americano before but as I'm on a diet now, I drink it three times a day.

2. 신애: (surprised) 으엥?

Sinae: (surprised) Oh?

.....

3. 경호: 원래 뚱뚱해가지고.

Kyeongho: I was always fat.

4. 신애: 진짜요?

Sinae: Really?

5. 경호: 옛날에는 90 몇 kg 나갔고 최근 3-4 달 전에는 80 몇 kg 나갔거든요.

Kyeongho: A long time ago, I weighed 90kg. I weighed 80kg about 3 or 4 months ago.

In Excerpt (3), after having ordered drinks with Sinae (female), Kyeongho (male) smoothly segues into the topic about his diet [Disclose]. His explanation of his drink of choice (line 1) draws Sinae's attention. The surprise particle 으엥 'Oh' with a rising tone that Sinae deploys (line 2) serves the same function as the word 'why' in this context. This implicit meaning is apparently understood by Kyeongho because he goes on to confess that he was overweight several months ago (lines 3 and 5). His vulnerability, an essential quality for healthy intimate relationships (Tsai, 2016), can gain Sinae's respect and arouse her sympathy. Sinae responds with 진짜요 'really' (line 4) to show her disbelief, which could suggest her good impression of Kyeongho's current body image. Kyeongho's disclosing his not-so-glorious image in the past, especially the detailed information about his weight in line 5, indicates his personality trait of honesty, which could be attractive to Sinae. This self-oriented topic initiation in the form of a statement (line 1) can help facilitate the speakers'

friendship. On the other hand, Kyeongho seems to dominate the whole conversation by providing details and holding the floor (lines 1, 3 & 5). In contrast, Sinae's responses are no longer than one word each time (lines 2 & 4).

Excerpt (4) (你好另一半<sup>20210430</sup>)

1. 王执臣:朋友跟我说说我可能没那么会撩\_撩妹, 没有没有。  
Zhichen Wang: My friends told me that I can't fl\_f flirt with girls that well. I can't
2. 黄雯:嗯。  
Wen Huang: En.
3. 王执臣:喔。  
Zhichen Wang: Oh.
4. 黄雯:所以这也是导致你现在单身的原因吗?  
Wen Huang: So, this is one of the reasons for you to still be single?
5. 王执臣:呃, 其中之一。  
Zhichen Wang: Uh, one of the reasons.

Similarly, in a Chinese conversation (Excerpt 4), Zhichen Wang (male) is straightforward about what he thinks is his frailty [Disclose] – not knowing how to flirt (line 1) – with his date, Wen Huang (female). The pause before the word 撩妹 'flirting with girls' could suggest his hesitation in this disclosure, which is not reciprocated by Wen Huang who simply responds with a particle 嗯 'en' (line 2). Her seemingly lack of interest might have made Zhichen Wang feel no need to continue this topic. So, he reacts with another particle 喔 'oh' (line 3). Surprisingly, Wen Huang follows up with a question seeking information [Request] and makes an association between Zhichen Wang's character weakness and his single status (line 4). Although Zhichen Wang does not deny the association, his use of a hedge 呃 'uh' could indicate his effort to seek a more accurate answer (line 5). This is subsequently echoed by Wen Huang who discloses her own reasons for staying unmarried. It is a regular practice for people to use self-disclosure to elicit information and form relationships (Dianiska et al., 2021). Zhichen Wang's self-oriented topic initiation in the form of a statement (line 1) also indicates his belief in honesty as another essential quality for rapport maintenance and development (Debnam et al., 2014).

Furthermore, both the Korean and Chinese speakers frequently initiated personal topics that are oriented towards their date in the form of questions. In Excerpt (5), Jiyung (female) arrived earlier despite traffic; hence, Keunwook (male) is curious about where she lives.

## Excerpt (5) (Couple 6)

1. 근욱: 댁이 어디세요?

Keunwook: Where do you reside?

2. 지영: 저장북\_ 여기서 가까워요.

Jiyung: Gangbuk\_ It's close to here.

3. 근욱: 네, 멀지 않아요. 걸어오셨어요?

Keunwook: Yes, not far. Did you walk here?

4. 지영: @@ (puts a hand on her face) 아니요, 버스 타고.

Jiyung: @@ (puts a hand on her face) No, I rode the bus.

5. 근욱: 아, 버스타고\_ 막혔을 텐데. 저는 인천에서.

Keunwook: Ah, you rode the bus\_ Probably traffic. I reside in Incheon.

6. 지영: 아 진짜요? 그 쪽 어디?

Jiyung: Ah really? Where?

7. 근욱: 부평 아세요?

Keunwook: Do you know Bupyeong?

8. 지영: (nods) 저희 이모가 부평 살다가 지금 부천 중동으로 이사 가셨어요.

Jiyung: My aunt lived in Bupyeong but she has moved to Middle East Bucheon.

As we can see from Excerpt (5), Keunwook initiates an other-oriented personal topic in the form of a question about Jiyung's residence [Request] (line 1). Jiyung answers with a little explanation about the short distance between her residence and the dating venue (line 2), which she might have hoped to help increase familiarity between her and Keunwook. Jiyung's effort seems to pay off because Keunwook apparently knows her residence area by confirming with 네 멀지 않아요 'Yes, not far' [Okay] (line 3). After his assumption of how Jiyung came is proved wrong (line 4), Keunwook sounds surprised, which is realized in the particle 아 'ah', by Jiyung's early arrival despite the traffic. This could suggest his dominating role in the conversation because one of the reasons for him initiating the topic about residence might have been to figure out why she arrived earlier than he. After this is settled, he also discloses where he lives in line 5 as a reciprocal action [Disclose] which results in Jiyung's request for more information [Request] (line 6). This information exchange leads them to a wonderful discovery – Jiyung's aunt used to live in Keunwook's area [Disclose] (line 8) – and thus helps them establish common ground. A third person is often brought in to make connections and create common ground (Thorne, 1987), which has great social outcomes for relationship development

(Enfield, 2020). The above other-oriented topic initiation also emerges in the following Chinese conversation (Excerpt 6).

Excerpt (6) (你好另一半 20210507)

1. 未然:你是北京\_?

Ran Wei: Are you Beijing\_?

2. 王勇:我是北京人。

Yong Wang: I'm from Beijing.

3. 未然:北京人?

Ran Wei: From Beijing?

4. 王勇:对,我是北京人,对。

Yong Wang: Yes. I'm from Beijing. Yes.

5. 未然:哦,干杯!

Ran Wei: Oh, cheers!

Ran Wei (female) and Yong Wang (male) agreed to meet in a tea house. After warm greetings from Yong Wang, who arrived earlier, and some relaxing small talk, Ran Wei goes straight to what she cares most with a question about Yong Wang's origin [Request] (line 1). But she pauses before she completes the question, eliciting an answer from Yong Wang. Since this is a typical question for blind dates in China, Yong Wang finishes Ran Wei's thought with an answer [Tell] (line 2). The interesting part is that Ran Wei seeks confirmation from Yong Wang about his origin right away (line 3), which might indicate her cautious character and placing great value on this origin owing to Beijing's privilege as the capital and political/economic/cultural center of mainland China. After Yong Wang confirms his origin firmly with two 对 'yes' at both the beginning and the end of his answer [Okay] (line 4), Ran Wei exclaims with a particle 哦 'oh' and happily makes a toast (line 5) because she is originally from Beijing too. This common ground that they discover facilitates their rapport building because they share some similar life experiences in Beijing which can make them feel closer to each other.

#### 4.2.3 Encyclopedic Topics

It is interesting that none of the Korean speakers discussed encyclopedic topics. In contrast, some of the Chinese speakers explored a few encyclopedic topics, such as love, the meaning of life, tourist attractions, and May–December romance. Take Excerpt (7) for example.

Excerpt (7) (你好另一半20210604)

1. 何燕成:就是爱情应该是到后来的那种两个人。

Yancheng He: It's just that love should be like the couple who grow old together.

2. 夏清影:你要爱的那个状态。

Qingying Xia: You want the state of love.

3. 何燕成:不可替代的那种感觉才是爱情,我也愿意为你牺牲很多很多东西,或者甚至牺牲我所有东西给你。

Yancheng He: Love is that irreplaceable feeling, that I'm willing to sacrifice many many things, or even everything for you.

4. 夏清影:那你找的这是灵魂知己那种。

Qingying Xia: In that case, you're looking for a soulmate.

5. 何燕成:对,我觉得只有灵魂知己才能=

Yancheng He: Yes, I think only soulmates can=

6. 夏清影:[一生一代一双人那种]

Qingying Xia: [Lifelong couples]

7. 何燕成:=[才能是爱情嘛,] 才能是爱情。当然这个爱情,就是人\_人这一生可能会遇到几次爱情我觉得,肯定不是就一次。

Yancheng He: =[have love,] have love. Of course, this love, I mean that people\_ people might be able to fall in love several times, I think, definitely more than once.

In Excerpt (7), Yancheng He (male) initiates an exploration of what love is (line 1) with Qingying Xia (female). He defines love and portrays soulmates in a general sense through words 两个人 'the couple' (line 1), 那种感觉 'that feeling' (line 3), generic 你 'you' (line 3), and 人 'people' (line 7). Qingying Xia behaves like an active listener and attempts to understand Yancheng He's mate preferences by dissecting and interpreting his description of love. Right after Yancheng He depicts love as a picture of a couple being together for a lifetime [Opine] (line 1), Qingying Xia interprets him wanting the state of staying in love (line 2). After Yancheng He describes the feeling of being in love [Opine] (line 3), Qingying Xia interprets him wanting a soulmate (line 4). Qingying Xia's interpretations are confirmed by Yancheng He with 对 'right' [Okay] (line 5). This confirmation seems to have given Qingying Xia the courage to interrupt Yancheng He with another interpretation – 一生一世一双人那种 'lifelong couples' (line 6) – before he completes his words in line 5. But the interruption does not seem to bother him because he continues to explain that people can fall in love several times [Opine] (line 7). This encyclopedic topic about love is abstract and philosophical, which might make the listener

admire the speaker's knowledge or profundity. It also helps the couple on the date comprehend each other's worldviews.

## 5 Discussion

This study contributes to the contrastive pragmatics studies between Korean and Chinese which need more attention due to a recent increase in heterosexual intermarriages between South Korean and Chinese nationals. The findings about topic initiation on first dates among the Korean and Chinese speakers can enhance the intercultural competence of the people from these two cultures and minimize communication misunderstandings that might result from cross-cultural pragmatic differences.

A big difference lies in topic initiation by the Korean speakers and the Chinese speakers under study. The Chinese speakers paid more attention to their date's hometown and income, which are indicators of stability of life and future relationships, in comparison to the Korean speakers focusing on the current residence which decides the geographic accessibility and easiness for future dating. This difference seems to be constrained by the sociocultural context such as regions, the interactional context such as topics, and the personal context such as gender and beliefs (Zhu, 2019b). In other words, Chinese people's origin might be associated with their socioeconomic status. People might relocate for more economic and educational resources, causing an increase in regional mobility in contemporary China (Cartier, 2005). Those living in the same neighborhood may come from vastly distant regions, hold only a temporary residence, and look for relocation again.

At the ideological level, a conflict was observed in the Chinese male speakers' claim of machismo and the Chinese female speakers' resistance to it. In traditional China, wives were required to take orders from husbands and follow their lead in conversations under the influence of neo-Confucianism which encompasses elements from Buddhism and Taoism (see Chan, 1963). Fortunately, "such ideology is condemned today and is regarded as an obstacle to social development" (Wang, 2017: 514). The traditional gender roles and communication practice have been mostly replaced by new ways of thinking and social practice that supposedly embrace the ideal of equality since the implementation of economic reforms in 1978. Chinese women desire equal social status as men. Our findings on the Chinese speakers' equal engagement in topic initiation can substantiate this desire. Consequently, the Chinese men's belief in machismo and their dominating role in family life are marginalized



and becoming a marked ideology that evokes contestation. As argued in Gal and Irvine (2019), a dominant ideology is often unmarked, less contested, and concealed in discourses.

Albeit the correlation between dominance of ideologies, contestation, and consciousness is not in any way straightforward, the absence of an explicit account of machismo in the Korean conversations lends us one possible interpretation, which is that the belief of men taking a dominating role in family life may not be ceasing from its hegemonic position on the Korean dating market. The Korean male speakers' dominating role in initiating topics can also corroborate this ideological position. It seems that both the Korean men and women held established expectations and perceptions of their social roles and interacted according to their rights and obligations in standard situations (House and Kádár, 2021) such as dating. These observations and ideologies appear to endorse what Kang (1992) stated:

In [South] Korea, the dimension of sex roles revolves primarily around the traditional [neo-]Confucian concept that a woman's position is subordinate to that of a man, both in the family and society. This phenomenon is clearly reflected in the world of Korean television (p. 79).

In addition to the difference in gender role in topic initiation, this study reveals, through one sample Z-test, a significantly higher quantity of other-oriented topic initiation than that of self-oriented topic initiation, setting topic initiation, or encyclopedic topic initiation ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ). It also shows a significantly greater number of questions for topic initiation than that of statements for topic initiation ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ). This might be due to the fact that other-oriented topics and questions display the speakers' interest in the other party and can elicit relevant information more effectively. Information exchange can build common ground, establish familiarity, enhance mutual understanding, and eventually contribute to the speakers' affiliation (Svennevig, 2014). This finding does not seem to support the previous research (e.g., Berger and Kellermann, 1994) that has claimed that an indirect approach such as self-disclosure tends to be used more frequently because direct questioning may be perceived as socially inappropriate (Strambi and Tudini, 2020). The Korean and Chinese speakers on the blind date seemed to be eager to get to know each other through questioning in order to make informed decisions about future dates.

But it is also important to recognize that the Korean and Chinese speakers both tried various topics to build common ground and get acquainted. Common ground refers to common world views, joint knowledge, shared values, beliefs, suppositions, and situational context (Clark, 1996, 2009). The

participants seemed to take advantage of setting topics such as food order (Excerpt 1) and pet loving (Excerpt 2) that were brought up in the form of statements and other-oriented personal topics such as residence (Excerpt 5) and origin (Excerpt 6) that were brought up in the form of questions to construct or discover common ground. The common ground helped them achieve familiarity (Svennevig, 1999) and ensure safe and comfortable interaction. This might be due to the fact that the common ground is where “the others’ strangeness did not become too intimidating” (Kuuluvainen et al., 2021: 46) and that detecting similarities is a precondition for a successful interaction. This finding aligns with previous research that has demonstrated that common ground can be deployed to improve social affiliation (Enfield, 2008; Lee, 2016) in both intercultural communication (Kecskes, 2006; Penz, 2007) and intracultural communication (Enfield, 2008; Lee, 2016).

During the process of building common ground and getting acquainted, the Korean and Chinese speakers both deployed a wide range of communicative acts such as greeting (Excerpt 2), remarking (Excerpt 2), requesting information from their date (Excerpts 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6), disclosing information to their date (Excerpts 3, 4, and 5), suggesting (Excerpt 1), thanking (Excerpt 1), sharing facts (Excerpts 2 and 6), confirming previous evaluations (Excerpts 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7), and expressing opinions (Excerpts 2 and 7). Their communicative act of requesting in the form of questions seems to endorse Ying and Hong’s (2020) finding about the Korean and Chinese speakers used query preparatory for requests. However, the speakers did not make refusals or express disagreement on the first date probably because they wanted to behave well and appear amicable and agreeable for purposes of impressing the other party or getting a second date.

Other findings that align with previous research include the use of some discourse markers and honorifics. Specifically, the Chinese speakers deployed 好 ‘o.k.’ to concede, change a topic, or end a conversation, as Min and Zhang (2016) described. Also, the Korean speakers used the informal expression 읊시다 ‘let us’, whereas the Chinese speakers employed more formal expression 请 ‘please’, which supports Schmidt et al. (1996). Although those from the southern China did not employ honorifics, those from the northern China employed 您 ‘you’ as a politeness strategy just as the Korean speakers used honorifics in a public place. This is in line with Tao, Yoon and Nishijima’s (2016) study. But the Chinese speakers did not use 亲 ‘dear’ on the first date despite what Cheng (2020) claimed, which might be due to the fact that using 亲 ‘dear’ on the first date can sound very frivolous and inappropriate.

In summary, aside from their similar routine of opening a conversation and employment of a variety of communicative acts, the Korean speakers and the Chinese speakers developed different indexicalities between the topics that

they chose to initiate and the desired social characteristics in intimate relationships. The findings are broadly in line with Chen and Wang (2021) who identified different cultural logics underlying Korean and Chinese speakers' management of interpersonal relationships. With a particular focus on the beginning stage of interpersonal relationships, research on topic initiation can provide us a venue to gain an insight into the different developmental pathways that South Korea and mainland China have made in the collisions between neo-Confucian conventions, migration resulting from industrialization, and social (in)equality issues that have arisen from modernization.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper attempts to uncover differences, along with similarities, in topic initiation by the native Korean speakers and the native Chinese speakers in their first encounters on two reality dating shows. The speakers followed a similar pattern of getting acquainted, starting with greetings, name exchange, queries about traffic or waiting time, and sometimes setting topics, and then gradually moving to personal topics. They all initiated new topics, established common ground, and performed a large variety of communicative acts such as requesting information, disclosing information, and expressing opinions, which helped them succeed in keeping the conversation flowing. Nonetheless, the speakers differed in the variety of topics and the gender role in topic initiation. The Chinese speakers had a wider range of topics and posed more queries than the Korean speakers. Also, there was a significant difference in the gender role in topic initiation between the Chinese speakers and the Korean speakers. The Korean men initiated a significantly higher number of topics than the Korean women, whereas no significant difference was detected between the men and the women who initiated the topics in Chinese.

The aforementioned findings are enlightening considering the stereotype that generalizes the cultural concept of the 'East', including the Chinese culture being similar to the Korean culture and the Chinese speakers being similar to the Korean speakers in pragmatic behavior. This study can contribute to the field of contrastive pragmatics research because the ability to initiate topics is important for speakers to actively engage in a conversation and create social relationships, especially considering the increasing number of intermarriages between South Korean and Chinese nationals. Moreover, the contrast between Korean pragmatics and Chinese pragmatics has not received sufficient coverage. Scholars should explore more under-researched areas along these lines to prevent miscommunication between South Korean and Chinese nationals.

For instance, it would be great to conduct research on topic initiation in first encounters in formal contexts such as Korean and Chinese academic conferences or workplaces where other sociolinguistic factors such as status differences play a vital role.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions (adapted from Schiffrin, 1987)

- : Speaker turn start
- [ ] Overlapping utterances
- = Contiguous utterances after an interruption
- ... Omission
- A short untimed pause
- (pause) Long untimed intervals
- @ Laughter
- italics* Emphasis
- (coughs) Characteristics of the talk
- (indistinct) Items in doubt

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