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THE LINGUISTIC NATURE OF MITIGATING EXPRESSIONS IN KOREAN: A THEORETICAL AND PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24296964

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Abstract: *This article examines the linguistic nature of mitigating expressions in Korean from a theoretical and pragmatic perspective, incorporating research on their concept, classification and communicative significance. It distinguishes mitigation from hedging and euphemism, and discusses the distinction between lexical-level and sentence-level mitigation. The study adopts a qualitative, theory-oriented approach based on a descriptive review of foundational work on hedging, politeness, conversational mitigation and speech-act modification, alongside Korean-language studies cited in the supplied literature excerpt. Korean constructions such as -(으)ㄹ 것 같다, -(으)ㄹ 수도 있다, -지 않을까 싶다, -(으)면 어떨까요?, -(으)면 좋겠다, and degree adverbs such as 좀, 약간 and 조금 are examined in illustrative contexts. The analysis suggests that sentence-level mitigation is especially relevant to the study of negative opinions because it modifies not only lexical choice but also the force and interpersonal impact of an utterance. Four overlapping functional dimensions are identified: epistemic, illocutionary, evaluative and discourse-oriented mitigation. The article concludes that Korean mitigation should be analysed contextually, with attention to linguistic form, speech-act type and interlocutors' relationship.*

Keywords: *Korean language; mitigating expressions; mitigation; hedging; euphemism; lexical mitigation; sentence-level mitigation; pragmatics; politeness; face-saving.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a means of transmitting propositional information. In interaction, speakers also communicate their attitudes, degrees of certainty, evaluations and social relationships. Consequently, the manner in which an utterance is formulated can be as consequential as the information it conveys. This is particularly evident in situations involving criticism, disagreement, refusal, advice or negative

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evaluation, where an unqualified statement may be perceived as imposing, confrontational or damaging to the relationship between interlocutors.

Speakers may therefore preserve the central content of a message while adjusting its force. They can present a judgement as a personal impression, qualify the certainty of a proposition, formulate a suggestion indirectly or reduce the intensity of a negative evaluation. Such choices are commonly discussed under the notions of mitigation and hedging. Although closely related, the terms should not be treated as exact synonyms. Mitigation is a broad pragmatic strategy for reducing the potentially unwelcome effects of an utterance, whereas hedging typically concerns the limitation of the speaker's commitment, precision or categorical force (Fraser, 1980; Holmes, 1984; Lakoff, 1972).[26]

Korean provides a particularly productive field for examining these processes because speakers can draw on sentence-final forms, modal constructions, expressions of possibility and conjecture, adverbs of degree and discourse-related devices. Forms such as -(으)ㄹ 것 같다 and -지 않을까 싶다 can present a proposition as a tentative assessment rather than an unequivocal claim. Other constructions, including -(으)면 어떨까요? and -(으)면 좋겠다, can frame a proposal as an option for consideration rather than as a directive. However, the pragmatic function of any such form depends on its context; a grammatical construction that expresses conjecture in one situation may serve to soften advice or disagreement in another.

The relevance of mitigation is also connected with politeness and the management of face. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain how certain speech acts may threaten an interlocutor's public self-image or freedom of action, and how speakers may use mitigating strategies to reduce that threat. This framework is useful for analysing Korean interaction, provided that it is not taken to mean that all Korean speakers communicate in the same way or that mitigation is exclusive to Korean culture. Rather, mitigation is a widely attested pragmatic resource whose linguistic realisations and distribution vary across languages, contexts and communities.[27]

The aim of this article is to describe the linguistic nature of mitigating expressions in Korean, organise their principal theoretical interpretations and identify the main semantic-pragmatic functions of selected forms. The article addresses three questions: (1) how should mitigation be distinguished from hedging? (2) which linguistic resources can perform

[26] Lakoff, G. Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts. // Papers from the Eighth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society. Chicago, 1972. P. 183–228.

[27] Brown, P., Levinson, S. C. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

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mitigating functions in Korean? and (3) how do context and speech-act type affect the interpretation of these resources?

A further objective is to clarify the distinction between lexical-level and sentence-level mitigation, a distinction discussed in Korean-language scholarship. This is particularly important for the present study because the Korean constructions under consideration operate at sentence and discourse levels: they can qualify an assessment, soften disagreement or present a criticism as a tentative opinion. The article therefore treats mitigation not simply as the replacement of an unpleasant word, but as a context-sensitive strategy for managing the force and interpersonal consequences of an utterance.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative, theory-oriented research design. It does not report a new experimental study or a statistical corpus investigation. Instead, it synthesises established theoretical accounts of hedging, politeness and mitigation and relates them to published research on Korean discourse. The principal sources include Lakoff's (1972) account of hedges, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, Fraser's (1980) analysis of conversational mitigation and Holmes's (1984) discussion of illocutionary-force modification. Korean-focused studies by Kim (2020), Choi (2018), and Yu and Hong (2023) are used to situate the discussion in research on Korean hedging.

Three complementary procedures were applied. First, a descriptive review was used to clarify the concepts of mitigation, hedging, politeness and epistemic stance. Second, a functional analysis was applied to selected Korean forms and illustrative sentences, considering their grammatical meaning and possible effects on the force of an utterance. Third, a contextual interpretation was used to consider how speech-act type, formality, social distance and the relative positions of interlocutors may influence the pragmatic reading of a form.

The Korean examples are illustrative rather than results extracted from a newly compiled corpus. Their English glosses are functional translations intended to convey the pragmatic effect in context, not necessarily word-for-word equivalents. Accordingly, the analysis makes claims about the potential functions of the constructions, not about their frequency or the behaviour of all Korean speakers.

The additional Korean-language theoretical material supplied for this study refers to works by Lee Yong-ju (1959), Cho Hye-seon (1999), Kim Mi-hyeong (2000), Cho Hui-suk (2009), Yong Yo-yo (2010), Choi Feng-hui (2010), Seok Jin-ju (2011), Bae Seong-yeong (2012), Liu Xiaoxuan (2012), Hwang Seol-un (2013), Chae Chun-ok (2016), Yang Jeong (2017), Lei Qiying (2022), and Yeo Ga-ye (2024). The excerpt provided the authors' names, publication years and summaries of their positions, but did not include complete bibliographic entries. Their views are

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therefore reported as they appear in the supplied excerpt; full publication details must be checked against the original works before the reference list is finalised.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Mitigation and hedging as related but distinct concepts

Lakoff (1972) introduced hedges as expressions that affect the clarity or categorical boundaries of meaning. Subsequent pragmatic work has extended the discussion to the speaker's degree of commitment, the strength of a claim and the management of interpersonal relations.[28] Hedging can therefore limit the precision or certainty of a proposition, as in expressions equivalent to "perhaps", "to some extent" or "I think". Mitigation, by contrast, concerns the broader modification of an utterance's potential impact on the hearer.[29] Fraser (1980) treats mitigation as the modification of a speech act in order to reduce certain unwelcome effects, while Holmes (1984) analyses linguistic resources that modify illocutionary force.[30]

This distinction is important for Korean. An expression of conjecture may function as a hedge when it limits the speaker's epistemic commitment. The same expression may also mitigate an assessment or disagreement by making it less categorical. Nevertheless, not every instance of conjecture is automatically an instance of interpersonal mitigation. Its function must be established from the utterance and its context.

3.2. The concept and classification of mitigating expressions in Korean

Korean-language scholarship has used related terms such as 완곡어 (euphemistic word), 완곡어법 (euphemistic expression or euphemism) and 완곡 표현 (mitigating expression). The supplied excerpt reports that the Standard Korean Language Dictionary includes entries for 완곡하다 and 완곡어법 rather than separate entries for 완곡 or 완곡 표현. 완곡하다 is explained as speaking in a manner that is not harsh or angular and that avoids hurting the listener's feelings; 완곡어법 is described as a way of using gentle expressions to avoid causing emotional discomfort. Examples include using 화장실 instead of 변소 and 돌아가다 instead of 죽다. These examples illustrate lexical substitution, a form of lexical euphemism, rather than the

[28] Lakoff, G. Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts. In: Papers from the Eighth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society. Chicago, 1972, 183–228.

[29] Grice, H. P. Logic and Conversation. // Syntax and Semantics. Vol. 3: Speech Acts / ed. P. Cole, J. L. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975. P. 41–58.

[30] Holmes, J. Modifying Illocutionary Force. // Journal of Pragmatics. 1984. Vol. 8, No. 3. P. 345–365.

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full range of sentence-level pragmatic mitigation.[31]

The excerpt attributes an early conceptualisation of 완곡어법 to Lee Yong-ju (1959), who relates it to euphemism and taboo: an expression that speakers are reluctant to use is replaced by another form. The excerpt also reports that Cho Hye-seon (1999) treats euphemistic usage as a socially conventional practice whose violation may lead to face damage in social interaction. Kim Mi-hyeong (2000) defines mitigating expressions as forms that soften the negative connotations of expressions that may sound uncomfortable, unpleasant or shocking. Importantly, Kim distinguishes lexical-level mitigation from sentence-level mitigation and discusses subtypes such as taboo-word replacement, vague reference and figurative expression.[32]

Other studies summarised in the excerpt emphasise indirectness and interpersonal functions. Cho Hui-suk (2009) describes euphemistic vocabulary as a means of indirectly expressing content that is difficult to state directly for social or psychological reasons. Bae Seong-yeong (2012) focuses on softening facts or opinions that might otherwise hurt the listener's feelings. Yang (2017) characterises mitigation as an indirect, circumlocutory and implicit pragmatic strategy that can guide communication in a more positive direction. Yeo Ga-ye (2024) similarly regards mitigation as a communicative strategy that avoids overly direct or forceful expressions and reflects social courtesy and respect.

For the present research, the distinction between lexical and sentence-level mitigation is analytically central. Lexical mitigation replaces a potentially offensive or taboo-related word with a socially more acceptable alternative. Sentence-level mitigation, by contrast, modifies the formulation of a proposition or speech act through grammatical, modal and discourse resources. It is particularly relevant to negative opinion expression because criticism, disagreement and evaluation can be softened without changing the central propositional content. Forms such as -(으)ㄹ 것 같다 and -지 않을까 싶다 may present a negative assessment as a tentative judgement, while -(으)면 어떨까요? can formulate an alternative as an open suggestion rather than a directive.

The excerpt further highlights an educational issue: learners may know the distinction between honorific and non-honorific speech but still have difficulty selecting mitigating forms appropriate to the situation and interlocutor. Sentence-level expressions are especially difficult to present as a fixed list because their

[31] Choi, A Study on Educational Strategies for Teaching Euphemistic Expressiom, 2025, pp. 4-6

[32] Kim, M. Korean General Extenders tunci ha and kena ha 'or something': Approximation, Hedging, and Pejorative Stance in Cross-Linguistic Comparison. // Pragmatics. 2020. Vol. 30, No. 4. P. 557–585. DOI: 10.1075/prag.18035.kim.

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interpretation depends on context, communicative purpose and the relationship between speakers. The excerpt therefore argues for teaching these expressions through contextualised practice rather than memorisation of isolated forms. This educational point supports the present article's emphasis on context-sensitive analysis, although the current study does not itself test a teaching intervention.

3.3. Korean constructions expressing epistemic mitigation

One prominent resource is -(으)ㄹ 것 같다, which commonly expresses conjecture, likelihood or a subjective assessment. For example:

이 방법이 더 좋을 것 같아요.

"I think this method might be better."

In this example, the speaker does not present the evaluation as an indisputable fact. Instead, it is framed as a personal assessment, leaving room for the interlocutor to offer a different view. In an appropriate interactional context, this can soften a recommendation or disagreement. The form may, however, simply express a genuine inference; its mitigating function cannot be inferred from morphology alone.

Possibility constructions such as -(으)ㄹ 수도 있다 and the more elaborated -(으)ㄹ 수 있을 것 같다 can similarly restrict the scope of a claim or proposal. Consider:

다른 방법을 고려할 수도 있을 것 같습니다.

"It may also be worth considering another approach."

The combination of possibility and tentative stance presents the suggestion as one available option rather than as an obligatory course of action. In academic writing, such forms may also help authors avoid overgeneralisation and indicate that a claim is limited by the available evidence.

3.4. Indirect suggestions and the mitigation of illocutionary force

Some Korean constructions mitigate not primarily by expressing uncertainty about a proposition, but by changing how a proposed action is presented to the hearer. The forms -(으)면 어떨까요? and -(으)면 좋겠다 can frame a recommendation as a question, wish or negotiable possibility. For example:

회의 시간을 조금 늦추면 어떨까요?

"How about moving the meeting a little later?"

Rather than issuing a direct instruction, the speaker invites the interlocutor to consider an alternative. This formulation preserves the hearer's opportunity to accept, reject or modify the proposal. Its mitigating effect is therefore illocutionary and interpersonal: it reduces the directive pressure of the utterance.

3.5. Tentative disagreement and cautious evaluation

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The construction -지 않을까 싶다 can present a view as a tentative thought, particularly in contexts where a direct objection might be face-threatening. For example:

이 부분은 수정할 필요가 있지 않을까 싶습니다.

"I wonder whether this section might need revision."

The speaker communicates a critical assessment without formulating it as a categorical judgement. The expression invites consideration and leaves space for a response. This can be useful in academic discussion, professional communication and interactions involving differences in status. The precise effect nevertheless depends on intonation, surrounding discourse and the relationship between participants.

3.6. Lexical and degree-related resources

Mitigation in Korean is not restricted to modal or sentence-final constructions. Degree adverbs such as 좀, 약간, 조금 and 다소 can reduce the apparent intensity of an evaluation. The construction -는 편이다 can present an assessment as relative rather than absolute. For example:

조금 아쉬운 부분이 있습니다.

"There is one aspect that is somewhat disappointing."

이 표현은 다소 직접적인 편입니다.

"This expression is relatively direct."

In the first sentence, 조금 attenuates the negative evaluation. In the second, 다소 and -는 편이다 frame the assessment as a matter of degree rather than as an absolute verdict. These resources are not inherently mitigating in every occurrence: their effect is influenced by the surrounding wording, prosody and communicative situation.

3.7. Functional classification

On the basis of the reviewed literature and the illustrative analysis, Korean mitigating resources can be organised into four overlapping functional dimensions: **Epistemic mitigation:** marks conjecture, possibility, limited certainty or a subjective assessment; examples include -(으)ㄹ 것 같다 and -(으)ㄹ 수도 있다. Lakoff (1972). **Illocutionary mitigation:** reduces the directive or confrontational force of suggestions, requests and objections; examples include -(으)면 어떨까요? and -(으)면 좋겠다. Fraser (1980). **Evaluative mitigation:** reduces the intensity or categorical character of a positive or negative evaluation; examples include 좀, 약간, 조금, 다소 and -는 편이다. Holmes (1984). **Discourse-oriented mitigation:** helps manage transitions, qualifications and disagreement across a stretch of discourse, allowing speakers to maintain interaction while qualifying their position.

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These dimensions are not mutually exclusive. A single construction may simultaneously limit epistemic commitment and reduce the interpersonal force of an objection. Classification should therefore be based on the function performed in a particular instance, rather than on grammatical form alone.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis supports the view that mitigation in Korean is a multi-layered pragmatic phenomenon rather than a discrete grammatical category. Its interpretation emerges through the interaction of linguistic form, speaker stance, speech-act type and context. This is consistent with Fraser's (1980) account of mitigation as modification of a speech act and Holmes's (1984) analysis of devices that alter illocutionary force. It also accords with the distinction between epistemic hedging and broader interpersonal mitigation: limiting commitment may contribute to politeness, but the two functions are not identical.[33]

The lexical-versus-sentence-level distinction reported in Korean-language scholarship further clarifies the scope of the present analysis. Lexical euphemism is an important part of the broader phenomenon, especially where taboo or socially uncomfortable concepts are involved. However, the negative opinions examined here are more often softened through sentence-level choices that qualify certainty, reduce directive pressure or present an assessment as negotiable. This distinction prevents euphemism from being treated as synonymous with all forms of mitigation. It also explains why the grammatical constructions investigated in this article require analysis at the level of utterance and discourse.

Research focused on Korean provides further support for a function-sensitive account. Kim (2020), using natural conversation corpora, shows that the general extenders -든지 하다 and -거나 하다 can develop functions involving approximation, epistemic uncertainty, tentativeness and polite hedging in particular contexts. This demonstrates that pragmatic functions may emerge beyond the most familiar modal constructions. Choi (2018), examining Korean-to-English consecutive interpreting, identifies several functions of hedges, including mitigation and limitation, possibility and assumption, vagueness, and numerical approximation.[34] The study also shows that these functions are not necessarily preserved to the same degree in interpreting. Yu and Hong (2023) report differences between native and non-native argumentative writing in

[33] Fraser, B. (1980). Conversational mitigation. Journal of Pragmatics, 4(4), 341–350. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378 2166(80)90029-6

[34] Choi, M. Interpreting Hedges from Korean to English: A Case Study Focusing on an Earnings Conference Call. // The Journal of Translation Studies. 2018. Vol. 19, No. 1. P. 247–276. DOI: 10.15749/jts.2018.19.1.010.

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the use and combination of hedging expressions, highlighting the importance of multiword patterns rather than isolated forms.[35]

The educational observations in the supplied Korean-language excerpt also have implications for the interpretation of pragmatic competence. Appropriate use of mitigation cannot be reduced to selecting honorific rather than non-honorific speech. Speakers must also consider the communicative act, the interlocutor and the interactional context. Since sentence-level mitigating expressions are context-dependent and cannot always be taught through a closed inventory, contextualised examples and communicative practice are likely to be more suitable than memorisation alone. This is a pedagogical implication drawn from the reviewed literature, not an outcome tested by the present study.

Politeness theory offers one explanation for why speakers may choose indirect or qualified formulations. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, criticism, disagreement, requests and refusals can threaten an interlocutor's face or freedom of action. Mitigating devices can reduce the force of such acts and help preserve a workable relationship. Grice's (1975) cooperative principle is also relevant: speakers may signal limits on certainty or precision rather than make claims that exceed their evidence. However, neither framework should be applied mechanically. A tentative form can be used strategically, habitually or simply to express uncertainty; the analyst must establish its role from contextual evidence.

The social context of Korean interaction may include age, institutional position, relative status, social distance, degree of formality and the purpose of the exchange. These variables can influence the choice of speech level and the formulation of criticism or suggestions. Nevertheless, it would be methodologically unsound to attribute every indirect expression to a single cultural value or to generalise about all Korean speakers. Cultural explanations should be supported by interactional or empirical evidence and should account for variation across settings and individuals.

For future comparative research on Korean and Uzbek, functional equivalence is more useful than a search for identical grammatical forms. The relevant question is how speakers in each language soften a negative assessment, limit commitment, reduce pressure on the hearer or maintain interaction during disagreement. A rigorous corpus-based study could annotate each occurrence for grammatical form, speech-act type, interlocutor relationship, degree of formality and pragmatic outcome. Frequency counts alone would be insufficient: each instance

[35] Yu, M., Hong, K. A Comparative Analysis of Lexical Bundles in Native and Non-Native Argumentative Writing Using Hedge. // Korean Language Education Research. 2023. Vol. 58, No. 5. P. 107–138. DOI: 10.20880/kler.2023.58.5.107.

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would need contextual examination because, for example, -(으)ㄹ 것 같다 can express ordinary conjecture without performing interpersonal mitigation.

The present article is theoretical and illustrative in scope. It does not provide a newly collected corpus, experimental validation or quantitative comparison between Korean and Uzbek. Its classifications should therefore be treated as an analytical framework for subsequent empirical work, not as a final inventory of all Korean mitigating expressions.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the linguistic nature of mitigating expressions in Korean by relating mitigation to hedging, politeness and the modification of illocutionary force. The analysis has shown that mitigation cannot be reduced to a single grammatical form or to epistemic uncertainty alone. It is realised through a range of resources, including modal constructions, indirect suggestion patterns, degree adverbs and discourse-related expressions.

For the purposes of this study, sentence-level mitigating expressions are defined as linguistic forms and discourse strategies through which speakers reduce the directness or potentially face-threatening force of an utterance in order to show consideration and respect for interlocutors and to support effective communication. This operational definition is adapted from the conceptual positions summarised in the supplied Korean-language excerpt and is applied here specifically to the analysis of negative opinions.

Forms such as -(으)ㄹ 것 같다, -(으)ㄹ 수도 있다, -지 않을까 싶다, -(으)면 어떨까요? and -(으)면 좋겠다 may express conjecture, cautious assessment or a negotiable proposal. Lexical items such as 좀, 약간, 조금 and 다소 can attenuate evaluations, while -는 편이다 can present them in relative terms. Their pragmatic value is context-dependent and must be interpreted with reference to the speech act, the speaker's stance, the interlocutors' relationship and the communicative purpose.

The four functional dimensions proposed here—epistemic, illocutionary, evaluative and discourse-oriented mitigation—provide a framework for analysing these forms while recognising that their functions may overlap. The framework may also inform future Korean–Uzbek comparative research, in which the central concern should be functional equivalence across communicative situations rather than formal correspondence between grammatical structures.

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