Mikyung Ahn* and Foong Ha Yap

# On the face-threat attenuating functions of Korean *com*: implications for internal and external dialogic processing in interaction

**Abstract:** Pragmatic markers are linguistic resources, many of them highly ubiquitous, that provide speakers with a means to display their stance toward a given proposition and, at the same time, toward their fellow interlocutors and others. Using naturally-occurring spoken data from the *Sejong* Spoken Corpus, we examine the role of Korean pragmatic marker *com* as an interactional resource for stance management in conversation. We integrate a 'stance triangle' framework and a dialogicality model that involves both 'internal' and 'external' dialogic processes, and analyze how Korean *com* is recruited as a face-threat mitigator to attenuate the assertive force of a speaker's utterance in a variety of conversational contexts. Our findings indicate that the use of *com* is frequently motivated by sociocultural values, reframed as politeness norms, which prompt speakers to modulate their position in ways that mitigate face-loss for both themselves and others. We thus propose an expanded version of the 'stance triangle' for situations involving mitigation acts whereby, in potentially dis-aligning contexts, the speaker's external positioning toward the stance object often does not directly nor fully reflect their internal evaluation, indicating a frequent desire among fellow interlocutors to preserve solidarity with each other.

**Keywords:** face-threat mitigator; internal/external dialogic processes; Korean *com*; stance modulation

# 1 Introduction

When interacting with others, we often need to deploy politeness strategies that help us establish and maintain positive relationships with our interlocutors. Face-

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threat mitigators play an especially crucial role in disaffiliative contexts, for example, when we disagree with others or complain about others. Arguably, all languages have some means for speakers to hedge their assertions in a less face-threatening way (e.g. *kind of/sort of* in English (Lakoff 1972) and *chotto* 'a little' in Japanese (Matsumoto 1985, 2001)). In Korean, *com*, which is a contracted form of *cokum* conveying a literal meaning of 'an amount of modest quantity' as in (1a), is often used as a pragmatic marker to attenuate the assertive force in a speaker's utterance (Ahn 2009; An 2009; Koo 2004; Yu 2008), as shown in (1b). In this paper, we will focus on how Korean pragmatic marker *com* helps to mitigate potential face-threats that could otherwise give rise to unwanted disalignment between the interlocutors.

1   a.   *yeki-ka      com(<cokum) te      siwenha-y.*
         here-NOM   a little          more   be.cool-IE
         'Here is a little cooler (than other places).'
     b.   *Minho-nun     com      piyelha-y.*
         PN-TOP          sort.of   be.mean-IE
         'Minho is sort of mean.'

Every culture has its own value system, which is partly reflected in the way people interact in conversation (e.g. Tannen 1980; Strauss & Kawanishi 1996; Iwasaki & Horie 1998). The sociocultural values of each community are often 'reframed' as politeness norms (Gumperz 2001), often similar to near-universalist politeness maxims articulated in Leech (1983). In this paper, we will investigate a socio-interactional phenomenon in Korean involving the use of the face-threat mitigator *com*, in which sociocultural values, reframed as politeness norms, affect the way speakers converse in interaction.

We propose to approach the issue of politeness from the point of view of stance, especially taking insights from Du Bois' (2007) 'stance triangle' framework, Linell's (2009) dialogicality model, and Iwasaki's (this issue) idea about the dynamic and evolving nature of stance activities. This approach clarifies both the nature of the stance activity and the politeness strategies in interaction. Integration of these three frameworks enables us to further analyze how, when engaging in acts of mitigation, 'evaluation' can be separated from 'positioning.'

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews relevant literature. In Section 2.1 we focus on some seminal studies on politeness phenomena to provide a background to better understand the important role of Korean *com* as a face-threat mitigator in disaffiliative contexts. Then, in Section 2.2, borrowing insights from Linell (2009) and Iwasaki (this issue), we propose an expanded definition of the stance act proposed by Du Bois (2007). In Section 3, we provide some background information on the selected extracts from the *Sejong*

Contemporary Spoken Corpus that are used for illustrative purposes in this study. In Section 4, we examine the functions of Korean *com* as a face-threat mitigator in disaffiliative stance acts and we also identify sociocultural values, reframed as politeness maxims and strategies, which motivate the use of *com*. More specifically, Section 4.1 highlights how speakers often use *com* to position themselves obliquely from their disaffiliative stance to hedge their negative evaluation, while Section 4.2 focuses on how speakers use *com* to tone down their assertions when engaging in dispreferred acts (such as mock-boasting). In Section 5, we further examine how the stance triangle is reconfigured in acts of mitigation. Section 6 summarizes and concludes the study.

# 2 Literature review

## 2.1 Previous studies on politeness phenomena

Early studies on politeness phenomena in Western societies, such as Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Leech (1983), all riding on strong rationalist and universalist views of the 1970s and 1980s (see Sifianou 2010), have provided us with analytical frameworks that have spurred investigations into whether politeness is expressed in similar ways across all languages and cultures. While Lakoff (1973) focused on identifying 'rules of politeness' based on linguistic form (grammar) and social function (pragmatics), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) turned to Goffman's (1955, 1967) notion of face-work and introduced the concepts of positive face and negative face. Positive face is defined as one's desire that his/her wants be approved by others, while negative face is defined in terms of one's desire that his/her action be unimpeded by others. Acts that run contrary to these desires are seen to be face-threatening, prompting much of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) focus on 'politeness strategies' that help mitigate potential face-threats.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the seriousness of a face-threat is affected by three major social variables, namely, the social distance (i.e. degree of familiarity) between the speaker and the hearer, the relative power (i.e. social status) of the speaker viz-a-viz the hearer, and the weight of imposition of the speech act upon the hearer. Whereas Lakoff (1973) focused on 'politeness rules' and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) on 'politeness strategies', Leech (1983) focused on 'politeness principles' and 'politeness maxims', the latter comprising of pithy statements that capture general rules of conduct related to tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. Such rules of conduct are more succinct manifestations of his more general principle that one should minimize

expressions of impoliteness while maximizing expressions of politeness in order to achieve social harmony.

Despite differences in their approach, there are considerable overlaps between the 'rules', 'strategies' and 'principles and maxims' in these three frameworks. As such, in research on politeness phenomena we often interweave the insights from all three approaches. This pertains to our present study on Korean face-threat mitigator *com*, which will become evident as we make reference to Brown and Levinson's positive and negative politeness strategies and Leech's approbation, tact, modesty and agreement maxims (see Section 4).

Although they have been highly influential in promoting studies on politeness phenomena across languages and cultures, the early approaches introduced by Lakoff, Leech, and especially Brown and Levinson have also been met with a number of criticisms. Among the criticisms is their over-extended, near-universalist claims that have largely focused on individualistic as opposed to collectivist cultures, hence the debate on individual face versus social group face (e.g. Matsumoto 1988, 1989; Gu 1990; Nwoye 1992; Mao 1994; Byon 2006). Questions have also been raised over whether negative face exists as part of the politeness system in all cultures, with counter-examples noted in oriental collectivist cultures such as Japan and China (e.g. Matsumoto 1988, 1989; Gu 1990, respectively). In more recent work, Sifianou (2010: 26) has noted that, barring English-speaking societies, evidence points to a "primarily positive politeness orientation" across many cultures, including western, eastern and Mediterranean ones. As will be shown in this study, however, in Korean there is evidence that face-threat mitigators such as *com* can serve both positive and negative politeness functions (see Section 4).

Subsequent studies have also criticized Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) for their disproportionate focus on conflict-avoidance (Kasper 1990; see also Ide 1989, 1990) and on face-threats to the hearer, largely ignoring face-threats to the speaker (Sifianou 2010). More recent studies have begun to redress this shortcoming by advocating an interpersonal pragmatic perspective to politeness studies (Arundale 2005, 2006, 2009; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Locher and Watts 2005; O'Driscoll 2007; Terkourafi 2007; Watts 2003). It is against this backdrop that our present study adopts an interactional linguistic analysis along the lines of Du Bois' (2007) 'stance triangle' framework, with additional insights from Linell (2009) and Iwasaki (this issue), in our investigation of how Korean *com* is deployed as a face-threat mitigating device in disaffiliative contexts.

## 2.2 Beyond Du Bois' (2007) stance triangle

Du Bois (2007) proposes a conceptual framework that analyzes how stance operates in the context of conversational interaction, and he identifies three key
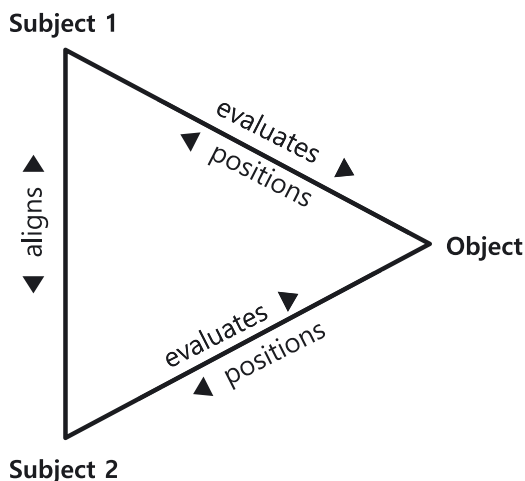
**Subject 1**



**Figure 1:** The stance triangle (Du Bois 2007: 163).

components of stance, namely, *evaluation*, *positioning* and *alignment*. According to Du Bois, a 'stance activity' (or 'assessment activity', see Goodwin and Goodwin 1992) is viewed as a single unified act comprising: (i) the 'evaluation' action that assigns value to the target of stance, i.e. the stance object; (ii) the 'positioning' action that orients stancetakers (=stance subjects) with respect to the stance object; and (iii) the 'alignment' action that links the initial stance taker, i.e. *stance subject 1* (SS1), and the recipient/respondent, i.e. *stance subject 2* (SS2). Incorporating these components of stance, Du Bois (2007) proposes the "stance triangle" as a model of stancetaking as shown in Figure 1.

In Du Bois' stance triangle, two evaluative vectors project from the stancetakers (SS1 and SS2) to the stance object, while a third vector links the two stancetakers to represent their stance relations (i.e. their alignment or disalignment to each other in terms of their respective evaluations of the stance object). The resulting stance triangle thus illustrates that when speakers take a stance, they simultaneously evaluate the stance object and position themselves in relation to it, and at the same time also align themselves with other stance subjects (Du Bois 2007: 163). The alignment could vary from affiliative to disaffiliative (Stivers et al. 2011), and could even be detached or non-committal (see D. Lee, this issue). Adopting the first-person point of view of the stancetaker, Du Bois (2007: 163) summarizes the definition of the stance act as follows: *I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and thereby align with you.*

By examining details of 'stance activities' in interaction, Iwasaki (this issue) highlights that the stance triangle is never static but evolves dynamically in the

course of interaction, with stancetakers often adjusting their footing towards the stance object and their alignments toward each other. This means that the vectors of the stance triangle disassemble and reassemble to form new triangles as stance-takers negotiate their views and manage their relationships with each other. Expanding on the sequential and dialogical analyses found in Du Bois' (2007) stance triangle framework, Iwasaki proposes that attention should also be given to the 'interior' and 'exterior' layers in the stance triangle if we are to understand details of the triangle in motion. Iwasaki (this issue) highlights that the interior layer is the space where private evaluative subjectivity is registered and processed while the exterior layer is the space where actual verbal (and non-verbal) signs are displayed and negotiated. As noted by Linell (2009), when interacting with others, speakers do not always reveal their inner thoughts and feelings; often, they modulate what is verbally expressed. In Linell's words (2009: 74), "there is evidently silent thinking going on as well, *an internal dialogue accompanying external dialogue.*"

This notion that 'an internal dialogue accompanies external dialogue' (Linell 2009: 123) is well illustrated in the stance acts of Korean mitigator *com*. Consider, for example, the following scenario. SS1 is thinking 'the man is suspicious' in her interior dialogic space but she utters *ku namcan **com** uysimsulewe* 'the man is **sort of** suspicious' in the exterior dialogic space. In other words, SS1 evaluates the stance object *the man*, and takes a negative stance toward him, but SS1 does not disclose her evaluation as it is. Rather, SS1 employs *com* 'sort of' as a mitigator in order to convey her thought in a less assertive way. This is because when she takes a stance, sociocultural values, reframed as politeness considerations similar to those articulated in Leech's (1983) Approbation Maxim ('Minimize dispraise of other'), comes into play and constrains her utterance.[1] Her use of *com* indicates that she is aware that once her evaluation about the stance object is verbalized, it may cause some loss of face for herself for violating politeness norms in her culture and/or it may invite disagreement or disalignment from SS2. This awareness prompts SS1 not to disclose in her verbal utterance (i.e. outer dialogic space) what she has in mind in her interior dialogic space. In other words, by using *com*, SS1 positions herself obliquely in order to mitigate a potential face threat.

To explain the stance activity in interaction where *com* and other mitigation devices are frequently employed, we expand the definition of the stance act

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**1** According to Ide (1989, 1990), 'discernment' and 'volition' are fundamental components in polite interactions. Speaker discernment involves understanding of and conformity to sociocultural norms, whereas speaker volition involves the deployment of a speaker's strategy in accordance with his/her freedom of choice. Similar to Japanese people, Koreans also consider "discernment politeness" more important than "volitional politeness" (Byon 2006: 258).

proposed by Du Bois (2007) as follows: *I evaluate something, and may sometimes position myself obliquely (to avoid or mitigate face-threats), and thereby align with you.*

In Section 4, using naturally occurring spoken data from the *Sejong* Spoken Corpus, we will show how the expanded definition of the stance act above can be applied in real conversations. More specifically, we will discuss how *com* helps to attenuate face-threats in two separate contexts, namely, when speakers deliberately wish not to assert their utterances in potentially disaffiliative stance acts and when speakers seek to present their negative evaluations with a sense of detachment. These two cases are manifestations of interlocutors' efforts to establish and maintain solidarity with each other.

# 3 Data

Data for our analysis come from the *Sejong* Corpus of Contemporary Spoken Korean, which comprises 805,646 words. The data are audio recorded and comprise 200 naturally-occurring spoken discourses collected from various settings such as casual talks including college students' conversations on campus, conversations between a tutor and a high school student, dialogues in a restaurant, group discussions between two or more interlocutors, telephone conversations, Church parishioners' gatherings, lectures, workshops, monologues, sermons, broadcast talks, and opening and closing addresses. These discourses were transcribed as part of the 21st Century *Sejong* Project undertaken by the National Institute of Korean Language from 1998 to 2008.

The face-threat mitigator *com* is found in 190 discourses (out of 200) and occurs in all the text types of the *Sejong* Corpus of Contemporary Spoken Korean. Excerpts that are used for illustrative purposes in this paper come from casual conversations among college students and young adults in their thirties. These excerpts are chosen

**Table 1:** List of four excerpts from the *Sejong* Contemporary Spoken Corpus selected for the analysis of Korean face-threat mitigator *com* in this study.

| Excerpt used | File name | Year | Text types (genres) | No. of words for this study |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Excerpt 1 (=(2)) | 4CM00034 | 2001 | casual talk (daily conversations among adults in their thirties) | 14,856 |
| Excerpt 2 (=(3)) & Excerpt 4 (=(5)) | 6CM00051 | 2003 | casual talk (college students' conversations on campus) | 8,729 |
| Excerpt 3 (=(4)) | 4CM00006 | 2001 | casual talk(college students' conversations on campus) | 3,594 |

for their spontaneity and their highly interactional features; this allows us to examine the unscripted use of Korean *com* as a face-threat attenuating pragmatic marker. More detailed information about the selected extracts is shown in Table 1.

# 4 Data analysis: the mitigative role of *com* in disaffilitative stance acts

As a pragmatic marker, Korean *com* is often deployed in disaffiliative contexts to mitigate face-threats to both speaker and others. Below we will first analyze how speakers use *com* to distance themselves from their negative evaluation of others (Section 4.1). Following this, we will then analyze how speakers use *com* to tone down their assertion when they engage in potentially face-threatening speech acts such as self-praise (Section 4.2).

## 4.1 Presenting negative evaluations with a sense of detachment

In this section, we will discuss how pragmatic marker *com* can be used as a detachment device to hedge the speaker's negative evaluation. As can be seen in (2), Speaker A and Speaker B, co-workers in the same company, are having a conversation about Speaker B's preparation for her wedding. Speaker B is revealing to Speaker A the difficulty she encountered while preparing for her wedding because her boss did not allow her to take a few days off, but instead even made her work the day before her wedding. Upon hearing that, Speaker A criticizes the boss for her lack of consideration (line 06).[2]

(2) 01 A: *ani    kulem   elkwul   masaci-nun    ettehkey    ha-yssess-e?*
           well    then    face    massage-TOP    how    do-PST.PFV-IE
           'Well, then, how were you able to deal with your face massage?'

    02 B: *kulayse    masaci-to    hanpen-pakkey    mos    pat-ass-e.*
           so    massage-also    once-only    NEG    receive-PST-IE
           'So I got a massage only once.'

    03 *ku    cen-cen-nal    samwel ilil-lal    swi-ess-ketun,*
           that    before-before-day    March    1-day    take.day.off-PST-CONN
           'Because I took a day off on March 1 (=official holiday), two days before my wedding,'

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**2** The transcription conventions are provided in the Appendix.

04      *ehwu    na-n      kulay kacko nay-ka    nemwu kika cha-n*
        INTJ    1SG-TOP and.then    1SG-NOM too      be.absurd-ADN
        *ke-ya,*
        NMLZ-IE
        'Whew, as for me, then, it was just too absurd for me.'

05      *na-nun      tangyenhi    kala-ko      hal cwul      al-ko*
        1SG-TOP      of.course    go-CONN      let           know-CONN
        *nay-ka      yayki-lul     ha-n         ke-ntey,*
        1SG-NOM      talk-ACC     do-ADN        NMLZ-CONN
        'Of course, I thought that she (=my boss) would let me take off (to
        prepare for my wedding), as I had talked to her about it.'

06   A: *yeca-nikka        paylye        com       haci      kule-nya,*
        woman-because    consideration    a.little    do       be.so-Q
        'Being a woman, why didn't she have a bit of consideration (for
        you),'

07   B: *kuntey    wenlay      chan-palam    ssayngssayng    to-nun*
        but       naturally    cold-wind      IDEO           blow-ADN
        *suthail-ilase salamtul-i    mal-ul      an       sikhy-e.*
        style-CAUS    people-NOM    words-ACC    NEG     ask-IE
        'But since she is naturally cold, people don't talk to her.'

08      *ani          ay-to        twul-ina     iss-e.*
        by.the.way.   child-also    two-even    exist-IE
        'By the way, she even has two kids.'

09   A: *kuntey    kulay?*
        but        be.so
        'Well, is she really like that?!'

10 → B: ***com    kulay::***
        **PM    be.so**
        **'(She's) a bit like that::'**

                              (*Sejong* Contemporary Spoken Corpus #4CM00034)

Viewed from the perspective of Du Bois' (2007) stance triangle, Speaker A is
expressing a negative stance toward the stance object, the boss (line 06), and in
doing so, Speaker A is aligning herself with Speaker B, who in the preceding
utterance has implied that their boss had been unreasonable (lines 02 to 05).
Hearing Speaker A's explicit criticism of the boss, Speaker B herself begins to
engage in some negative evaluation of the boss as well. She remarks that the boss is
*wenlay chan-palam ssayngssayng to-nun suthail* 'naturally cold' and not someone
easy to talk to (line 07), despite her already having two kids of her own (line 08),
implying that the boss should be more understanding but is not. The additional

information that the boss already has two kids of her own comes as a surprise to Speaker A and intensifies her negative evaluation toward the boss, as can be seen from her confirmation-seeking question with mirative reading *kuntey kulay?* 'Well, is she really like that?!' (line 09). Speaker B then hedges her subsequent evaluation using the expression *com kulay::* '(She's) a bit like that::' (line 10). Vocalic lengthening on the last word *kulay::* indicates a slight tentativeness on Speaker B's part, which complements the mitigating function of *com*.

Both strategies signal that Speaker B is now distancing herself from her earlier negative assessment of the boss, which is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) negative politeness strategy. This allows Speaker B to attenuate the threat to her face after having complained about her boss' lack of consideration in not giving her time off from work to prepare for her wedding. In so doing, Speaker B is acting consistently with the sociocultural value ('one should not talk behind someone's back'), reframed as politeness norms in her culture that also resonates with Leech's (1983) Approbation Maxim ('Minimize dispraise of other') and Tact Maxim ('Minimize cost to other'). In addition, because *com* functions as a distancing and hedging device, the tentativeness of the evaluation also serves to downgrade the face-damage to the absent third party, in this case the boss. Crucially for our present study, we see Speaker B adjusting her footing, using *com kulay*, from strong to weak assertion. As Iwasaki (this issue) states, degrees of evaluation can change over a stretch of turns to reflect the cumulative and evolving knowledge and attitudinal states. Speaker B's slightly modified, mitigated criticism (*com kulay::* 'She's a bit like that::') comes across as less incredulous to Speaker A.

As can be seen in (3) below, *com* can also be used to suspend a clause such that the speaker can implicitly express his negative evaluation without completing his utterance. In this stance act, Speaker A (=SS1), Speaker B (=SS2) and Speaker C (=SS3), all of whom are male college students in their 20s, are evaluating a shared stance object, namely, Cinyeng, a female college-mate who left the students club due to conflict with other members. Speaker B tries not to explicitly convey his negative evaluation about Cinyeng by producing the face-threat attenuator *com* without further verbalizing the details of his negative evaluation. In so doing, Speaker B indirectly invites the other interlocutors to figure out the content of his internal thought.

(3) 01 B: *Cinyeng      nwuna-nun.*
              PN          older.sister-TOP
              'As for Cinyeng.'

    02 C: *yeseng-tul-kwa-uy      chwungtol-lo    kapcaki    nakapely-ess-ci.*
              woman-PL-with-DAT    conflict-CAUS    suddenly    go.out-PST-SFP
              '(She) left because of conflicts with (other) women.'

| 03 | A: | *nwukwu-lang* | *Cinyeng-ilang*? | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | who-with | Cinyeng-with | | |
| | | 'Who did Cinyeng have conflicts with?' | | | |
| 04 | C: | *yele* | *salam-ilang*, | | |
| | | many | person-with | | |
| | | '(She had conflicts) with many people,' | | | |
| 05→ | B: | *Cinyeng-inun* | *cal* | *cinay-taka* | *kapcaki* | *com*. |

03    A:    *nwukwu-lang*     *Cinyeng-ilang*?
          who-with          Cinyeng-with
          'Who did Cinyeng have conflicts with?'
04    C:    *yele*      *salam-ilang*,
          many      person-with
          '(She had conflicts) with many people,'
05→ B:    *Cinyeng-inun*    *cal*    *cinay-taka*      *kapcaki*       *com*.
          *Cinyeng*-TOP    well    get.along-and    suddenly    **PM**
          'Cinyeng got along well and suddenly … '
06    A:    *um*.
          'Yes.'
07    B:    *cal*    *cinay-nun*          *kes-chelem*    *poy-ess-ten*        *ke*
          well    get.along-ADN      NMLZ-like    look-PST-RETRO    NMLZ
          *kath-ay*      *kunikka*.
          be.like-IE    that.is.why
          'She looked as if she got along well (but actually she wasn't)
          That is why (she left).'
                                                (*Sejong* Contemporary Spoken Corpus #6CM00051)

In the stance act in excerpt (3) above, when Speaker B seeks to disclose his internal evaluation which is rather negative toward Cinyeng (the stance object), socio-cultural values such as 'one should not talk behind someone's back' are yet again mobilized and deployed (as in the case of (2) above), and Speaker B chooses not to deliver his negative evaluation verbally (line 05). Instead he suspends his comment with utterance-final *com*, which allows him to position himself distantly from his unuttered but implied negative evaluation. In so doing, Speaker B manages to protect to an extent the face of Cinyeng (who is the absent stance object), as well as his own face as he stops short of verbalizing a negative remark about a friend. As noted in Iwasaki (this issue), social norms often include the adage that when one denigrates others, it says more about oneself than about the denigrated other. Viewed from the perspective of Linell's (2009) internal and external dia-logical processes and Du Bois' stance triangle framework, and further within Iwasaki's evolving stance triangle analysis, Speaker B is negotiating his footing and his relationship with his interlocutors as well as an absent other (i.e. his friend Cinyeng) by using utterance-final *com* to convey an unuttered negative evaluation in an implicit and detached manner. This resonates with Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategy that helps reduce his responsibility for a face-threatening act.

In this section, we have discussed how pragmatic marker *com* can be used as a detachment device to hedge speakers' negative evaluation. Consistent with the sociocultural value that one should not talk behind someone's back (see also Leech's (1983) Approbation Maxim and Tact Maxim), speakers often choose to convey their negative evaluation implicitly. Since *com* functions as a hedging device, its tentativeness helps to attenuate potential face threats to both speaker and others.

## 4.2 Toning down the speaker's assertion

Speakers can also use the pragmatic marker *com* to tone down their assertions when engaging in dispreferred acts such as mock-boasting. In (4), three close friends (Speakers A, B and C) who go to the same college are talking about their daily lives before their class begins. They have not seen each other for a few days due to an extended weekend holiday, and Speaker A notices that Speaker C now looks more radiant after resting a few days. Speaker A initiates a topic about Speaker C's complexion, which then becomes the stance object being evaluated by all three discourse participants.

(4) 01　A:　*myechil*　　*ccom*　　*swi-ess-tako*　　*elkwul-i*　　*pposyasya*
　　　　　　　a.few.days　a.little　take.rest-CAUS　face-NOM　be.bright
　　　　　　　*ha-ycy-ess-e.*
　　　　　　　become-PST-IE
　　　　　　　'As you (=Speaker C) have taken a rest for a few days, your face
　　　　　　　has become radiant.'

　　　02　B:　*e.*
　　　　　　　'Yes'

　　　03　A:　*kuci*　　*e?*
　　　　　　　it.is.so　right
　　　　　　　'It is so, isn't it?'

　　　04　C:　*mwelakwu?*
　　　　　　　what
　　　　　　　'What?'

　　　05　B:　*[mek-kwu　pintwungpintwung　cal　mek]*
　　　　　　　eat-CONN　idly　　　　　　　　well　eat
　　　　　　　'You (=Speaker C) have been eating well.'

　　　06　A:　*[e.]*
　　　　　　　'Yes.'

| 07 | B: | *[mek-kwu* | *nol-ass-kwuman.]* | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | | eat-CONN | play-PST-EVID | | |
| | | 'You ate and played, I see.' | | | |

08  C:  *[@@@@]*
       '@@@@'

09  A:  *[pposyasya]*    *hay-cye-kacikwu*
        be.bright        do-become-CONN
        '(Your face) has become radiant.'

10  C:  *[way?]*
        why
        'Why?'

11      *hwacang-twu*      *cal*      *an*      *mek-kwu.*
        make.up-even       well       NEG       blend-IE
        'Even make-up doesn't blend into my skin well.'

12  B:  *ayu*!
        INTJ
        'Oh no!'

13 →C:  *wenlay*        *com*     *ippu-canha.*
        naturally       **PM**    be.pretty-you.know
        'I am **a bit** of a natural beauty, you know.'

14      *<@@ ha ha ha@@>*
        '@@ Ha ha ha @@'

(*Sejong* Contemporary Spoken Corpus #4CM00006)

Speaker A takes a positive stance as she comments on Speaker C's face becoming radiant after a few days of rest (line 01). Speaker B agrees with Speaker A's positive evaluation, uttering the affirmative particle *e* 'yes' (line 02). While Speaker A is realigning with Speaker B as she utters *kuci* 'It is so' (line 03), she at the same time turns to Speaker C and tries to align with her, using *e?* as a confirmation-seeking particle, equivalent to the English tag question 'right?' or 'isn't it?' (also line 03). However, Speaker C indirectly expresses her disalignment with Speaker A by uttering *mwelakwu?* 'What?' (line 04), which is interpretable as her attempt to express modesty rather than a genuine expression of puzzlement. Speaker B, on the other hand, seeks to further align with Speaker A by adding her assessment that Speaker C's face looks better because she has eaten well and has been relaxing (lines 05 and 07). Speaker C avoids a direct response with laughter (line 08).

Failing to elicit a verbal uptake from Speaker C, Speaker A continues to compliment Speaker C, remarking again that her face is *pposyasya* 'radiant', once again making the skin tone of Speaker C's face the stance object (line 09).

However, Speaker C still chooses not to align with Speaker A's evaluation, opting instead for a deprecative stance toward the stance object, her own face, uttering modestly that make-up does not blend well into her skin (line 11). Here, consistent with the sociocultural value ('one should be modest') similar to Leech's (1983) Modesty Maxim ('Minimize praise to self'), Speaker C positions herself in a manner that avoids taking a positive stance toward her own face. Speaker C's act of taking a deprecative stance toward the stance object (her face) and disaligning with other interlocutors (Speakers A and B) is more acceptable and desirable in light of politeness norms. In response, Speaker B interjects with *ayu!* 'Oh no!' as a playful expression of disbelief (line 12). This prompts Speaker C to change her negative stance into a positive one, and she sportingly joins in the fun and playfully jests by coyly uttering *wenlay com ippu-canha* 'I'm a bit of a natural beauty, you know' (line 13), before bursting into laughter (line 14).

In this stance act, mindful of the need to be modest, Speaker C makes use of the face-threat mitigator *com* as she jokingly engages in an act of mock-vanity. Her move to sportingly engage in self-teasing allows her to maintain solidarity with her friends (Speakers A and B). This move resonates well with Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategy. As a mitigator, *com* helps to attenuate possible self-induced face loss that may arise from Speaker A's seemingly boastful stance (line 13) and allows her to finally accept the earlier compliments from her friends in an indirect but playful manner.

In the next excerpt (5), two close friends in their 20s, Speaker A (female) and Speaker B (male), are having a conversation about their family. Upon hearing that Speaker A's father does all the housework including preparing a meal for her, Speaker B reprimands Speaker A for not helping her father. This reprimand, however, takes the form of playful banter, as can be seen in the laughter of both interlocutors (indicated by the symbol <@@>) in lines 04 to 06. Both Speaker A (=SS1) and Speaker B (=SS2) then proceed to converse about what Speaker A's father thinks of her (see lines 08 and 09), departing from the preceding topic about Speaker A's father's behavior (lines 01–07).

(5)　01　B:　*pap-twu*　　　*appa-ka*　　　*chali-kwu*　　　　*selkeci-twu*
　　　　　　　meal-also　　　dad-NOM　　　prepare-CONN　　wash.dishes-also
　　　　　　　*appa-ka*　　　*ha-kwu.*
　　　　　　　dad-NOM　　　do-CONN
　　　　　　　'Your dad prepares a meal and washes dishes as well.'
　　　02　A:　*nay-ka*　　　*nuccam*　　　　*ca-nikka*　　　　*kuntey.*
　　　　　　　1SG-NOM　　　oversleeping　　sleep-because　　DM
　　　　　　　'It's because I oversleep.'

03  B:  *calang-i-ya?*
        boast-COP-IE
        'Are you boasting about it?'

04  A:  *ani     nay   ha-l       il-un       cal    ha-y <@@>*
        NEG    1SG   do-ADN    thing-TOP   well   do-IE
        'No, I am doing well what I should do <@@>'

05  B:  *<@@> mwe   ha-nuntey,*
        what        do-CIRCUM
        '<@@> What on earth do you do?'

06      *ni     ha-l      il-i          apeci    pap     chayngkye-tulye-twu*
        2SG    do-ADN    thing-NOM    father   meal    prepare-HON-also
        *siwenchanh-un         phan-ey    ni-ka       apeci-ka*
        not.satisfactory-ADN   DN-LOC    2SG-NOM    father-NOM
        *ta     ha-kwu iss-kwu. <@@>*
        all    do-PROG-IE
        'What you do, (that is), preparing a meal for your dad, is not enough;
        your father is doing all the housework (including preparing a meal).
        <@@>'

07      *[wuwulha-key         maliya.]*
        be.depressing-COMP    DM
        'It is depressing (to hear that).'

08→A:   *[wuli    appa-ka    na-l      **com**    yeyppeha-y.]*
        1PL     dad-NOM    1SG-ACC   **PM**     adore-IE
        'My dad **sort of** adores me.'

09  B:  *yeyppeha-nun    key      ani-ya    aymwultanci    kath-ta.*
        adore-ADN        NMLZ     NEG-IE    nuisance        be.like-DEC
        'You are not adored but you are like a nuisance.'
                                      (*Sejong* Contemporary Spoken Corpus #6CM00051)

In the above excerpt, although the two speakers each adopt a divergent stance, they skillfully safeguard their friendship through banter and with the help of the face-threat mitigator *com*. As seen in line 08, Speaker A uses *com* to playfully attenuate what otherwise would have come across as unabashed boasting. Because of the presence of *com*, Speaker B's retort in line 09 comes across as mock-disaffiliation rather than an acerbic rebuke.

Viewed from a cognitive processing perspective (cf. Linell 2009), in line 08, Speaker A could be thinking (in her interior dialogic space) that although she does not help her father, he still adores her. Nevertheless, she hedges and uses *com* (in her exterior dialogic space) to produce the mitigated utterance *wuli appaka nal com yeyppehay* 'My dad *sort of* adores me'. Here, when Speaker A takes a positive stance

toward herself as the stance object, sociocultural values such as 'one should be modest' are mobilized. These sociocultural values, reframed as politeness norms, similar to Leech's (1983) Modesty Maxim ('Minimize praise of self'), prompt Speaker A not to display her evaluation in an assertive way. In other words, if Speaker A were to outwardly express her evaluation ('My father adores me') without any mitigation, she would be violating the modesty maxim, since she would be unabashedly boasting about her father's affection for her. Crucially, however, Speaker A modulates her evaluation (in her interior dialogic space) and positions herself with the help of a *com*-mitigated expression (in her exterior dialogic space).

Speaker A could also be anticipating that if she were to verbalize her evaluation about her father's doting attitude toward her (that is, her belief that her father adores her), it may trigger Speaker B's disagreement, thus she employs *com* as a mitigator in order to convey her thought in a less assertive way and thereby avoid potential disagreement with Speaker B. This would be consistent with Leech's (1983) Agreement Maxim ('Minimize disagreement between self and other'), and it also resonates well with Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategy to engage affiliatively and non-face-threateningly with others. In response to Speaker A's face-saving efforts, Speaker B playfully retorts, 'You are not adored but you are like a nuisance' (line 09), creating a mock-disaffiliation between them. In other words, there is a semblance of disalignment *but no actual disaffiliation* between these two close friends. As noted in previous literature (see, for example, Sifianou 2010; Haugh and Bousfield 2012), such mock-disaffiliative responses, comprising impolite talk and violation of politeness maxims, are often seen as a marker of in-group identity and solidarity. In the context of this playful banter between the two close friends, *com* has been successfully deployed by Speaker A to avert a potential face-threat to herself and at the same time also avert a disalignment with her friend, Speaker B.

In sum, we see that the act of taking a stance invokes an evaluation, in the process of which sociocultural values are mobilized and deployed. The sociocultural values are reframed as politeness norms in one's culture, often similar to those articulated in Leech's (1983) Approbation Maxim and Tact Maxim as in (1) and (2), Modesty Maxim as in (3) and (4), and Agreement Maxim as in (4). These politeness considerations prompt the speakers to employ *com* to mitigate responsibility for socially dispreferred moves and to attenuate potential face loss for both themselves and others. In other words, when engaging in (potentially) disaffiliative stance acts, the speakers often use face-threat mitigators such as *com* to position themselves obliquely from their disaffiliative stance, and in this way help to establish or maintain a positive relationship (i.e. solidarity alignment) with their

addressee (and sometimes also absent others that are the object of evaluation). The speakers adjust their footing to the stance object and their alignment with each other in the course of interaction; as such, the stance triangle is never static but is instead in constant dynamic motion (see Iwasaki, this issue).

# 5 Discussion: stance acts in mitigation

According to Du Bois (2007: 163), stance is a social act "achieved dialogically through overt communicative means of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field." In other words, stance subjects evaluate a shared stance object and position themselves, often in light of sociocultural values; they also modulate their alignment with each other, whether it is convergent or divergent (Du Bois 2007: 164). Let us consider (6) (taken from example (51) from Du Bois (2007: 165)).

(6)  01  Sam:      I don't like those.
     02           (0.2)
     03  Angela:   I don't either

In (6), SS1 (Sam's *I*) and SS2 (Angela's *I*) are evaluating the stance object, the entity expressed by the syntactic object *those*. The negative polarity verb phrase *don't like* not only commits SS1 (Sam) to his evaluation of the stance object but also serves to position himself relative to the stance object, and the representations of his evaluation and positioning are combined in a single stance act, as shown in the 'diagraph' in (7) (taken from Du Bois (2007: 166, example (53)). A similar evaluation and footing is taken up by SS2 (Angela), reflecting her affiliative alignment with SS1 (Sam).

(7)

| # | Speaker | Speaker Subject | Positions/ Evaluates | Stance Object | Aligns |
|---|---------|-----------------|----------------------|---------------|--------|
| 1 | SAM; | $I_1$ | don't like | those | |
| 3 | ANGELA; | $I_2$ | don't {like} | {those} | either |

As shown in (7), since Du Bois' stance triangle focuses on dialogic syntax, he does not separate the internal process (or interior space) of stance acts from the external process (or exterior space) (cf. Linell 2009). However, when stance acts of mitigation are involved, attention is inevitably drawn to the dissonance between the speakers' thoughts and feelings in 'the interior dialogic space' and their verbal utterances in 'the exterior dialogic space', revealing them as two separate

processes, i.e. internal and external processes as shown in (8) and (9) (which are the representations of stance activities in (3) and (5) respectively).[3]

In (8) (which is the representation of the stance activities in (3)), Speakers A (SS1), B (SS2) and C (SS3) are evaluating their friend Cinyeng as the stance object.

(8)(=3')

| Stance Subject | Evaluates (internal process) | Positions (external process) | Stance Object |
|---|---|---|---|
| Speaker C (SS3) | '(Cinyeng had conflict) with many people' (=not sociable) [This is indexed by lines 02 and 04.] | '(Cinyeng had conflicts) with many people.' (line 04) | |
| Speaker B (SS2) | 'Cinyeng does not get along with others' (=not sociable) [This is implied by *com* in line 05 and is inferred by the participants.] | **'Cinyeng got along well and suddenly *com*.'** (line 05) (negative evaluation not verbalized, but *com* is used to index internal evaluation) | Cinyeng |
| Speaker A (SS1) | 'Cinyeng does not get along with others' (=not sociable) [This is indexed by lines 03 and 06] | 'who did Cinyeng have conflicts with?' (line 03) (discreetly adopts a question format and later deploys *um* as a back-channeling device to align with B (line 06)) | |

While all three speakers share a rather negative evaluation of Cinyeng for 'not being sociable', they each position themselves differently. Speaker C positions himself as being critical about Cinyeng being in conflict with other women (lines 02 and 04), while Speaker A positions himself more discreetly by asking a question (line 03) and by merely responding with a non-lexical backchannel such as *um* 'yes' (line 06). Speaker B also tries to be discreet but adopts a different strategy from Speaker A. He chooses not to explicitly disclose his negative evaluation (which he keeps to himself in his interior dialogic space), but he nevertheless uses *com* as an utterance-final mitigator in a suspended clause construction (line 05) to convey his implicit criticism of Cinyeng in his exterior dialogic space, leaving some room for others to infer his stance themselves. In this stance act, the mitigator *com* enables Speaker B not to indiscreetly verbalize his evaluation about the stance

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**3** Note that *com* can also be used in non-disaffiliative contexts, and in some contexts *com* can also be used in its more lexical sense where it has a quantitative interpretation, some of which is deployed with a scalar reading. This is an area for future research.

object and thereby detach himself from his negative evaluation and in so doing distance himself from blame.

In (9) (which is the representation of the stance activities in (5)), Speaker A is the stance object that is being evaluated by Speaker A herself (SS1) and by Speaker B (SS2) as well.

(9)(=5')

| Stance Subject | Evaluates (internal process) | Positions (external process) | Stance Object |
|---|---|---|---|
| Speaker A (SS1) | 'I am an adorable person' (because my dad does everything for me) [This is indexed by line 08] | **'my dad adores me *com*'** (*com* 'sort of' used as a mitigator) (line 08) (this utterance reveals internal evaluation, but adds *com* for politeness purpose) | Speaker A |
| Speaker B (SS2) | 'You are not an adorable person' [This is indexed by line 09] | 'You are not adored but you are like a nuisance' (line 09) (this utterance directly reveals B's internal evaluation) | |

As shown in (9) above, in her interior dialogic space, Speaker A (SS1) evaluates the shared stance object (=Speaker A herself) and takes a positive evaluation such as 'my dad adores me' (which is the internal dialogic process of the stance act). In the exterior dialogic space, however, Speaker A does not display this raw inner thought and feeling explicitly; rather, she employs *com* as a mitigator to position herself obliquely from her earlier evaluation, in the process yielding a hedged and attenuated reading 'my dad *sort of* adores me'. In other words, the pragmatic marker *com* serves as a face-threat mitigator that helps the speaker externalize and express her evaluation in a subtle and socially acceptable way.

In this stance act, the mitigator *com* allows Speaker A to separate the internal process (i.e. evaluation) from the external process (i.e. positioning). Simply put, Speaker A evaluates the stance object but, with the help of *com*, she is able to position herself obliquely from her own evaluation in an effort to align herself with Speaker B.

We thus see that in stance acts of mitigation, evaluation (internal process) can be separated from positioning (external process), as shown in Figure 2. In other words, *com* as a mitigator serves not to assert the initial Stance Subject's (SS1's) evaluation but to position SS1 *obliquely* (in the sense of being 'detached') from his or her evaluation so as to align with the other Stance Subject (SS2). In this regard, *com* is also often used to attenuate the face loss for both the speaker-self (SS1) and
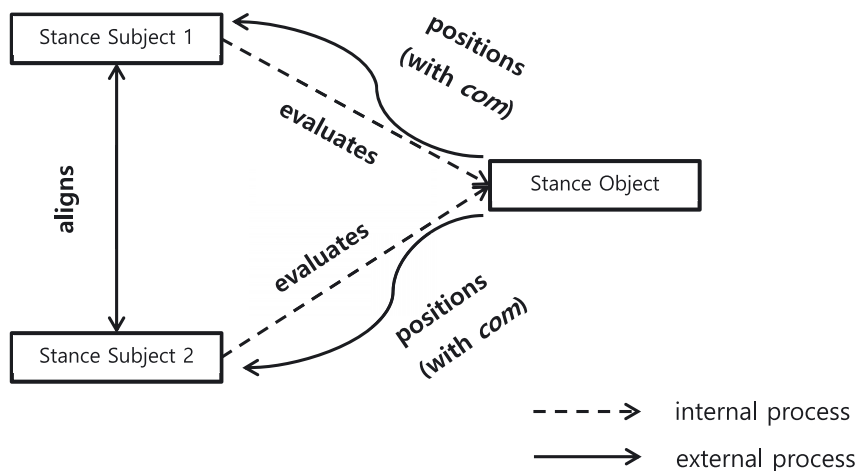
**Figure 2:** The stance triangle for mitigated acts involving *com*.

the addressee (SS2) or absent others who are the target of evaluation (=Stance Object).

# 6 Conclusion

Mitigation serves an important function of attenuating a face-threatening utterance by masking the inner thinking of a speaker in order to maintain social propriety and equilibrium in discourse (Briz 2004). In this study, taking our cue from Linell's (2009) dialogicality model involving 'internal' and 'external' dialogic processes and Iwasaki's (this issue) evolving stance triangle analysis, we investigated how the face-threat mitigator *com* allows speakers to separate their inner thinking or the internal process of their dialogical act (i.e. their evaluation) from their actual utterance or the external process of their dialogical act (i.e. their positioning). This separation of the internal process (evaluation) from the external process (positioning) leads to an expanded definition of the 'stance triangle' proposed by Du Bois (2007) as follows: *I evaluate something, and may sometimes position myself obliquely (to avoid or mitigate face-threats), and thereby align with you.* In other words, mitigation devices such as *com* can help index something unsaid, or indirectly said, that is nevertheless understood by both hearer and speaker by virtue of contextual information and shared common knowledge.

　　Our analysis also highlighted that the use of face-threat mitigator *com* is frequently motivated by sociocultural values, reframed as politeness norms that

resonate with the approbation, tact, modesty and agreement maxims articulated in Leech (1983), as well as positive and negative politeness strategies posited by Brown and Levinson (1987). These sociocultural values tend to constrain speakers to modulate their evaluations so as to externally position their utterances in ways that mitigate face-loss for both themselves and others. We specifically focused on how the face-threat mitigator *com* helps to attenuate face-threats in (potentially) disaffiliative contexts, in which speakers do not disclose in their verbal utterance (i.e. outer dialogic space) what they have in mind in their interior dialogic space, and by employing *com*, they position themselves obliquely in order to mitigate a potential face threat.

Given its social function as a pragmatic softener and face-threat mitigator, *com* also allows a speaker to express a disaffiliative stance while largely maintaining a solidarity alignment with their addressee (or with absent others that are the object of evaluation). From an intercultural communication perspective, it would be useful to further investigate similarities and differences in the ways different languages and cultures deploy their face-threat mitigators as part of speakers' resources in managing interpersonal relationships in disaffiliative contexts. The stance triangle and dialogicality model will be extremely helpful in this direction of research, and a dynamic model of an evolving stance triangle will further help us capture the moment-by-moment alignments, disalignments and re-alignments among stance subjects (=discourse participants) as they negotiate their interpersonal relationships with each other.

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ACC | accusative |
| ADN | adnominal |
| CAUS | causal |
| CIRCUM | circumstantial |
| COMP | complementizer |
| CONN | connective |
| COP | copula |
| DAT | dative |
| DEC | declarative |
| PM | pragmatic marker |
| DN | defective noun |
| EVID | evidential |
| HON | honorific |
| IE | informal ending |
| INTJ | interjection |
| LOC | locative |

| | |
|---|---|
| NEG | negation |
| NMLZ | nominalizer |
| NOM | nominative |
| PL | plural |
| PN | personal name |
| POL | polite |
| PRES | present |
| PROG | progressive |
| PST | past |
| PST.PFV | past perfective |
| Q | interrogative |
| RETRO | retrospective |
| SFP | sentence final particle |
| SG | singular |
| TOP | topic |

# Appendix: Transcription conventions

(The transcription conventions used in the *Sejong* Contemporary Spoken Corpus have been slightly modified to follow the transcription conventions updated in Du Bois (2006)).

| | |
|---|---|
| . | Final transitional continuity |
| , | Continuing transitional continuity |
| ? | Appeal or rising intonation |
| ! | Booster: Higher than expected pitch on a word |
| – | Truncated word |
| : | Prosodic lengthening |
| [ ] | Speech overlap |
| <@@> | Laughing voice quality |

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