

Why self-deprecating? Achieving ‘oneness’ in conversation

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to explore a less-discussed topic, that is, ‘self-deprecating’ language used in conversation. Based on task-based conversations in Korean and Japanese, where speakers were told to arrange a series of picture cards to make a coherent story, this paper presents three examples of self-deprecation: (a) the use of self-directed negative yes/no interrogatives showing uncertainty or self-doubt, (b) self-deprecating digressions exposing one’s weaknesses or personal issues, and (c) the collaborative nature of self-deprecation. Self-deprecating language, in which speakers lower or humble themselves toward their addressees, does not contribute to achieving the goal of communication according to the Western culture-based frameworks. It even deters the efficiency and automaticity constituting the objective of any interaction. However, the results of the analysis suggest that speakers often self-deprecate in order to be on the same interactional plane, to be in equilibrium with each other. It is argued in this paper that, at least in some cultures, self-deprecating language is an important means that speakers use in conversation to level with each other and become of ‘one mind’.

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1. Introduction

Each form of society, whether national, regional, or ethnic, generally has its own norms of human interaction, often reflecting the cultural attitudes and values shared by its members. In this context, languages provide a variety of linguistic resources that speakers can utilize. For instance, the inventory of vocabulary of a certain language tells us something about its culture. [Wierzbicka \(1991: 47\)](#) illustrates this by showing how the absence of an intimate T-form of second-person pronoun *you* in English indicates the democratic culture but this can be also seen as a “distance-building device”, reflecting and fostering the culturally expected psychological distance between individuals.

Under the assumption that language is culturally and historically embedded, the present paper attempts to explore a less-discussed topic, that is, ‘self-deprecating’ language used in conversation. Self-deprecating language, in which speakers lower or humble themselves toward their addressees, does not contribute to achieving the goal of communication according to the Western culture-based frameworks. It even deters the efficiency and automaticity that any interaction would aim for. However, it is argued in this paper that, at least in some cultures, self-deprecating language is an important means that speakers use in conversation to level with each other and become of ‘one mind’.

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Although self-deprecation is a rather common phenomenon, relatively few studies have actually examined the real language of self-deprecation. It would appear that most discussions are anecdotal or focused on formulaic expressions or social rituals. For example, it is well known that compliment responses in Asian countries are characterized by a norm of modesty (Daikuhara, 1986; Blum-Kulka, 1987; Chen, 1993; Yu, 2003; Tang and Zhang, 2009; Chen and Yang, 2010; see Chen and Yang (2010) for a review).¹

Humor is another area where self-deprecation is often mentioned.² Comparing the socio-pragmatic evidence of politeness norms of Maori New Zealanders and non-Maori New Zealanders, Holmes et al. (2012) contend that both groups use self-deprecating humor in response to a compliment in workplace interaction. However, non-Maori New Zealanders' self-deprecation has its source in their preference for egalitarianism, whereas Maori's concept of *whakaiti* "being humble, modest" comes from their emphasis on the group over the individual.

In the present paper, three examples of self-deprecation by Korean and Japanese speakers are examined: (a) the use of self-directed negative yes/no interrogatives showing uncertainty or self-doubt, (b) self-deprecating digressions exposing one's weaknesses or personal issues, and (c) the collaborative nature of self-deprecation in conversation. The data were harvested from task-based conversations, where speakers were told to arrange a series of picture cards to make a coherent story. If we assume that the goal of communication is the effective exchange of information between speakers (Sacks et al., 1974; Grice, 1975; Brown and Levinson, 1978), task-based conversations provide an ideal context to observe the degree of effectiveness of this because the participants have a clear goal and must cooperate efficiently to achieve that goal. On the other hand, if language is culturally rooted and the goal of communication is the creation or maintenance of relationships, we may in fact uncover something more, even in task-based conversations. In this regard, there has been a great deal of work done on such phenomena as co-construction, repetition, tag and negative questions, and so on, all of which seem to facilitate interdependence between speakers (Tannen, 1987; Hayashi, 2003; Fujii and Kim, 2007; among others). However, in the present paper, it is argued that speakers often go one step further and even lower or humble themselves, the ultimate goal of which is the achievement of 'one mind', to be in equilibrium with each other.

1.1. Three approaches to research on 'self-deprecation'

Before we move on, it is important to note that self-deprecation can be viewed from three different perspectives: dispositional, situational, and interactional. Most psychologists would probably be interested in the dispositional aspect, that is, as stable, individual personality traits. Humility or modesty would be viewed as a component of one's personality, as a relatively enduring disposition which a person brings to many different kinds of situations. In many non-Western cultures, modesty or humility has been an important virtue to which everyone should aspire. However, in Western societies, where there is a strong culturally shared belief in individualism and egalitarianism, modesty or humility has been a neglected virtue (Tangney, 2000).³ Self-deprecation frequently has been equated with a sense of unworthiness or low self-esteem in Western cultures. Thus, in social and psychological sciences, low self-esteem or self-deprecation has been found to be related to social problems such as depression, poor school achievement, drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency, and so on (Mecca et al., 1989; Rosenberg et al., 1989; Owens, 1994; Jones et al., 2010; among others). In other words, self-deprecation is viewed from a pathological point of view.

Another way of looking at self-deprecation is situational. Personality and individual differences aside, most of us display humility or show self-deprecation in some situations but not in others. Situational factors such as the relative status of individuals, degrees of intimacy, presence or absence of evaluation concerns, prior interpersonal experience, and different social settings might affect the use of humility in some specific contexts. Many languages including Korean and Japanese have an honorific system built into the language to show respect to the addressee or to humble oneself. In these languages, the speakers should assess the situation constantly to determine whether they should use honorifics.

Lastly, there is an interactional aspect to self-deprecation or self-effacement. It is expected that speakers should use verbal and non-verbal means of self-deprecation to achieve a variety of interactional goals in the dynamics of talk during interaction. Self-deprecating responses to compliments among Asian speakers and instances of self-deprecating humor in workplaces as discussed above are good examples of this.

Although the three ways of looking at self-deprecation are all mentioned in this paper, the paper focuses mainly on the interactional aspect of self-deprecation, that is, how it contributes to the speakers' goal of managing relationships moment

¹ Chen (1993) reports that his Xi'an Chinese subjects reject compliments 95.73% of the time.

² Self-deprecating or self-denigrating humor refers to instances where the speaker rather than the listener is the butt of the humor (Zajdman, 1995, from Schnurr and Chan, 2011). Hay (2001:74) argues that in employing self-deprecating humor, the speaker has two conflicting face needs of apparently attacking their own face while at the same time signaling that they are in control of the situation by making fun of their own weakness.

³ For example, Sherlock Holmes in *The Greek Interpreter* says, "... My dear Watson, ... I cannot agree with those who rank modesty among the virtues. To the logician all things should be seen exactly as they are, and to underestimate one's self is as much a departure from truth as to exaggerate one's own powers."

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