

Crosslinguistic and Crosscultural Similarities and Differences in Rhetorical Structure of Narratives: A Comparative Study of English and Korean Oral Narratives

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1 Introduction

Crosslinguistic studies of narratives have argued that differences in conventionalized narrative structure and style exist across languages and cultures (Berman 2001; Berman and Slobin 1994; McCabe and Bliss 2003; Minami 2002; Chafe 1980; Tannen 1980, 1993). Previous studies have maintained

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that Anglo-American narratives tend to prefer a topic-centered chronological structure of a single event with rich descriptions of characters' mental and emotional states, whereas East Asian narratives tend to combine multiple events that are similar in the same story and lack explicit reference to characters' psychological states or evaluative comments (Kang 2003; Kuntay and Nakamura 2003; Minami 2002; Song 2017). For example, Kang (2003) examined Korean and English speakers' oral narratives elicited through the picture book *frog where are you?* and found that Korean narratives were shorter and contained fewer evaluations than English narratives. Kang (2003: 131) attributes this to the different socialization patterns by Korean and American mothers: "Since Korean mothers elicit significantly less evaluation and descriptive information from their children than American mothers (Mullen and Yi 1995), it is also likely that Koreans may elaborate less than the native English speakers in their Korean or English narratives." Similar observations have been made about Chinese and Japanese mothers (Han et al. 1998; Minami and McCabe 1995; Wang and Yang 2023). In addition to the suppressed expressives and evaluatives, Korean narratives have been claimed to have a different overall plot structure. Song (2017) used a comparison of two Korean folktales and their English translations to argue that Korean narratives often have a double peak contrastive structure (Longacre 1981). She notes that the second, parallel peak in the non-linear rhetorical structure could be perceived as a digression by American readers, whose typical narrative patterns involve the main character's problem-solving and goal-oriented actions (Connor 1998).

This paper investigates whether these types of claims made in the literature—that East Asian narratives are less expressive and have different rhetorical structures than Anglo-American narratives—are replicable and thus valid. I report the result of a comparative analysis of oral narratives by Korean and English speakers elicited through a film retelling task, which showed that Korean and English narratives are more similar than previously thought. The data was analyzed in terms of a fine-grained coding scheme, expanding the existing empirical coverage. The results also contribute to a new understanding of crosslinguistic and crosscultural variations in narrative structure. Previous studies are either purely descriptive, or they tend to explain the results in terms of input differences in childhood. This only moves the question one step higher; it does not explain why Korean mothers are less expressive than American mothers in the first place. The results of the current study suggest that a systematic viewpoint/perspective variation explains different linguistic behaviors of the two language groups better than input difference resulting from varying cultural values and practices.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

There were overall twenty participants: ten Korean speakers and ten (American) English speakers. The native Korean speaker participants (20s and 30s) consisted of graduate and undergraduate students studying at a major public university in the U.S. All of them grew up in monolingual Korean households and attended high school or college in Seoul, Korea. The native English speakers were undergraduate and graduate students in their 20s and 30s at the same university. All of them grew up in monolingual English households and had no dominant second language.

2.2 Stimulus

Oral narrative data were collected from the participants through a silent film-retelling task using the edited version of the film *Modern Times* (1936), which was broken down into two parts. The first half of the film, which was 14 minutes long, introduces the main characters, Charlie Chaplin (playing the Tramp character) and an orphan girl. Chaplin's character gets released from the prison after preventing a drug gang's escape and finds a job at a shipyard, but he gets fired after making a mistake. The orphan girl loses her father during a police crackdown on a protest and runs away to escape being placed into an orphanage. In the second half, which is 11 minutes long, the two characters run into each other while the girl is trying to survive, and Chaplin is seeking another prison sentence. This half of the film includes four episodes with a variety of locations and times, different configurations of actors, and a sequence of events (See Table 2 below for a more detailed episode structure).

2.3 Procedure

In each elicitation session, the participant and his/her interlocutor watched the first half of the film together, after which the interlocutor left the room while the participant watched the second half. When the interlocutor returned, the participant told her/him what happened in the rest of the film. The elicitation method created a genuine and natural communication situation because the participant had to convey new information to the interlocutor, but they also shared previous common knowledge. The sessions were audio recorded, and the recorded oral narratives were digitally transcribed with all original forms preserved.

2.4 Coding Schemes and Research Questions

To find out whether Korean narratives are less expressive and have different rhetorical structures than American narratives, I coded the data in terms of the following questions.

- 1) Number of clauses: Did Korean speakers produce a fewer number of clauses than English speakers?
- 2) Narrative structure: Did Korean speakers omit any plot events? Did they employ a different episode structure than English speakers?
- 3) Events vs. descriptions: Did Korean speakers use a fewer number of descriptive clauses than English speakers?
- 4) Characters' psychological states: Did Korean speakers make fewer references to the characters' thoughts and feelings than English speakers?
- 5) Perspectives and evaluations: Did Korean speakers shift the point of view from themselves to a character less or more frequently than English speakers? Did Korean speakers use expressives indicating their own judgment (evaluative adjectives and adverbs, epithets, etc.) less frequently than English speakers?

3 Data Analysis

3.1 Number of Clauses

The collected narratives were divided into clauses. Each clause contains one finite main predicate, describing a single event or state located on the narrative timeline. Subordinating clauses, such as embedded clauses under an attitude verb, relative clauses, and infinitive clauses (*in order to*, etc.), were not coded as an independent clause, whereas coordinating clauses (*because*, *and*, *so*, *while*, etc.) were coded as an independent clause. (1) is an English example and (2) is a Korean example of this coding.

- (1) a. So, we saw the girl that was destitute, right? (C1)
b. And Charlie Chaplin is, um, trying to get himself back into prison, (C2)
- (2) a. pwumo epsnun yeca-ka ppangcip ka-se (C1)
parents not-have girl-Nom bakery go-and¹
'The orphan girl went to a bakery and'
b. ppang-ul hwumch-yess-nunteyyo. (C2)
bread-Acc steal-Past-Dec
'stole bread.'

¹ The abbreviations in the glosses are as follows. Nom: Nominative case, Acc: Accusative case, Top: Topic, Past: Past tense, Dec: Declarative.

Table 1 presents the number of clauses produced by each participant.

	English	Korean
Participant 1	24	28
Participant 2	31	21
Participant 3	21	167
Participant 4	46	49
Participant 5	36	32
Participant 6	81	62
Participant 7	65	101
Participant 8	55	32
Participant 9	35	54
Participant 10	37	30
Total/Average/SD	432/43.1/18.911	576/57.6/45.026

Table 1. Number of clauses

Contrary to the previous studies, Korean speakers as a group produced more clauses than English speakers as a group. Large SDs indicate that there were more individual variations than group variations. A t-test showed that there was no significant difference between the Korean and the English groups at the 0.05 significance level ($p = 0.366$). A pure number of clauses, however, does not reveal much about the crosslinguistic differences between the two languages. What is noteworthy is that Kang's (2003) result, such that Korean narratives were shorter than English narratives, was not replicated in this study. This discrepancy could be attributed to the different experimental tasks, as Kang's study was based on a picture description task and mine was a film retelling task. However, it is unlikely that Korean speakers had better short-term memory than English speakers at the time of data collection. Their ages and educational backgrounds were similar. The participants were encouraged to take notes while watching the film, so memory constraints presumably did not have a significant effect in their production.

3.2 Episode Structure

The second research question is whether Korean and English narratives have different plot structures. To investigate this issue, the data were coded in terms of the episode structure of the stimulus film, given in Table 2. The film is divided into four episodes consisting of ten scenes following Kim (2000: 88), who draws an episode boundary, based on Chafe (1987), between shifts in location, time, characters, and the overall event structure. If a change in all of these elements occurs, then an episode boundary is drawn. If there is a change in just one of them, a sub-episode or a "scene" boundary is drawn.

	Location	Characters	Main events
Episode 1 Scene 1-1	In front of the bakery	The girl, the baker, the passerby witness	The girl steals bread; the witness alerts the baker; the baker chases the girl
Scene 1-2	On the street	The girl, the baker, the witness, Chaplin, a police officer	The girl runs into Chaplin; Chaplin claims responsibility for the theft to the police officer; the baker and the witness refute the claim; the police officer chases after the girl.
Episode 2 Scene 2-1	In a restaurant	Chaplin, the cashier, a police officer	Chaplin eats a lot of food without paying; Chaplin calls in a passing police officer and asks him to arrest him.
Scene 2-2	Outside the restaurant	Chaplin, the police officer, the owner of a kiosk, two children	The police officer calls for a paddy wagon; Chaplin gets a cigar from the kiosk and gives away sweets to children passing by.
Episode 3 Scene 3-1	In the paddy wagon	Chaplin, a police officer, the girl, crowd	Chaplin gets on the paddy wagon; later the girl gets aboard; Chaplin yields his seat to the girl who is weeping, and consoles her; the girl attempts to escape; the vehicle makes a wide turn and drops the girl, Chaplin and the officer.
Scene 3-2	On the street	Chaplin, the girl, the police officer	Chaplin hits the police officer on the head, knocking him unconscious; Chaplin urges the girl to get away; the girl invites Chaplin to accompany her.
Scene 3-3	In front of a middle-class house	Chaplin, the girl, a husband and a wife, a police officer	Chaplin and the girl take a rest in front of the house; the couple comes out of the house; Chaplin and the girl envy the couple and talk about their lives and future;

Episode 4 Scene 4-1	On the street	Chaplin, the girl	The girl tells Chaplin that she has found a house.
Scene 4-2	In the dilapidated house	Chaplin, the girl	Chaplin and the girl go to the dilapidated house; Chaplin sleeps in an out-house; the girl serves breakfast for Chaplin.
Scene 4-3	On the road	Chaplin, the girl	Chaplin and the girl walk towards the horizon.

Table 2. Episode structure of the stimulus film

Each narrative was coded in terms of the scenes, and missing scenes were identified. Table 3 presents missing scenes (marked by scene numbers in Table 2) in each narrative.

	English	Korean
Participant 1	2-1, 2-2, 3-2, 3-3, 4-2, 4-3	3-3
Participant 2	1-1, 2-1	2-2, 3-2, 4-3
Participant 3	2-2	
Participant 4	4-1	2-1, 2-2, 3-2
Participant 5	3-2, 4-1, 4-3	2-2, 3-2, 4-3
Participant 6		
Participant 7	2-2	
Participant 8	4-3	2-2, 3-2, 4-3
Participant 9	1-1, 2-2, 3-2, 4-1	4-3
Participant 10	4-3	2-2, 3-2, 4-3
Number of missing scenes/Average/SD	20/2/1.825	17/1.7/1.418

Table 3. Narrative structure

There was no significant difference between the two groups ($p = 0.73$). In the English group, only one participant described all of the scenes. The rest omitted two scenes on average. The only scenes that were present in every English narrative were the girl meeting with Chaplin on the street and also in the police wagon, which the participants considered plot events. Chaplin giving a cigar and chocolate to a kid was perceived as relatively unimportant, as demonstrated its omission in four of the narratives. The last scene was also excluded by four participants, who simply concluded their narrative with 'they lived happily ever after'.

In the Korean group, three participants included all scenes in their narratives. Like English narratives, the scenes that were present in all of the Korean narratives were the girl meeting with Chaplin on the street and then again in the police wagon. In addition, the following scenes were present in

all Korean narratives: the girl stealing bread, she and Chaplin sitting in front of a middle-class house talking, her telling him that she found a house, and them going to the house. Korean speakers in general provided a more detailed account of the story. Similar to the English narratives, Chaplin giving a cigar and chocolate to a kid and the last scene were omitted by five participants. Four Korean speakers ended the narrative with ‘they lived happily’ or ‘it was a happy ending’. It appears that events perceived to be important to or less crucial for the plot were the same for both groups.

3.3 Foreground and Background

Narratives consist of foreground and background clauses (Hopper 1979; Labov 1972). Foreground clauses are typically telic event descriptions² that move the narrative time forward, whereas background clauses are lexical or grammatical states (e.g., progressive, perfect, modality), which do not move the narrative time forward but instead provide elaborations to the plot events. Background clauses remain outside the narrative timeline (Dry 1983; Kamp and Rohrer 1983; Kamp and Reyle 1993; Partee 1984). Examples from the data collected are given below.

- (3) a. she showed him this kind of shack they had going on (Foreground)
 b. and it was kind of their makeshift version of the life that they saw prior (Background)
- (4) a. kulayse yeca-ka palkyenha-n cip-ey kathi ka-ss-nuntey
 so woman-Nom find-RC. house-to together go-Past-and
 (Foreground)
 ‘So they went to the house the woman found together but’
 b. cip-i toykey heswulhay-se (Background)
 house-Nom very shabby-so
 ‘the house was very shabby.’

Table 4 presents the number of background clauses in English and Korean narratives. According to previous claims, English Speakers should be expected to produce more background clauses than Korean speakers.

² Telic event descriptions are those with inherent endpoint, e.g., *cross*, *die*, whereas atelic event descriptions lack inherent culmination, e.g., *run*, *swim*.

	English	Korean
Participant 1	11/24 (45.8%)	1/28 (0.3%)
Participant 2	8/31 (25.8%)	5/21 (2.4%)
Participant 3	5/21 (23.8%)	68/167 (40.7%)
Participant 4	11/46 (23.9%)	7/49 (14.3%)
Participant 5	6/36 (16.6%)	7/32 (21.8%)
Participant 6	25/81 (30.8%)	20/62 (32.3%)
Participant 7	18/65 (27.6%)	17/101 (17%)
Participant 8	6/55 (10.9%)	9/32 (28%)
Participant 9	9/35 (25.7%)	8/54 (14.8%)
Participant 10	10/37 (27%)	5/30 (16.7%)
Total (Percentage) SD	109/432 (25.2%) 9.09	147/576 (25.5%) 9.09

Table 4. Background clauses

English and Korean groups used approximately the same amount of background clauses and no significant difference was detected ($p = 0.27$). Much like the number of clauses, individual variation in the number of background clauses was greater than group differences. English speakers did not provide any more background information and elaboration than Korean speakers did.

3.4 Character's Psychological States

In principle, it is impossible to know a third person's inner thoughts or feelings unless they are overtly expressed. The narrator, however, can have a privileged status in the story as an "omniscient" observer and mind reader. Not all third-person narratives are omniscient narrative. Some literary critics reserve the term "omniscient narration" for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors. Abbott (2008: 73) argues that even for these authors, the narration itself, unlike the omniscient narrator, is not omniscient at all. As previously mentioned, existing studies claim that Anglo-American narratives tend to provide rich descriptions of characters' mental and emotional states, whereas East Asian narratives lack explicit reference to characters' psychological states. To find out whether this is true for the data collected, I tallied expressions of characters' psychological states. Overt speech events and purpose clauses were excluded from this coding. Examples are given below.

- (5) a. she passes a bakery and realizes that there's a truck out front
b. so then, um, they're like he tells her that he was the one that like was from the bakery or whatever and she gets really sad

- (6) a. kuleko nase challi chayphullin-i tasi tto kamok-ey ka-ko siph-ese and then Charlie Chaplin-Nom again prison-to go-want-so ‘And then Charlie Chaplin wants to go to prison again’
- b. ku ttay icyey yeca-nun kamanhi anca iss-key toy-nikka ponin-i that time now woman-Top quietly sit-become-since herself-Nom yelekaci sayngkak-i tteolukey-ss-cyo. apeci-n tolakasye-ss-ko various thought-Nom arise-Past-Dec father-Top die-Past-and caki-n caphyeka-key tway-ss-ko kulayse wul-key toy-ko herself-Top arrested-become-Past-and so cry-become-and ‘Now at that time the woman got to sit quietly and various thoughts rose in her mind, like her father passed away and she was arrested so she starts to cry...’

Table 5 presents the number of clauses that describe the characters’ thoughts and feelings. Since the numbers were small, I did not calculate the percentages for individual participants and SD.

	English	Korean
Participant 1	1	0
Participant 2	0	3
Participant 3	2	9
Participant 4	5	2
Participant 5	2	3
Participant 6	9	9
Participant 7	0	0
Participant 8	2	4
Participant 9	7	3
Participant 10	4	3
Total (Percentage)	32/432 (7.4%)	36/576 (6.2%)

Table 5. Characters’ psychological states

As Table 5 shows, neither English nor Korean speakers described a character’s psychological state very frequently. Therefore, the previous claim that English speakers are more expressive than Korean speakers was not replicated. The participants overall did not seem to see themselves as an omniscient narrator.

3.5 Perspectives and Evaluations

A point of view refers to a temporal and spatial vantage point from which the events in the story are observed, described, interpreted, and evaluated. In everyday conversational discourse, the perspective is indistinguishable from the utterance context. In narratives, on the other hand, the narrator has a choice. The participants in this study described the film either from their

own perspectives anchored in the context of utterance (first-person or egocentric perspective), or from the perspective of the story embedded in the context of narrative (narrative or allocentric perspective). (7) and (8) are examples of the first-person perspective from each language, in which participants reported what they saw, making frequent comments about the film itself.

- (7) a. and then it ended with them walking off, kind of, into the sun set you could say, even though it was black and white but that's kind of how I saw it.
 b. and then they're off trying to get their American dream with their, their own house and their own things and it's really heartwarming and adorable, and it's really sweet.
- (8) a. ney yeca-ka ku chang pakk-ul po-myense ku
 woman-Nom that window outside-Acc see-while that
 ppangcip an-ul po-myense ku.. ppang-kathun ke-l
 bakery inside-Acc see-while that bread-like thing-Acc
 mek-ko siphehanun cangmyen-i iss-ess-eyo.
 eat-like-RC scene-Nom be-Past-Dec
 'yes, there was a scene where the woman was looking outside the window into a bakery and longs to eat something like bread.'
 b. nam-uy cip matang. cheumey-nun cantipath cangmyen-man
 other-Gen house yard first-Top grass scene-only
 po-yese kuke-y matang-incu molu-ko kongwen-ilako
 seen-since that-Nom yard-whether not-know-and park-is
sayngkakul hay-ss-nuntey hwamyen-i tasi twi-lo
 think-Past-but scene-Nom again back-toward
ppaci-myense twi-ey cip-i poi-ko icey ku nam-uy
 fall-while back-in house-Nom seen-and now that other-Gen
 cip cengwen-ilanun key ku ttay icey poi-key tway-yo.
 house garden-be-RC thing that time now seen-become-Dec
 'Someone else's front lawn. At first, I could only see grass, so I thought it was a park, but then the scene expanded toward the back, and then I could see that it was someone else's lawn.'

The first-person perspective promotes the use of expressives—exclamations like *yes*, hedges like *kind of*, epithets like *the poor woman*, and evaluative adjectives like *damn*, and speaker-oriented adverbs like *perhaps* that do not contribute to the truth condition of the proposition, but instead describe the narrator's attitudes or the emotion.

Narratives adopting the third-person perspective, by contrast, contain no or few mentions concerning the narrator's perception. A narrative was

coded as third-person perspective if the film commentary was restricted to the very beginning and the very end of the narrative. Examples are given below.

- (9) She--they bumped into each other, and the owner caught the girl and then the poli--the police officer came and the owner told the police officer that she stole his bread and Charlie Chaplin said, "No she didn't." That he did. So they took Charlie Chaplin, they arrested him, and then the lady who saw the girl take the loaf of bread, she told the owner it wasn't the man it was the girl, so the owner went after the girl and told the police officer it was a girl not the guy, uh, Charlie Chaplin, and then they took the girl
- (10) ku sonye-ka ppang-ul hwumchy-ese tomangka-taka ku ppang that girl-Nom bread-Acc steal-and run-while that break owner-by cwuin-hanthey kelly-ese tomangka-taka challi chayphullin-hako caught-and run-while Charlie Chaplin-with run.into-Past-but pwuticchy-ess-nuntey ku ttay kyengchal-i ccochawa-ss-eyo. that time police-Nom chase-Past-Dec
 'The girl, while running away from the bakery owner after stealing bread, ran into Charlie Chaplin, but at that time the police came chasing her.'

Table 6 presents the dominant perspective (1st person vs. 3rd person) and the number of evaluative and commentary clauses.

	English	Korean
Participant 1	1 st person, 6/24 (25%)	3 rd person, 1/28 (3.6%)
Participant 2	1 st person, 12/31 (38.7%)	3 rd person, 0/21 (0%)
Participant 3	1 st person, 3/21 (14.3%)	1 st person, 35/167 (20.9%)
Participant 4	3 rd person, 1/46 (2.2%)	3 rd person, 4/49 (8.2%)
Participant 5	1 st person, 4/36 (11.1%)	3 rd person, 4/32 (12.5%)
Participant 6	1 st person, 25/81 (30.9%)	3 rd person, 6/62 (9.7%)
Participant 7	1 st person, 16/65 (24.6%)	1 st person, 5/101 (4.9%)
Participant 8	3 rd person, 1/55 (1.8%)	3 rd person, 0/32 (0%)
Participant 9	1 st person, 11/35 (31.4%)	3 rd person, 1/54 (1.8%)
Participant 10	3 rd person, 1/37 (2.7%)	3 rd person, 0/30 (0%)
Total (Percentage) SD	80/432 (18.3%) 13.6	56/576 (6.1%) 6.8

Table 6. Perspectives and evaluations

English speakers preferred the first-person point of view, anchored in the context of utterance (7 out of 10), whereas Korean speakers preferred the

third-person point of view, anchored in the narrative context (8 out of 10). There was a significant difference between the two groups in terms of the number of evaluative and commentary clauses ($p = 0.026$). Similar results have been reported in Tannen (1980), who found in her narratives by American and Greek speakers that Americans adopted the film-viewer perspective.

4 Conclusion

The only group difference that was found in this study was a perspective difference. English speakers tended to describe the film from their own perspectives, making many commentaries about the film, such as their uncertainty about what was going on, etc. On the other hand, Korean speakers preferred to describe the film from the story context, avoiding direct commentaries about the film. In other words, Korean speakers preferred an impersonal (also known as “camera-eye”) frame of reference, relating events to one another on the narrative timeline, whereas English speakers tended to adopt an “egocentric” frame of reference, describing what they saw from the here-and-now perspective. Other aspects of the narratives, such as the number of clauses, use of background clauses, descriptions of a character’s thoughts and feelings, and the episode structure were not significantly different between the two groups. Therefore, the previous claim that Anglo-American narratives tend to prefer a chronological structure of a single event with rich descriptions of characters’ mental and emotional states, whereas East Asian narratives tend to have a parallel structure without explicit reference to characters’ psychological states or evaluative comments (Kang 2003; Kuntay and Nakamura 2003; Minami 2002; Song 2017) was not supported in this study. I suggest that the prior observations by Kang (2003) and Song (2017) were perhaps a byproduct of the difference in perspective/point of view. A correlation obviously exists between the first-person point of view and frequent use of evaluative comments, and between the narrative point of view and somewhat depressed use of them.

Highlighting the differences between language groups and attributing the different language uses to differences in inherent culture, as previous studies have tended to do, can have both positive and negative effects. While promoting awareness of cultural diversity, it may also lead to ignoring the universality of language/linguistic structures and to a somewhat simplified and stereotypical perception of a linguistic community and its culture. One might argue that the egocentric vs. neutral point of view difference derives from varying cultural values and practices. However, no obvious method exists to prove such correlation. Moreover, as shown in this study, such difference was not absolute, but could only be described in probabilistic terms. Overall, there was greater individual variation than

group differences. If perspective/point of view is indeed the determining factor in the differences observed, as I argue, rather than input differences due to cultural practices, we can go beyond a mere description and begin building a theory on the systematic crosslinguistic variation in narrative structure.

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