

## Communication of respect in interethnic service encounters

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### ABSTRACT

Divergent practices for displaying respect in face-to-face interaction are an ongoing cause of tension in the US between immigrant Korean retailers and their African American customers. Communicative practices in service encounters involving Korean customers contrast sharply with those involving African American customers in 25 liquor store encounters that were videotaped and transcribed for analysis. The relative restraint of immigrant Korean storekeepers in these encounters is perceived by many African Americans as a sign of racism, while the relatively personable involvement of African Americans is perceived by many storekeepers as disrespectful imposition. These contrasting interactional practices reflect differing concepts of the relationship between customer and storekeeper, and different ideas about the speech activities that are appropriate in service encounters. (Intercultural communication, respect, service encounters, African Americans, Koreans)\*

Conflict in face-to-face interaction between immigrant Korean retail merchants and their African American customers has been widely documented since the early 1980s. Newspapers in New York, Washington, DC, Chicago, and Los Angeles have carried stories on this friction; and the 1989 movie *Do the right thing* depicted angry confrontations of this type. By the time that the events of April 1992 – referred to variously as the Los Angeles “riots,” “uprising,” “civil disturbance” or, by many immigrant Koreans, *sa-i-gu* ‘April 29’ – cast a media spotlight on such relations, there had already been numerous African American boycotts of immigrant Korean businesses in New York and Los Angeles; politicians had publicly addressed the issue; and academics (e.g. Ella Stewart 1989 and Chang 1990) had begun to write about this type of friction.

There are multiple, intertwined reasons for these interethnic tensions in small businesses. An underlying source is the history of social, racial, and economic inequality in American society. In this broader context, visits to any store can become a charged event for African Americans. Thus, according to Austin (1995:32),

Any kind of ordinary face-to-face retail transaction can turn into a hassle for a black person. For example, there can hardly be a black in urban America who

has not been either denied entry to a store, closely watched, snubbed, questioned about her or his ability to pay for an item, or stopped and detained for shoplifting.

Specific features of small convenience/liquor stores, such as the ones studied here, exacerbate the potential for conflict. Prices in such stores are high, many customers have low incomes, and the storekeepers are seen by many as the latest in a long line of economic exploiters from outside the African American community (Drake & Cayton 1945, Sturdevant 1969, Chang 1990, 1993). Shoplifting is not uncommon, and the late hours and cash basis of the stores make them appealing targets for robbery. Nearly all the retailers interviewed had been robbed at gunpoint; this had led some to do business from behind bulletproof glass, making verbal interaction with customers difficult.

In this socially, racially, and economically charged context, subtle differences in the ways that respect is communicated in face-to-face interaction are of considerable significance, affecting relationships between groups. This article documents how differences in the ways that immigrant Korean storekeepers and African American customers communicate respect in service encounters have contributed to mutual, distinctively intense feelings of disrespect between the two groups, and serve as an ongoing source of tension. These contrasting practices for the display of politeness and respect are empirically evident in the talk and behavior that occur in stores, and the negative perceptions that result are salient in interviews of retailers and customers alike.

#### RESPECT

The issue of “respect” in face-to-face encounters has been stressed both in the media and in academic accounts of relations between African Americans and immigrant Korean retailers. Ella Stewart (1991:20) concludes that “respect” is important for both groups in service encounters:

Both groups declared rudeness as a salient inappropriate behavior. The underlined themes for both groups appear to be respect and courtesy shown toward each other. Each group felt that more respect should be accorded when communicating with each other, and that courtesy should be shown through verbal and nonverbal interaction by being more congenial, polite, considerate, and tactful toward each other.

Such analysis suggests that good intentions are all that is required to ameliorate relationships: each group simply has to show more “respect and courtesy” to the other. However, the data presented in this article suggest that, even when such good intentions seem to be present, respect is not effectively communicated and understood. The problem is that, in a given situation, there are fundamentally different ways of showing respect in different cultures. Because of different conventions for the display of respect, groups may feel respect for each other, and

may continuously work at displaying their esteem – yet each group can feel that they are being disrespected. This type of situation, in which participants communicate at cross-purposes, has been analyzed most notably by Gumperz 1982a,b, 1992 regarding intercultural communication, though not regarding respect specifically.

The communication of respect is a fundamental dimension of everyday, face-to-face interaction. As Goffman says (1967:46), “the person in our urban secular world is allotted a kind of sacredness that is displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts.” These symbolic acts are achieved, often unconsciously, through the manipulation of a variety of communicative channels including prosody, choice of words and topic, proxemic distance, and timing of utterances. Gumperz 1982a, 1992 has shown how cultural differences in the use of such contextualization cues – at levels ranging from the perception and categorization of sounds to the global framing of activities – can lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication. The focus of this article is the ways in which constellations of interactional features can communicate (dis)respect in service encounters.

The intercultural (mis)communication of respect between African American customers and immigrant Korean retailers is particularly significant for inter-ethnic relations because behavior that is perceived to be lacking in respect is typically interpreted as actively threatening. Thus, according to Brown & Levinson (1987:33), “non-communication of the polite attitude will be read not merely as the absence of that attitude, but as the inverse, the holding of an aggressive attitude.” When conventions for paying respect in service encounters differ between cultures, as they do between immigrant Koreans and African Americans, individuals may read each other’s behavior as not simply strange or lacking in social grace, but as aggressively antagonistic.

Brown & Levinson posit a classification system for politeness practices that is useful for conceptualizing the contrasting interactional practices of immigrant Korean retailers and African American customers. Following Durkheim 1915 and Goffman 1971, they suggest two basic dimensions of individuals’ desire for respect: NEGATIVE FACE wants and POSITIVE FACE wants. Negative face want is “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others,” while positive face want is “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others” (Brown & Levinson, 62). Stated more simply, people do not want to be imposed on (negative face want); but they do want expressions of approval, understanding, and solidarity (positive face want). Because the labels “positive” and “negative” have misleading connotations, I use the word *involvement* to refer to positive politeness phenomena, and *RESTRAINT* to refer to negative politeness phenomena. These terms denote the phenomena to which they refer more mnemonically than the terms POSITIVE and NEGATIVE.

Strategies for paying respect include acts of “involvement politeness” and acts of “restraint politeness.” Involvement politeness includes those behaviors which express approval of the self or “personality” of the other. It includes acts which ex-

press solidarity between interactors – e.g. compliments, friendly jokes, agreement, demonstrations of personal interest, offers, and the use of in-group identity markers. Data from store interactions show that these acts are relatively more frequent in the service encounter talk of African Americans than of immigrant Koreans.

Restraint politeness includes actions which mark the interactor's unwillingness to impose on others, or which lessen potential imposition. These strategies can include hedging statements, making requests indirect, being apologetic, or simply NOT demanding the other's attention to begin with. Restraint face wants are basically concerned with the desire to be free of imposition from others, where even the distraction of one's attention can be seen as imposition. Behaviors that minimize the communicative demands on another – e.g. NOT asking questions, NOT telling jokes that would call for a response, and NOT introducing personal topics of conversation – can be expressions of restraint politeness or respect. Such acts of restraint are typical of the participation of immigrant Korean store-owners in service encounters.

#### METHODS

Fieldwork for this study took place in Los Angeles between July 1994 and April 1995. Data collection methods included ethnographic observation and interviewing in immigrant Korean stores, interviews with African Americans outside of store contexts, and videotaping of service encounters in stores.

I made repeated visits to six stores in the Culver City area, five in South Central, and two in Koreatown. Visits to stores typically lasted from one-half hour to two hours; with repeated visits, I spent over 10 hours at each of three stores in Culver City and one in South Central, and over five hours in one Koreatown store.

Service encounters in two immigrant Korean stores, one in Culver City and one in Koreatown, were videotaped for a total of four hours in each store. Video cameras were set up in plain view, but drew virtually no attention, perhaps because there were already multiple surveillance cameras in each store. The tapes from the Koreatown store are used for the current study because the Culver City store had no Korean customers and a lower proportion of African American customers. During the four hours of taping in this Koreatown store, there were 12 African American customers and 13 immigrant Korean customers.

The encounters with African American customers were transcribed using the conventions of conversation analysis (Atkinson & Heritage 1984),<sup>1</sup> resulting in over 30 pages of transcripts. The encounters in Korean were transcribed by a Korean American bilingual assistant according to McCune–Reischauer conventions, and then translated into English. Transcription and translation of Korean encounters were accompanied by interpretation and explanation – some of which was audio-recorded – by the bilingual assistant while watching the videotapes. In addition, the storekeeper who appears throughout the four hours of videotape watched segments of the tapes and gave background information on some of the

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customers appearing in the tapes, e.g. how regularly they came to the store. Transcripts of encounters in Korean comprise over 25 pages.

### SERVICE ENCOUNTER INTERACTION

In the following sections, I first consider the general structure of service encounters as an activity, delineating two types: SOCIALLY MINIMAL vs. SOCIALLY EXPANDED service encounters. Second, I consider the characteristics of convenience store service encounters between immigrant Koreans, presenting examples from transcripts that show socially minimal service encounters to be the common form. Third, I consider the characteristics of service encounters between immigrant Korean storekeepers and African American customers, using transcripts of two such encounters to demonstrate the contrasting forms of participation in them.

Merritt (1976:321) defines a service encounter as:

an instance of face-to-face interaction between a server who is "officially posted" in some service area and a customer who is present in that service area, that interaction being oriented to the satisfaction of the customer's presumed desire for some service and the server's obligation to provide that service. A typical service encounter is one in which a customer buys something at a store ...

Service encounters in stores fall under the broader category of institutional talk, the defining characteristic of which is its goal-orientation (Drew & Heritage 1992a). Levinson (1992:71) sees the organization, or structure, of such activities as flowing directly from their goals: "wherever possible I would like to view these structural elements as rationally and functionally adapted to the point or goal of the activity in question, that is the function or functions that members of the society see the activity as having."

The structural differences between Korean-Korean service encounters and those with African American customers that will be described below suggest that the two groups have different perceptions of the functions of such encounters. Even when goals are seen to overlap, participants in intercultural encounters frequently utilize contrasting means of achieving those goals (Gumperz 1992:246). Although African American customers and immigrant Korean shopkeepers might agree that they are involved in a service encounter, they have different notions of the types of activities that constitute a service encounter and the appropriate means for achieving those activities.

The service encounters involving immigrant Koreans and African Americans that are transcribed in this article took place in a Koreatown liquor store between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. on a Thursday in April 1995. The store does not use bulletproof glass, and from the cash register one has an unobstructed line of sight throughout the store. The cashier is a 31-year-old male employee with an undergraduate degree from Korea; he attended graduate school briefly, in both Korea and the US, in microbiology. He has been in the US for four years and worked in this store for about three and a half years.

Service encounters in this corpus vary widely both in length and in the types of talk they contain. They range from encounters that involve only a few words, and last just seconds, to interactions that last as long as seven minutes and cover such wide-ranging topics as customers' visits to Chicago, knee operations, and race relations. More common than these two extremes, however, are encounters like the following, in which an immigrant Korean woman of about 40 buys cigarettes:

- Cash: *Annyǒng haseyo.*  
'Hello/How are you?' ((Customer has just entered store.))
- Cust: *Annyǒng haseyo.*  
'Hello/How are you?'
- Cust: *Tambae!*  
'Cigarettes!'
- Cash: *Tambae tǔryǒyo?*  
'You would like cigarettes?' ((Cashier reaches for cigarettes under counter.))
- Cash: *Yǒgi issūmnida.*  
'Here you are.' ((Cashier takes customer's money and hands her cigarettes; customer turns to leave.))
- Cash: *Annyǒngghi kaseyo.*  
'Good-bye.'
- Cust: *Nye.*  
'Okay.'

The basic communicative activities of this encounter are: (a) greetings or openings, (b) negotiation of the business exchange, and (c) closing of the encounter.

Greetings, as "access rituals" (Goffman 1971:79), mark a transition to a period of heightened interpersonal access. In these stores, greetings typically occur as the customer passes through the doorway, unless the storekeeper is already busy serving another customer. Greetings in these circumstances include *Hi*, *Hello*, *How's it going*, *How are you?* – or, in Korean, *Annyǒng haseyo* 'Hello/How are you?'

The second basic activity is the negotiation of the business transaction, which includes such elements as naming the price of the merchandise brought to the counter by the customer, or counting out change as it is handed back to the customer. While explicit verbal greetings and closings do not occur in every recorded encounter, each contains a verbal negotiation of the transaction. The negotiation of the business exchange can be long and full of adjacency pairs (Schegloff & Sacks 1973) – involving, e.g., requests for a product from behind the counter, questions about a price, repairs (Schegloff et al. 1977), and requests or offers of a bag. Merritt calls these adjacency pairs "couplets," and she gives a detailed structural flow chart (1976:345) that shows the length and potential complexity of this phase of a service encounter.

The third and final activity of these encounters, the closing, often includes formulaic exchanges: *See you later*, *Take care*, *Have a good day*, or *Annyǒngghi kaseyo* 'Goodbye'. Frequently, however, the words used to close the negotiation of the business exchange also serve to close the entire encounter:

- Cash: One two three four five ten twenty ((Counting back change.))
- Cash: (Thank you/okay)
- Cust: Alright

This type of encounter – limited to no more than greetings/openings, negotiation of the exchange, and closings – I call a SOCIALLY MINIMAL service encounter. The talk in it refers almost entirely to aspects of the business transaction, the exchange of goods for money; it does not include discussion of more sociable, interpersonal topics, e.g. experiences outside the store or the customer's unique personal relationship with the storekeeper.

However, many service encounters do NOT match this socially minimal pattern. SOCIALLY EXPANDED service encounters typically include the basic elements described above, but also include activities that highlight the interpersonal relationship between customers and storekeepers. These socially expanded encounters are characterized by practices that increase interpersonal involvement, i.e. involvement politeness strategies such as making jokes or small-talk, discussing personal experiences from outside the store, and explicitly referring to the personal relationship between customer and storekeeper.

The initiation of a social expansion of a service encounter is evident in the following excerpt. The African American customer has exchanged greetings with the Korean owner and cashier of the store; the cashier has retrieved the customer's habitual purchase, and begins to ring it up. The customer, however, then reframes the activity in which they are engaged, initiating (marked in boldface) a new activity – a personable discussion of his recent sojourn in Chicago – which lasts for several minutes.

- Cash: That's it?  
 Cust: That's it ((Cashier rings up purchases.)) ((1.5))  
 Cust: **I haven't seen you for a while**  
 Cash: hehe Where you been  
 Cust: Chicago. ((Cashier bags purchase.))  
 Cash: Oh really?

The customer's comment *I haven't seen you for a while* instantiates and initiates a new type of activity and talk. The discussion of the customer's time in Chicago is a fundamentally different type of talk from that of socially minimal service encounters. Specifically, it is characterized by talk that is not directly tied to the execution of the business transaction at hand, but rather focuses on the ongoing relationship between the customer and storekeeper. Discussing the customer's trip to Chicago both indexes this personal relationship and, at the same time, contributes to its maintenance.

Such sharing of information helps constitute social categories and co-membership. To quote Sacks (1975:72),

Information varies as to whom it may be given to. Some matters may be told to a neighbor, others not; some to a best friend, others, while they may be told to a best friend, may only be told to a best friend after another has been told, e.g., a spouse.

In introducing talk of his trip to Chicago, the customer asserts solidarity with the cashier: they are co-members of a group who can not only exchange greetings and

make business exchanges, but who can also talk about personal experiences far removed from the store.

This type of talk, which indexes and reinforces interpersonal relationships, distinguishes socially expanded service encounters from minimal ones. My data contain a wide range of such talk which enhances personal involvement. Specific practices include, among many others, talk about the weather and current events (*Some big hotel down in Hollywood, all the windows blew out*), jokes (*I need whiskey, no soda, I only buy whiskey*), references to commonly known third parties (*Mr. Choi going to have some ice?*), comments on interlocutors' demeanor (*What's the matter with you today?*), and direct assertions of desired intimacy (*I want you to know me*).<sup>2</sup> Through their talk, customers and retailers create, maintain, or avoid intimacy and involvement with each other. These individual service encounters – an everyday form of contact between many African Americans and immigrant Koreans – are fundamental, discrete social activities that shape the nature and tenor of interethnic relations on a broader scale.

#### SERVICE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN IMMIGRANT KOREANS

Before examining immigrant Korean interaction with African Americans, I consider service encounters in which the customers as well as the storekeepers are immigrant Koreans. These Korean–Korean interactions provide a basis for comparison with African American encounters with Koreans. If, for example, the taciturnity and restraint of retailers in their interaction with African Americans were due solely to racism, one would expect to find retailers chatting and joking with their Korean customers and engaging in relatively long, intimate conversations.

In fact, the retailers in Korean–Korean encounters display the same taciturn, impersonal patterns of talk and behavior that they display with African American customers, even in the absence of linguistic and cultural barriers. The Korean–Korean interactions are even shorter and show less intimacy than the corresponding interactions with African American customers. Ten of the 13 service encounters with immigrant Korean customers were socially minimal, while only 3 of the 12 encounters with African Americans were socially minimal. Unlike their African American counterparts, immigrant Korean customers generally do not engage in practices through which they could display and develop a more personal relationship during the service encounter, e.g. making small talk or introducing personal topics. The example of a Korean woman buying cigarettes, transcribed above, is typical of encounters between Korean merchants and customers. Racism or disrespect are not necessarily reasons for what African Americans perceive as distant, laconic behavior in service encounters.<sup>3</sup>

I have no recorded data of service encounters involving African American store-owners with which to compare these encounters with immigrant Korean ones. I did, however, observe many interactions between African American cus-



tomers and African American cashiers who were employed in stores owned by immigrant Koreans. Interactions between customers and such African American cashiers were consistently longer, and included more social expansions and affective involvement, than the corresponding encounters with immigrant Korean cashiers in the same stores.

Of the three socially expanded service encounters among immigrant Koreans, two involve personal friends of the cashier from contexts outside the store, and the third is with a child of about 10 years who is a regular customer at the store. According to Scollon & Scollon (1994:137), the communicative behavior that East Asians display toward those whom they know and with whom they have an ongoing personal relationship ("insiders") differs drastically from the behavior displayed toward those in relatively anonymous service encounters ("outsiders"):

One sees quite a different pattern [from "inside" encounters] in Asia when one observes "outside" or service relationships. These are the situations in which the participants are and remain strangers to each other, such as in taxis, train ticket sales, and banks. In "outside" (or nonrelational encounters) one sees a pattern which if anything is more directly informational than what one sees in the West. In fact, Westerners often are struck with the contrast they see between the highly polite and deferential Asians they meet in their business, educational, and governmental contacts and the rude, pushy, and aggressive Asians [by Western standards for subway-riding behavior] they meet on the subways of Asia's major cities.

In my data, service encounter communicative behavior among Korean adults could be predicted by the presence or absence of personal friendship from contexts outside the store. Socially expanded encounters with immigrant Korean adults occurred only when those adults were personal friends of the cashier, with whom he had contact outside the store. The cashier did not have a relationship with the child customer outside the store; but criteria for expanding encounters with children, and the nature of the expansions, may be different than for adults. In this case, the social expansion included a lecture to the child on the necessity of working long hours, and the child formally asked to be released from the interaction before turning to go.

Even in socially expanded service encounters among adult Korean friends, interlocutors may at times display a relatively high degree of restraint. For example, in the following segment, the cashier encounters a former roommate whom he has not seen in several years, who has by chance entered the store as a customer. The cashier and this customer had shared an apartment for two months in Los Angeles, more than three years prior to this encounter, and the customer had later moved away from Los Angeles.

When the customer enters the store, he displays no visible surprise or emotion at this chance encounter with his former roommate. He initially gives no reply to the cashier's repeated queries, "Where do you live?", and gazes away from the

cashier as if nothing had been said. After being asked five times where he lives, he gives a relatively uninformative answer, “Where else but home?”

- Cash: *Ö:!*  
 ‘He:y!’ ((Recognizing customer who has entered store. Cashier reaches out and takes customer’s hand. Customer pulls away and opens cooler door.)) ((3.0))
- Cash: *Ödi sarö.*  
 ‘Where are you living?’
- Cash: *Ö?*  
 ‘Huh?’ ((7.0))
- Cash: *Ödi sarö.*  
 ‘Where are you living?’ ((.5))
- Cash: *Ödi sarö.*  
 ‘Where are you living?’ ((Cashier and customer stand at the counter across from each other.)) ((2.5))
- Cash: *Ö?*  
 ‘Huh?’ ((Customer gazes at display away from cashier. Cashier gazes at customer.))
- Cash: *Ödi sarö::*  
 ‘C’mon, where are you living?’ ((1.0))
- Cust: ( )
- Cash: *Ö?*  
 ‘Huh?’ ((Cashier maintains gaze toward customer; customer continues to gaze at display.)) ((7.0))
- Cash: *Ödi sanyanikka?*  
 ‘So, where are you living?’ ((3.0))
- Cust: *Ödi salgin, chibe salji.*  
 ‘Where else, but home?’ ((1.0))
- Cash: *Ö?*  
 ‘huh?’
- Cash: *Chibi ödi nyago?*  
 ‘So where is your house?’

In this opening segment of transcript, the cashier has asked the customer six times where he lives – 10 times if the follow-up *Huh?*’s are included. The customer does not reveal to his former roommate where he lives, even as he stands three feet away from him, directly across the counter.

The customer’s initial unresponsiveness in this encounter is striking by Western standards of conversational cooperation (Grice 1975). The cashier, however, does not seem to treat the customer’s behavior as excessively uncooperative, e.g. by becoming angry or demanding an explanation for his interlocutor’s lack of engagement. A Korean American consultant suggested that the customer’s restraint was a sign not of disrespect, but of embarrassment (perhaps regarding his lack of career progress), which could explain the cashier’s relative patience with uninformative responses.

This apparent resistance to engagement, however, is precisely the type of behavior cited by African Americans as insulting, and as evidence of racism on the part of immigrant Korean storekeepers:

When I went in they wouldn’t acknowledge me. Like if I’m at your counter and I’m looking at your merchandise, where someone would say “Hi, how are you today, is there anything I –” they completely ignored me. It was like they didn’t care one way or the other.

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They wouldn't look at you at all. They wouldn't acknowledge you in any way. Nothing. You were nobody . . . They'd look over you or around you. (46-year-old African American woman)

. . . to me, many, not all, many of them perceive Blacks as a non-entity. We are treated as if we do not exist. (50-year-old African American male gift shop owner)

The customer's reluctance to acknowledge the cashier verbally or to respond to his questions – and the cashier's lack of anger at this – indicate that, at least in some situations, relatively dispassionate and impassive behavior is not interpreted by Koreans as insulting or disrespectful.

The taciturnity of the customer in this interaction, and of immigrant Korean storekeepers and customers more generally, is consistent with descriptions of the importance of *nunch'i* among Koreans – roughly 'perceptiveness', 'studying one's face', or 'sensitivity with eyes' (M. Park 1979, Yum 1987). It is a Korean interactional ideal to be able to understand an interlocutor with minimal talk, to be able to read the other's face and the situation without verbal reference. Speaking, and forcing the interlocutor to react, can be seen as an imposition: "to provide someone with something before being asked is regarded as true service since once having asked, the requester has put the other person in a predicament of answering 'yes' or 'no'" (Yum 1987:80).

This ideal, of communicating and understanding without talk, is present in the two most important religio-philosophical traditions of Korea – Confucianism and Buddhism. Confucian education stresses reading and writing, rather than speaking. Talk cannot be entirely trusted and is held in relatively low regard:

To read was the profession of scholars, to speak that of menials. People were warned that "A crooked gem can be straightened even by rubbing; but a single mistake in your speech cannot be corrected. There is no one who can chain your tongue. As one is liable to make a mistake in speech, fasten your tongue at all times. This is truly a profound and urgent lesson . . ." (Yum 1987:79)

In Buddhism, communication through words is generally devalued: "there is a general distrust of communication, written or spoken, since it is incomplete, limited, and ill-equipped to bring out true meaning" (Yum 1987:83). Enlightenment and understanding in Korean Buddhism is achieved internally, unmediated by explicit utterances: "The quest for wordless truth – this has been the spirit of Korean Buddhism, and it still remains its *raison d'être*" (Keel 1993:19).

The data from service encounters presented here suggest that this cultural ideal, of understanding without recourse to words, exists not only in religio-philosophical traditions, but may extend in certain situations to ideals of behavior in everyday face-to-face interaction.

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AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

As noted above, the service encounters with African American customers are characterized by more personal, sociable involvement and talk than the Korean–Korean encounters. While social expansions with Korean adult customers occurred only with personal friends of the cashier from contexts outside the store, only one of the nine African American customers in socially expanded encounters was friends with the cashier outside the store context.

Although the encounters with African Americans are longer and in many ways more intimate than the corresponding ones with Korean customers, close examination reveals consistently contrasting forms of participation in the service encounters. Overwhelmingly, it is the African American customers who make the conversational moves that make the encounters more than terse encounters focusing solely on the business transaction. Repeatedly, African American customers, unlike the immigrant Korean storekeepers and customers, treat the interaction not just as a business exchange, but as a sociable, interpersonal activity – by introducing topics for small-talk, making jokes, displaying affect in making assessments, and explicitly referring to the interpersonal relationship between cashier and customer.

Immigrant Korean retailers in these encounters are interactionally reactive, rather than proactive, in co-constructing conversation. Videotaped records reveal, for example, repeated instances where African American customers finish turns when discussing issues not related to the business transaction, and then re-initiate talk when no reply is forthcoming from the storekeepers. African American customers carry the burden of creating and maintaining the interpersonal involvement.

When immigrant Korean store keepers do respond to talk, many responses display an understanding of referential content of utterances – but no alignment with the emotional stance, of the customer’s talk, e.g. humor or indignation. Consider the reaction to ASSESSMENTS, i.e. evaluative statements that show one’s personal alignment toward a phenomenon (Goodwin & Goodwin 1992). These are not met by storekeepers with second-assessments of agreement. When they do respond to assessments with affect, e.g. smiling at a customer’s joke and subsequent laughter, their displayed levels of affect and interpersonal involvement are typically not commensurate with those of the customers.

The relative restraint of storekeepers in interaction with African American customers is not only a function of cultural preference for socially minimal service encounters and situated, interactional restraint; it also reflects limited English proficiency. It is more difficult to make small-talk, to joke, or to get to know the details of a customer’s life if communication is difficult. Restraint politeness can be expressed by NOT using the verbal channel, i.e. silence; but involvement

politeness requires more complex verbal activities – e.g. using in-group identity markers, showing interest in the other's interests, and joking.

The phonological, morphological, and syntactic differences between Korean, an Altaic language, and English, an Indo-European one, make it difficult to achieve fluency, and store-owners have limited opportunities for study. Even among those who have been in America for 20 years, many cannot understand English spoken at native speed, and many express embarrassment about speaking it because of limited proficiency.<sup>4</sup>

Videotaped records of interaction do NOT reveal constant hostility and confrontations between immigrant Korean retailers and African American customers; this finding is consistent with many hours of observation in stores. Some relationships, particularly those between retailers and regular customers, are overtly friendly: customers and storekeepers greet each other, engage in some small talk, and part amicably. Observation and videotape do not reveal the stereotype of the inscrutably silent, non-greeting, gaze-avoiding, and non-smiling Korean storekeepers which were cited by African Americans in media accounts and in interviews with me. However, videotaped records do reveal subtle but consistent differences between African Americans and immigrant Koreans in the forms of talk and behavior in service encounters. These differences, when interpreted through culture-specific frameworks, can contribute to and reinforce pejorative stereotypes of store-owners as unfriendly and racist, and of customers as selfish and poorly bred.

In the following section I detail these differences in interactional patterns in transcripts of two socially expanded service encounters. The first interaction is with a middle-aged African American man who is a regular at the store. The cashier was able to identify him immediately on videotape in a follow-up interview; he said that the customer had been coming to the store two or three times a week for at least three and a half years. This encounter shows notably good and comfortable relations, typical of encounters with regular customers, but at the same time it displays the asymmetrical pattern of involvement described above. The second interaction is a much longer one that occurs with a 54-year-old customer who is new to the area and the store, and who may be under the influence of alcohol at the time. Contrasting forms of participation are particularly evident in this second interaction.

### *Encounter 1*

In this interaction, a neatly dressed African American man in his 40s, carrying a cellular phone, comes into the store to buy a soda and some liquor. He is a regular at the store, but at the time of videotaping he had been away in Chicago for a month. The cashier is behind the counter, and the store-owner is standing amid displays in the middle of the store. The store-owner, about 40, has been in America for 20 years. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of California, Los Angeles; he studied math and computer science, he told me, be-

cause his English was not good enough for other subjects. He is more outgoing and talkative with customers than most of the storekeepers of his age, or older, who were observed.

Following greetings, the customer begins to treat the activity not just as a business transaction, but as an opportunity to be sociable, e.g. by introducing personal narratives about his long absence from Los Angeles and his experiences in Chicago:

- ((Customer enters store and goes to soda cooler.))  
 Cust: [Hi ]  
 Own: [How ar]e you?  
 ((Customer takes soda toward cash register and motions toward displays.)) ((7.5))  
 Cust: Wow you guys moved a lot of things around  
 Cash: Hello:, ((Cashier stands up from where he was hidden behind the counter.))  
 Cash: Heh heh  
 Cash: How are you? ((Cashier retrieves customer's liquor and moves toward register))  
 Cust: What's going on man? ((Cashier gets cup for customer's liquor.)) ((.8))  
 Cust: How've you been?  
 Cash: Sleeping  
 Cust: eh heh heh ((1.8))  
 Cash: That's it?  
 Cust: That's it ((Cashier rings up purchases.)) ((1.5))  
 Cust: I haven't seen you for a while  
 Cash: hehe Where you been  
 Cust: Chicago. ((Cashier bags purchase.))  
 Cash: Oh really?  
 Cust: [yeah]  
 Cash: [How] long?  
 Cust: For about a month ((1.2))  
 Cash: How's there.  
 Cust: Co:l'!  
 Cash: [Co:ld?]  
 Cust: [heh ] heh heh heh  
 Own: Is Chicago cold?  
 Cust: u::h! ((lateral headshakes)) ((1.4)) man I got off the plane and walked out the airport I said "Oh shit."  
 Cust: heh heh heh  
 Own: I thought it's gonna be nice spring season over there  
 Cust: Well not now this is about a month- I been there- I was there for about a month but you know (.) damn ((lateral headshakes))  
 ((Customer moves away from cash register toward owner.)) ((1.4))  
 Cust: Too co:l'  
 Cust: I mean this was really cold  
 Own: (They have snowy) season there  
 Cust: I've known it to snow on Easter Sunday (.)  
 Cust: Alright this Sunday it'll be Easter (.)  
 Cust: I've seen it snow Easter Sunday  
 ((15-second discussion, not clearly audible, in which the owner asks if there are mountains in Chicago, and the customer explains that there are not.))  
 Cust: See th- this- California weather almost never changes.  
 Cust: ((Spoken slowly and clearly as for non-native speaker.)) back there it's a seasonal change, you got fall, winter, spring  
 Own: mm hm  
 Cust: You know  
 Cust: But back there the weather ssshh ((lateral headshake))

## COMMUNICATION OF RESPECT

- Cust: It's cold up until June  
 Cust: I mean these guys like they– they wearing lon:g john:s from September until June  
 Own: (It's hot season, June)  
 Cust: He– here it's hot, but there it's ((lateral headshake))  
 Cust: (Really ) ((Customer moves toward exit.))  
 Own: Kay [see you later]  
 Cust: [see you later]  
 Cust: Nice talking to you

Although this customer has come into the store to buy a soda and liquor, he also displays interest in chatting, particularly about his sojourn in Chicago and the climate there. After the initial greetings, he comments on how much the store displays have changed: *Wow you guys moved a lot of things around*. This comment is consistent with the fact that he's been away; it provides an opening for a reply such as *We moved those a long time ago*, or another such comment that would display acknowledgment that the customer hasn't been in the store for some time. But neither cashier nor owner responds to his comment. The customer's use of the present perfect tense (*How've you been?*) – as opposed to present tense (*How are you?* or *How ya doing?*) – draws attention to the fact that he hasn't had contact with these storekeepers for a period of time beginning in the past and ending as he speaks; again this invites discussion of the fact that he hasn't been to the store for an unusually long time. The cashier answers the question *How've you been?* with *Sleeping*, treating it as referring to the present. The English present perfect tense is expressed with a past tense form in Korean, and may have led the cashier to interpret the question as a form of present tense.

The cashier places the customer's habitually preferred liquor on the counter without the customer's requesting the item. In doing so, the cashier, without talk, shows that he knows the customer, at least his business exchange habits. As the cashier rings up the purchase, the customer again uses the present perfect tense, indexing his relatively long absence from the store, commenting: *I haven't seen you for a while*. This comment not only indexes his long absence from the store, but draws the cashier into conversation. The comment is typically made by a person who has remained in one place while another has left and come back. In this case there is no indication that the cashier has been away. In fact, as an immigrant Korean working in a liquor store, he probably spends 80 or more hours a week in the store, up to 52 weeks each year.

The customer's seeming reversal of roles – speaking as if the cashier, rather than he, had been away – has the function, however, of drawing the cashier into conversation. The customer does not simply introduce the topic he wants to discuss; he compels the cashier to ask him about the topic. If the customer had simply stated, *I've been in Chicago for a month and it was cold*, his audience could simply have nodded and acknowledged it. Instead the speaker chooses an interactional strategy that compels a question from his interlocutors, increasing interpersonal involvement.

The customer's delivery displays a relatively high level of affective personal involvement: he uses profanity (*Oh shit*), falsetto voice, hyperbole (*they wearing long johns from September until June*), elements of African American English syntax (*they wearing*) and phonology (*col'*), and relatively high-volume laughter. The cashier and owner, however, do not display such a high level of affective personal involvement in the interaction, even through channels which are not dependent on linguistic proficiency. They do not laugh during the encounter, for example, and the owner is looking down unsmiling when the customer recounts his reaction (*Oh shit*) when getting off the plane in Chicago.

This disparity in levels of personal involvement is particularly apparent as the customer makes repeated assessments that display his alignment toward the weather in Chicago. According to Goodwin & Goodwin (1992:166),

this alignment can be of some moment in revealing such significant attributes of the actor as his or her taste and the way in which he or she evaluates the phenomena he or she perceives. It is therefore not surprising that displaying congruent understanding can be an issue of some importance to the participants.

Assessments provide a locus for interlocutors to show a common understanding and orientation through verbal and/or non-verbal markers of agreement with the assessment. Even when an individual has little knowledge of the referent of an assessment, positive response to the assessment will show emotional understanding and alignment with the assessor.

Explicit practices for displaying this alignment are highly developed among African Americans in the interactional pattern of "call-and-response," in which one actor's words or actions receive an immediate, often overlapping, response and confirmation from others (Smitherman 1977). Call-and-response marks involvement and congruent understanding with explicit vocal and non-verbal acts. Responses that overlap the caller's action are not seen as disrespectful interruptions, but rather as a means of displaying approval and of bringing caller and responder closer together.

While most often studied in formal performances – e.g. concerts, speeches, or sermons – relatively animated back-channel responses also characterize everyday talk of (and particularly among) many African Americans. Smitherman (1977:118) points out that differing expectations and practices of back-channel responses can lead to the breakdown of interethnic communication:

"call-response" can be disconcerting to both parties in black–white communication . . . When the black person is speaking, the white person . . . does not obviously engage in the response process, remaining relatively passive, perhaps voicing an occasional subdued "Mmmmmhmm." Judging from the white individual's seeming lack of involvement, the black communicator gets the feeling that the white isn't listening . . . the white person gets the feeling that the black person isn't listening, because he "keeps interrupting and turning his back on me."



In the encounter under consideration, the storekeepers display little reaction to the customer's assessments – much less animated, overlapping responses. The customer makes repeated assessments of the extreme cold of Chicago, e.g. *Co:l'!*; *Oh shit, damn; Too col'*; *this was really cold; back there the weather sshhh; it's cold up until June; they wearing lon:g john:s from September until June*; and *there it's* [lateral headshake]. The cashier smiles at the customer's *Oh shit* and immediately succeeding laughter, but other assessments get no such show of appreciation. The owner's responses to these dramatic assessments tend toward checks of facts: *Is Chicago cold?*; *I thought it's gonna be nice spring season over there*; and *It's hot season, June*. The Korean storekeepers show little appreciation for the cold of Chicago, thereby failing to align themselves and display solidarity with the customer making these assessments.

Following two of these assessments (*co:l'* and *I got off the plane and walked out the airport I said "Oh shit"*), the customer laughs. According to Jefferson (1979:93),

Laughter can be managed as a sequence in which speaker of an utterance invites recipient to laugh and recipient accepts that invitation. One technique for inviting laughter is the placement, by speaker, of a laugh just at completion of an utterance, and one technique for accepting that invitation is the placement, by recipient, of a laugh just after onset of speaker's laughter.

The customer's laughter following his utterances matches this pattern precisely, but cashier and owner do not accept the invitation to laugh. Not only do they fail to accept the invitation to laugh, but the owner actively declines the invitation to laugh. He does this not through silence, which would allow the speaker to pursue recipient laughter further, but by responding to the customer's laughter with serious talk of facts, i.e. the temperature in Chicago: *Is Chicago cold?* and *I thought it's gonna be nice spring season over there*. As Jefferson says,

In order to terminate the relevance of laughter, recipient must actively decline to laugh. One technique for declining a postcompletion invitation to laugh is the placement of speech, by recipient, just after onset of speaker's laughter, that speech providing serious pursuit of topic as a counter to the pursuit of laughter.

The owner's response to the customer's invitation to laugh serves as an effective counter to the invitation.

Finally, the customer's comment upon leaving (*Nice talking to you*) suggests his attitude toward this service encounter: it wasn't just an encounter about doing a business transaction, it was a time to enjoy talking personally and make connections to people. Such an attitude is consistent with observations and videotaped records, which show African American customers consistently engaging in a relatively high degree of sociable, interpersonal interaction in service encounters.

The customer's parting comment, *Nice talking to you*, has no equivalent in Korean. The closest expression might be *suigo haseo*, which has a literal meaning close to 'Keep up the good work,' but is used to mean 'Thank you and goodbye'. Reference to work may serve as a more appropriate social currency ('Keep up the good work') than reference to talk ('Nice talking to you'), consistent with cultural ideals of relative taciturnity in service encounters.

This asymmetrical pattern of interaction occurs despite apparent attempts by both parties to accommodate to the perceived style or linguistic proficiency of the other. Both cashier and owner, for example, make repeated inquiries about the customer's trip to Chicago (*How long?; How's there.*) and the weather there (*Is Chicago cold?; They have snowy season there*). Showing interest in one's interlocutor's interests is a basic form of involvement politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987:103), and one that is absent in the encounters between immigrant Koreans that do not involve intimate friends or children. The cashier and owner are adopting a relatively involved style. The customer also appears to adapt his speech behavior to his interlocutors, in this case for non-native speakers. He explains and repeats his assessments after they draw no second-assessment of agreement (*I've known it to snow on Easter Sunday . . . Alright this Sunday it'll be Easter . . . I've seen it snow Easter Sunday*); and he shifts to a slow and enunciated register to explain the seasonal weather of Chicago (*back there it's a seasonal change, you got fall, winter, spring*). Thus both parties accommodate to the other, narrowing differences in communication patterns; but the accommodation is not necessarily of the type or degree that can be appreciated by the other, to result in a more synchronous, symmetrical interaction.

### *Encounter 2*

This second encounter of a Korean immigrant shop-owner and cashier with an African American customer is much longer, lasting about 7 minutes, with distinct episodes – including two instances when the customer moves to the exit as if to leave, and then returns to re-initiate conversation. Five excerpts from the encounter are presented and discussed.

The customer's talk and communicative behavior are in sharp contrast to that of immigrant Korean customers. He not only engages in interactional practices that increase interpersonal involvement, e.g. talk of personal topics; he also explicitly states that he wants the storekeepers to know him, and he pledges extreme solidarity with them – e.g. he tells them to call him to their aid if their store is threatened in future "riots." His interaction with the storekeepers suggests that he has different ideas about the relationship between customers and storekeepers than do immigrant Koreans, and different ideas about the corresponding service encounter style.

This customer's explicit expressions of solidarity and intimacy with the storekeepers are matched with an interactional style that includes many of the characteristics – e.g. relatively high volume, volubility, and use of profanity – that

immigrant Korean retailers have characterized as disrespectful (Ella Stewart 1989, 1991, Bailey 1996). While this customer's interactional style is "emotionally intense, dynamic, and demonstrative" (Kochman 1981:106), relative to most of the African American customers at this Koreatown store, it shares many features with the style regularly observed in stores in low-income South Central Los Angeles.

The customer, a male in his 50s, has visited the store just once before, the previous night. He is accompanied by his nephew, who does not speak during the encounter. The customer is wearing a warm-up suit and has sunglasses resting on top of his head. His extreme expressions of co-membership with the storekeepers as he talks to them, along with the jerkiness of some of his arm motions, suggest that he may have been drinking. It is not uncommon for customers at mom-and-pop liquor stores to display signs of alcohol use when they are at the store. This customer's speech is not slurred, however, and he does not appear to be unsteady on his feet.

This new customer arrives at the store speaking to his nephew at relatively high volume. The encounter proceeds as a socially minimal service encounter until the African American customer, following the pattern described above, re-frames the activity by introducing a personal topic from outside the store context (his recent move to the area) and referring to his personal relationship with the cashier:

- ((Customer arrives talking to his companion, who is later identified as his nephew.))  
 Cust: ( ) thirty-seven years old (in this) ass  
 Cust: Motherfucker ((1.0))  
 Cash: Hi ((Customer approaches counter.)) ((.2))  
 Cust: How's it going partner? euh ((Cashier nods.)) ((1.0))  
 Cust: You got them little bottles?  
 Cash: (eh) ((Customer's gaze falls on the little bottles.)) ((3.5))  
 Cust: One seventy-fi:ve! ((Customer gazes at display of bottles.)) ((2.0))  
 Cust: You ain't got no bourbon? ((1.2))  
 Cash: No: we don't have bourbon ((1.0))  
 Cust: I'll get a beer then.  
 Cust: ((turns to nephew)) What would you like to drink? what do you want? ((Customer selects beverages and brings them to the cash register.)) ((7.5))  
 Cash: Two fifty ((Cashier rings up purchase and bags beer.)) ((4.5))  
 Cust: I just moved in the area. I talked to you the other day. You [remember me]?  
 Cash: [Oh yesterday ] last night  
 Cust: Yeah  
 Cash: [(O:h yeah ) ] ((Cashier smiles and nods.))  
 Cust: [Goddamn, shit] [then you don't- ]  
 Own: [new neighbor, huh?] ((Customer turns halfway to the side toward the owner.))  
 Cust: Then you don't know me  
 Cash: [(I know you ) ] ((Cashier gets change at register.))  
 Cust: [I want you to know] me so when I walk in here you'll know me. I smoke Winstons. Your son knows me  
 Cash: [Ye::ah]  
 Cust: [The yo]ung guy  
 Cash: There you go ((Cashier proffers change.))

Cust: [Okay then]

Cash: [Three four] five ten ((Cashier steps back from counter.))

The interaction with the storekeepers proceeds as a socially minimal service encounter until the customer volunteers personal information about himself (*I just moved in the area*) and raises the history of his relationship with the cashier (*I talked to you the other day. You remember me?*) Although the cashier shows that he remembers the customer (*Oh yesterday, last night*), the customer continues as if the cashier didn't know or remember him. The customer's *goddamn, shit . . . then you don't know me* is spoken at high volume, but with a smile, suggesting humor rather than anger.

Though the cashier acknowledges having seen the customer before, his turns are oriented toward completing the transaction. Except for the words *last night*, his acknowledgments of this customer's history with the store (*Oh yeah, I know you, Yeah*) are spoken in overlap with the customer's words, and only in response to the customer's assertions.

The customer does not acknowledge it when the cashier shows that he remembers him. Perhaps the recognition does not count when it requires prompting (*Then you don't know me*), but rather must be done immediately and spontaneously. The customer then explicitly states that he wants the cashier and the owner to know him (he moves his gaze back and forth between them): *I want you to know me so when I walk in here you'll know me. I smoke Winstons. Your son knows me.* This customer is concerned with the storekeepers "knowing" him: he wants them to know him now and on future store visits, and he finds it worth noting that one of the other employees (*your son*), already knows him.

Knowing a customer's habitual purchases and brand preferences (e.g. Winstons) is one way of "knowing" the customer, and storekeepers frequently ready a customer's cigarettes or liquor without being asked; minimally, this customer wants to be known in this way. Subsequent talk, however, suggests that "knowing" him will involve a more personal, intimate relationship, and one that involves specific types of talk and behavior.

The data presented here suggest that immigrant Korean retailers and African American customers have differing notions of what it means to "know" someone in a convenience store context, and differing ideas about the kinds of speech activities entailed by "knowing" someone in this context. Different ideas about what it means to know someone may apply not just to service encounters, as described above, but to any encounter between relative strangers. Thus M. Park (1979:82) suggests that, by Western standards, Koreans are restrained and impersonal with those who are not intimate friends or part of a known group:

The age-old cliché, "Koreans are the most courteous people in the East" is rather rightly applied only to inter-personal interaction among ingroups or hierarchical groups. Koreans tend to be [by Western standards] impolite or even rude when they interact with outgroups like outsiders or strangers. Everyone

outside the ingroup is likely to be treated with curiosity or caution or even a bit of suspicion . . .

It may be difficult for these storekeepers to extend what for them is an intimate communicative style to a relative stranger.

In America, many communicative activities – e.g. greetings, smiles, and small-talk – occur in interactions both with friends and with relative strangers. The communicative style extended to both strangers and friends relatively emphasizes the expression of casual solidarity and explicit recognition of personal details.

Personal treatment in American life includes use of the first name, recognition of biographical details and acknowledgements of specific acts, appearances, preferences and choices of the individual. Cultural models are given by salesmen and airline hostesses. Their pleasant smiles, feigned and innocuous invasions of privacy, “kidding” and swapping of personal experiences constitute stereotypes of personal behavior . . . Signs of friendship, the glad handshake, the ready smile, the slap on the back . . . have become part of the normal way of behavior. (Edward Stewart 1972:55, 58)

Everyday speech behavior among strangers in America includes practices that would be reserved for talk among relative intimates in Korea.

Such differing assumptions about appropriate communicative style in service encounters, and about the relationship between customer and server, may underlie the contrasting forms of participation in the encounter under consideration. When the customer states that he wants the storekeepers to know him, the cashier’s *Yeah* and subsequent *There you go*, as he hands back change, fail to engage the topic of knowing the customer. The cashier is reframing the activity as a business transaction, specifically the closing of the business negotiation component, and perhaps the entire encounter. The return and counting of change (*There you go; Three four five ten*) is used in many service encounters as a way of closing not only the business negotiation, but also the entire interaction.

The customer, however, does not treat this as the end of the encounter. Instead, he treats this as a time to discuss details of his life outside the store:

- Cust: And then I– I’ve got three months to be out here.  
 Cash: How’s [ here ] ((Cashier steps back from counter and gazes down.))  
 Cust: [I’m going] to school  
 Cash: How’s here  
 Cust: I’m going to– (.2) locksmith school  
 Cash: Oh really  
 Cust: Yeah. so after that– because I had a (.) knee operation ((Customer rolls up pant leg to show scars.)) ((4.2))  
 Cust: I had a total knee so my company is retiring my– old black ass at fifty-four ((Customer smiles and gazes at owner.)) ((.6))  
 Own: (mmh) ((Owner shakes his head laterally and gazes away from the customer.))  
 Cust: And they give me some money  
 Cash: Huh ((Cashier bares his teeth briefly in a smile.))

Cust: So I'm spending my money at your store on liquor heh heh heh heh hah hah hah hah hah  
 ((Customer laughs animatedly, turning toward the owner who does not smile, but who continues lateral headshakes as he takes a few steps to the side.))

Own: You still can work?

The business exchange has been completed, and the customer initiates discussion of a series of personal topics. He volunteers how long he will be in Los Angeles, what he is doing there, details of his medical history, and his current employment status. He goes so far as to roll up his pant-leg to show the scars from his knee replacement operation. He has said that he wants these storekeepers to "know" him, and he's giving them some of the information they need to know him. In doing so he is treating them as co-members of an intimate group, i.e. the circle of people who can see his knee scars, even though by some standards they are virtual strangers. The customer is treating the social distance between himself and the storekeepers as small; his interactional style increases involvement between him and the storekeepers.

The cashier's talk displays some interest in the interaction, e.g. his initial query *How's here* displays understanding of the customer's statement (*I've got three months to be out here*) and invites further comment. The customer, however, does not answer the question. The non-standard form *How's here* (for 'How do you like it here?') may not have been understood by the customer, and comprehension may have been further hindered by the cashier's non-verbal actions. During the first *How's here*, the cashier's arm is in front of his face, and his gaze is not on the customer; during the second, he's shifting his weight to lean on a counter to the side. The even intonation contour of *How's here* may also prevent the customer from realizing that a question is being asked. Even when a storekeeper expresses involvement in an interaction, his or her limited English proficiency may prevent the customer from understanding the expression of interest.

The customer concludes this introduction with a joke that stresses the humorous nature of his relationship with the liquor store owners: he is sharing the proceeds from his disability payments with them. His smile and laughter at this situation are an invitation to his audience to share in his laughter (Jefferson 1979). The store-owner and cashier fail to join in this laughter; the cashier displays a fleeting, stiff smile, and the owner none at all. Not only do cashier and owner fail to accept the invitation to laughter, but as in the previous encounter, the owner, through his subsequent question, **ACTIVELY DECLINES** the invitation to laughter. His question *You still can work?* is a serious pursuit of a topic that effectively counters the customer's pursuit of laughter. The question proves his comprehension of the customer's prior talk, but displays no affective alignment or solidarity with the customer's humor. Even though the store-owner can understand the referential content of the words, he does not participate in the interactional activity of laughing – the preferred response to the customer's laughter.

It is also, of course, possible that the owner is displaying a dispreferred response because he does NOT want to display alignment: perhaps he thinks that

people take advantage of social programs when they could support themselves through their own work – a sentiment voiced in interviews with immigrant Korean retailers in a variety of forms. This active declination to laugh, however, also occurs in my data during talk about morally less sensitive topics, e.g. the weather, with both African American and Korean customers; this suggests a pattern of declining invitations to laughter that is unrelated to personal opinions about the topic at hand.

In the next two minutes of talk and interaction (not transcribed here), the customer gets change for a five-dollar bill, and then explains to the owner that his former employer doesn't want him to work for fear that they would have to redo his knee operation if he resumed work. The customer takes his bag of purchases from the counter, and moves to the door as if to leave (the owner says *See ya*); but he stops in the doorway, then re-enters the store to resume talking. He discusses the exact amount of money he receives per month for his disability, compares it to the amount of money he made previously, and reiterates that if he goes to work now, his disability benefits will be cut off.

In the next segment, transcribed below, the customer explains that he is being re-trained for a new job. He begins to depart, and then once again returns from the threshold of the exit door to re-initiate talk:

- Cust: So I gotta get another trade. Just like if you get hurt in the liquor store business, you gotta go get another trade. So I gotta go get another trade. For them to pay me the money. So I'm gonna get another trade. But then like— after I get another trade they pay me (a sum) a lump sum of money? And I'm gonna do what I wanna do. ((.8))
- Cust: They only gonna give me about sixty or seventy thousand. ((1.4))
- Cust: Plus— my schooling— ((1.0))
- Cust: So— I got to take it easy for a little bit. ((Customer moves toward exit.))
- Cust: That's why I'm gonna buy enough of your liquor (so I can take it )
- Own: Alright, take care
- Cust: Okay ((Customer pauses in doorway.))

This segment is characterized by dramatically asymmetrical contributions to the interaction. Not only does the customer do most of the talking, but there is a noticeable absence of response to his statements. He gives up his turn at talk five times in this short segment, but receives a verbal response only once. The customer only gets verbal collaboration, in this segment, in leaving the store – which suggests that these storekeepers may be more proficient at closing interactions with customers than they are at sociable, personal discussion with them.

The lack of verbal response to the customer's talk is particularly noteworthy because he is making statements that invite easy responses. The fact that he's going to get a lump sum of money and *do what I wanna do* makes relevant such questions as: *How much are you going to get?* or *What are you going to do when you get the money?* The amount of money he's going to get (*sixty or seventy thousand*) similarly invites comment, e.g. *That's great*, or *That's a lot of money*, or again, *What are you going to do with it?* The customer's *Plus my schooling* invites questions about the details of the schooling, beyond the fact (stated ear-

lier) that it's locksmith school. The customer's reference to buying *enough of your liquor* also provides an opening for storekeeper recognition of his patronage, e.g. *We appreciate your business*. The silence of the storekeepers displays restraint, but not interest or involvement.

The immigrant Korean storekeepers' lack of overt response to the customer's talk forms a stark contrast with the African American pattern of call-and-response described above. Smitherman (1977: 108) emphasizes the importance of responding to a speaker, regardless of the form of the response: "all responses are 'correct'; the only 'incorrect' thing you can do is not respond at all." By this standard, the storekeepers' lack of response is inappropriate.

In the next segment, although the customer has once again moved to the door, and the owner has said goodbye, the customer re-enters the store and more talk follows. After learning the storekeepers' names, the customer invokes the events of April 1992. He tells the store-owners that he will come to their aid if they have problems in the future, and goes on to discuss his philosophy of race relations:

- Cust: What's your name? ((Customer re-enters store and approaches the owner.))  
 Own: Han Choi ((.6))  
 Cust: Han? ((Customer shakes hands with the owner.)) ((1.2))  
 Cust: What's your name? ((Customer shakes cashier's hand.))  
 Cash: Shin  
 Cust: Chin?  
 Cash: No, [Shin]  
 Cust: [Okay] (.) Shin?  
 Cash: Yeah  
 Own: What's yours (then)?  
 Cust: Larry  
 Own: Larry  
 Cust: I'm a gangsta from Chicago, Larry Smith. Anybody fuck with you, this black— I seen them riots and things. and they was fucking up with the Korean stores and the— and the what's his name stores? And I was in Vietnam and everything like that  
 Own: [(Our) neighbors friendly (here)]  
 Cust: [Well— (.) well let me ] tell you something— nobody fuck with your store, if I catch 'em making fuck with your store (.) you just ca:ll me: dow:n  
 Own: Alright  
 Cust: I'll fuck 'em up ((Customer reaches out and shakes the owner's hand; the owner's arm is limp and he is pulled off balance by the handshake.)) ((.8))  
 Cust: Because I believe in people not Koreans, not Blacks, not Whites, not this, I believe in people. ((.4))  
 Cust: Right there. ((Customer taps the owner on the chest twice, in rhythm with the two words *right there*))

The customer, who has created and emphasized solidarity with the storekeepers throughout their interaction, continues to reinforce his solidarity and co-membership with them. After learning their names and shaking their hands – an act of physical intimacy – he makes two explicit assertions of solidarity.

His initial assertion of solidarity is dramatic: he promises with high volume and affect that he will respond to their call for help, and "fuck up" anyone who is harming them or their store. He has seen the havoc of Los Angeles in April 1992 on TV; but he is a Vietnam veteran, so he has the capacity to deal with such



events. The storekeepers' enemies are his enemies; he and the storekeepers are co-members of an intimate group, a group whose members will risk harm to protect each other.

He reiterates this sentiment of solidarity by explaining his readiness to act on their behalf based on his personal philosophy: *Because I believe in people not Koreans, not Blacks, not Whites*. Social distance between him and these storekeepers is low; race is not a barrier. He emphasizes his intimacy with the storeowner by tapping him on the chest, once more making physical contact, and citing this specific storeowner as an example of the people in whom he has faith.

Following the segment transcribed above, there are two minutes of talk (not transcribed here) during which the customer discusses his beliefs about the basic sameness of people, regardless of race, and his criticisms of those who make society racist. The customer utters more than 10 words for each of the storeowner's words during this period. The service encounter comes to an end with the following turns:

((The customer speaks with high volume and animation, and sounds almost angry during these penultimate two turns. He is gesticulating so strongly that his sunglasses become dislodged from atop his head and he has to reposition them as he talks.))

Cust: Okay what I'm saying is (.) if you throw five kids (in the middle of the floor) and don't tell them what they are nothing like that they just grow up to be people ((.))

Cust: They don't even know (.) that they Black. they don't even know they Korean they don't know that they White they don't know this and that. It have to be an old person like you or me, George Washington and all these motherfuckers. Martin Luther King and all these motherfuckers.

((The customer has begun moving toward the exit. His vocal register shifts suddenly to one of low volume and affect for his final turn. He gazes first at the owner and then the cashier as he waves goodbye.))

Cust: Anyway— have a good day.

Own: Later ((Customer turns and exits.))

As this interaction progresses, the storekeepers become more and more reticent while the customer becomes more and more outspoken. Although the customer has dominated the talk throughout the interaction, his volume and affect level get higher as it progresses, and he holds the floor an ever higher proportion of the time. In the final two minutes of talk, the customer is literally following the owner from place to place in the store, leaning over the shorter man, and repeatedly touching him on the chest as he makes his points.

This asymmetry in participation occurs despite apparent efforts at accommodation by both customer and storekeepers. Thus the storekeepers ask more questions that display interest in the customer—*How's here; You still can work?*—than they ask of non-intimate adult Korean customers. The customer adapts his speech for non-natives, e.g. by using an example to explain his job retraining (*Just like if you get hurt in the liquor store business, you gotta go get another trade*); and he introduces a topic that might be of particular interest to them, e.g. Los Angeles civil unrest that could threaten their store. As in the first encounter, however, the mutual accommodation may not be of the degree or type that can be fully appreciated by the other party, or can result in more symmetrical participation in the encounter.

Mismatch in politeness orientations can have a self-reinforcing, spiraling effect that exaggerates differences in politeness style as interaction continues; this can exacerbate misunderstandings and mutual negative evaluations. The more this African American customer cheerfully talks and stresses his camaraderie with the store-owner, the more the retailer withdraws and declines involvement. This may be a more general phenomenon in interethnic communication. Borrowing a term from Bateson, 1972 Tannen (1981:138) concludes that speakers from backgrounds with contrasting linguistic practices frequently respond to each other in "complementary schismogenetic fashion"; i.e., "the verbal devices used by one group cause speakers of the other group to react by intensifying the opposing behavior, and vice versa."

Since, for many African-Americans the nature of good and respectful service encounter relations involves relatively great personal involvement, this customer may be redoubling his efforts to create solidarity as he encounters the retailers' increasing reticence. For the store-owner, the appropriate response to a customer's increasing intimacy may be the silence or avoidance that demonstrates restraint. In this instance, the pattern does not escalate out of control. The owner maintains a degree of engagement, although he appears uncomfortable at times; and the customer does not react as if he is being ignored, although his increasing affect as the interaction proceeds may well be related to the low level of response he gets from the storekeepers.

However, this self-escalating cycle may contribute to confrontations that have occurred elsewhere. Media and informant accounts of confrontations between retailers and African Americans often stress the seeming suddenness with which storekeepers, perceived to be inscrutably impassive, suddenly explode in anger at customers. As customers persist in behaviors that the retailer perceives as invasive, the storekeeper will remain silent; the customer will not know that he or she is doing something that the storekeeper finds inappropriate, and will increase the intensity of the involvement behaviors in reaction to the restraint of storekeepers. When the weight of the trespass against sensibilities becomes too grave, the store-owner will feel justified in lashing out (Kochman 1981:118, 1984:206). Conversely, the increasingly restrained behavior of store-owners, as customers express ever-greater friendliness, can lead to customer outbursts and accusations of storekeeper racism. Storekeepers report repeated instances in which customers have suddenly (and to the storekeepers, inexplicably) accused them of being racists.

#### CONCLUSION

Divergent practices for displaying respect in service encounter interaction are an ongoing cause of tension between immigrant Korean retailers and their African American customers. The two groups have different concepts of the relationship between customer and storekeeper, and different ideas about the speech activities that are appropriate in service encounters. The talk of immigrant Koreans focuses

almost exclusively on the business transaction at hand, while the talk of African American customers includes efforts toward more personal, sociable interaction.

The interactional patterns that are apparent in videotaped records are consistent with data that come from dozens of hours of observation in various stores, and from interviews with storeowners, customers, and consultants. The seeming avoidance of involvement on the part of immigrant Koreans is frequently seen by African Americans as the disdain and arrogance of racism. The relative stress on interpersonal involvement among African Americans in service encounters is typically perceived by immigrant Korean retailers as a sign of selfishness, interpersonal imposition, or poor breeding (Bailey 1996).

The focus of this article on miscommunication should not be taken to mean that immigrant Korean merchants and African American customers can never communicate effectively, or never have friendly relationships. The overwhelming majority of African American customers and immigrant Korean retailers that I observed get along, and relationships between retailers and regular customers (40–80% of the clientele at stores I visited) are often very positive. Retailers often know regular customers' family members and other details of their lives; and many retailers engage in friendly small-talk with such customers, even when limited English proficiency makes it difficult. This type of relationship, which often results only after longer contact, can change mutual perceptions, as described by an African American woman in her 50s:

I find that they shy away from you until you get to know them. Like this lady, the Korean store, I've been in the neighborhood for years and years, and she's friendly with everybody cause she knows everybody but when they don't know you, they're shy, and you think they're prejudice. They might be, but you just have to get to know them. They're nice people once you get to know them.

This article has focused on one source of interethnic tensions: miscommunication due to cultural and linguistic differences. Socio-historical conditions – e.g. social, economic, and racial inequality – are also clearly sources of tensions between African Americans and immigrant Korean storekeepers. Within a social and historical context, however, there are specific linguistic and cultural practices that can ameliorate or exacerbate tensions between groups. The goal of this essay has been to shed light on communicative processes that can lead to tensions between groups in face-to-face interaction, in the hope that understanding linguistic and cultural bases of differences in communication patterns can make these differences less inflammatory.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription conventions are as follows: Speakers are identified with an abbreviation in the far left column, e.g. "Cust" for "Customer," "Cash" for "Cashier," and "Own" for "Owner." A question mark in this column indicates that the speaker's identity is not clear to the transcriber. Descriptions of non-verbal activities are in double parentheses, e.g. ((Customer enters store.)) Note also the following:

- ((4.3)) Numbers in parentheses indicate the length of time in seconds during which there is no talk. Single parentheses are used for intra-turn silences, double parentheses for silences between turns.
- (.) A period in parentheses or double parentheses indicates a stretch of time, lasting no more than two-tenths of a second, during which there is no talk.
- :
- ? A colon indicates that the preceding sound was elongated in a marked pronunciation. A question mark indicates a marked rising pitch.
- .
- ( ) A period indicates a marked falling pitch. Parentheses that are empty indicate that something was said at that point, but it is not clear enough to transcribe. Parentheses around words indicate doubt about the accuracy of the transcribed material. A slash between words in parentheses indicates alternate possibilities.
- hhh *h*'s connected to a word indicate breathiness, usually associated with laughter.
- [ ] Brackets enclose those portions of utterances that are spoken in overlap with other talk. The overlapping portions of talk are placed immediately above or below each other on the page.
- !
- ,
- An exclamation point indicates an exclamatory tone. A comma indicates a marked continuing intonation in the sound(s) preceding the comma. Text that is underlined was pronounced with emphasis, i.e. some combination of higher volume, pitch, and greater vowel length.
- '
- A single apostrophe replaces a letter that was not pronounced, e.g. *col'* for *cold*, when the *d* is not pronounced. A hyphen or dash indicates that speech was suddenly cut-off during or after the preceding word.

Transcriptions of Korean data follow Martin et al. (1967:xv).

<sup>2</sup> This category includes practices that might seem to vary significantly in degree of intimacy; however, immigrant Koreans do not treat such distinctions as relevant in most encounters with immigrant Korean customers. As described in the section on encounters between immigrant Koreans, small-talk about the weather (for example) does not occur independently of, or more frequently than, talk of more personal matters.

<sup>3</sup> This is not meant to deny the role of racism in tensions between African Americans and immigrant Korean retailers. Racism permeates American society; and it provides a cogent explanation for a wide variety of historical, social, and economic phenomena, including behavior in face-to-face interaction. Quotes from store-owners interviewed in other studies (e.g. Ella Stewart 1989, K. Park 1995), attest the blatant racism of some storekeepers. The point here is not that immigrant Korean merchants are or are not racist, but rather that many immigrant Korean interactional practices upon which African American customers base assumptions of racism are not valid indices of racism, because retailers use identical practices with immigrant Korean customers.

<sup>4</sup> The difficulty of mastering English for adult speakers of Korean is suggested by the grammatical interference evident in the following utterance by a storekeeper who had been in Los Angeles over 20 years. When asked where her husband was, she replied: *Husband some merchandise buy* (i.e., 'My husband is buying some merchandise.') The subject-object-verb word order of Korean is used, rather than the subject-verb-object word order of English. The present tense form of *buy* is used, rather than present progressive; this parallels Korean usage, in which the present tense form of action verbs can indicate present progressive meaning. The possessive pronoun *my* is elided, since it would be understood from context in Korean (Lee 1989:90).

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