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How culture affects the use of language to self-disclose positive information

Research paper

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Running head: Culture and language use

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Abstract

This study investigated how culture affects language use in communicating one's good performance. Participants from Estonia (N = 113), China (N = 119), and America (N = 122) were included. We asked participants to imagine they took an exam with a close friend and received a very good score. Participants had to choose from the given lexical choices to describe their good performance to a third person, with the close friend's presence (present vs. absent) and score (good vs. bad) being manipulated. We found that across all cultures, people used a weaker term to describe their good performance when their friend's score was bad, and this effect was more prominent when the friend was present. We did not find a significant additional effect of culture. Potential reasons like modesty were discussed.

Keywords: language use, face, culture, modesty

Kuidas kultuur mõjutab keelekasutust iseendast positiivse informatsiooni avalikustamisel**Kokkuvõte**

Käesolev uurimus vaatab, kuidas kultuur mõjutab keelekasutust hea soorituse kommunikatsiooniolukorras. Osalesid katseisikud Eestist (N = 113), Hiinast (N = 119), ja Ameerikast (N = 122). Palusime katseisikutel ette kujutada end eksamiolukorras koos hea sõbraga, kus nemad ise said väga hea tulemuse. Katseisikud pidid tegema valiku etteantud leksikaalsete valikute hulgast, et kirjeldada enda head sooritust kolmandale isikule, kus manipuleeriti sõbra kohalolu (sõber on vs. ei ole kohal) ning tulemust (hea vs. halb). Leidsime, et kultuurideüleselt kasutavad inimesed nõrgemat terminit, et kirjeldada enda tulemust, kui nende sõbra tulemus on halb, ning et see efekt võimendub kui sõber on ka kohapeal. Kultuuripoolset statistiliselt olulist lisamõju me ei leidnud. Arutaseime selle võimalikke põhjuseid, nt alandlikkus.

Märksõnad: keelekasutus, nägu, kultuur, alandlikkus

How culture affects the use of language to self-disclose positive information

Imagine you come from an exam that you completely failed. You feel down and embarrassed about your result. After the exam, you gather with your friends and are asked: “How did the exam go?” Answering to such a question can be quite a blow to your dignity and perceived worth in that social context, a blow to a concept of self that psychologists call “face” (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998). In that situation, you may try to lessen that negative effect on your face by saying to your friends: “I did quite okay actually,” employing a strategy that is known as “facework” (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998). After all, people often want to present their face in as good of a light as possible (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003), to save themselves from embarrassment (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998). A person’s cultural background, for example how individualistic or collectivistic their culture is (G. H. Hofstede et al., 2010) and how they see themselves in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), has shown to affect how people act in these face-threatening situations (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

While the relation between a person’s culture and how they try to save their own and even other people’s face has been a point of interest for scientists for some time (Lin & Yamaguchi, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Togans et al., 2021), less attention has been shown to the effect of facework on communication when a person’s own face is not but his or her friend’s face is threatened. In the present study, I will look at a situation where a person has gotten a good result in an exam, but his or her friend has not. In social situations where there is no possible negative effect on people’s own face, will they even think about face, and would they try to save the friend from embarrassment?

Cultural Dimension: Collectivism-Individualism & Self-Construal

Although the specific features of it have been matters of long debate (Realo, 2003), Collectivism-Individualism (C-I) has remained as one of the most important dimensions to measure and characterise different cultures. The figurehead of the C-I concept, Hofstede et al. (2010) has defined Collectivism and Individualism as follows:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (p. 92)

The features of cultural C-I are numerous and therefore the concept has a far-reaching effect. Some features that are more current in the present study are as follows. (1) Individuals in an individualistic culture take care of their immediate family and of themselves, while individuals in a collectivistic culture are loyal to the whole groups they belong to (G. H. Hofstede et al., 2010). Therefore, cultural C-I differs based on how big a person's circle of trust is. (2) There is also a divide between people's goals in differing C-I backgrounds. Individualists' goals are often personal and take importance over others' goals, while collectivists are willing to prioritise the goals of their group over their own (Realo, 2003). (3) Peoples' view of themselves differ by C-I. People in individualistic cultures view themselves as independent from others and unique, while people in collectivistic cultures feel integrated into their groups (G. H. Hofstede et al., 2010).

Another feature that Cultural C-I has been shown to predict is a person's self-construal, i.e., the way people perceive themselves in relation to others, especially when looking at how connected or separate their self-perception is from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individualistic cultures are often associated with an independent self-construal, while collectivistic cultures are connected with an interdependent self-construal (Singelis & Brown, 1995). Therefore, the view of independent self-construal believes in the uniqueness of every person and that they can be defined only through their own attributes, actions and distinct expressions, while on the other hand, interdependent self-construal views a person and their view of self as intertwined with others and the social context they are in (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

We can understand the difference between those two self-construals in how people would reveal information about themselves and others. When asking a person with an independent self-construal what helped them achieve their good grade, they might refer to their personal attributes or abilities (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), like "I am very intelligent". Whereas a person with an

interdependent self in the same situation will attribute their success to a particular social relation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), for example: “I am a good student”. In an experiment conducted by Shweder and Bourne (1982), when asked to describe close acquaintances, people from an Indian ethnic group called Odia communicated differently compared to Americans. For the Odia people, when describing a close acquaintance, context and cases (e.g., “when herding the cows /.../”) seem to matter more whereas Americans heavily use adjectives and traits in descriptions, like “she is very reserved” (Shweder & Bourne, 1982). This is due to that people from India, a collectivistic country, tend to have an interdependent self-construal and see themselves and others in relation to the context they are in, whereas people from America, an independent country, tend to have an independent self-construal and see others through their individual traits (G. H. Hofstede et al., 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Culture and Face-focus

“Face” is an indigenous Chinese concept (Hu, 1944) and topical in most communicative situations. It refers to a person’s dignity or worth in a social context and can be used when discussing a person’s self-worth (self-face) or other-worth (other-face) in a social setting (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Face is most often timely in conflict-situations or where conflict is a future possibility. Face is also important in different uncertainty situations like conflict-management, embarrassment, negotiation or relationship-building (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998). We can save or challenge our own and others’ face with communicative behaviours: complimenting, politeness, embarrassment, apology, shaming, conflict behaviour, among others (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998). This ties in to a process that is called facework, wherein a person is compelled to act or answer in a way to influence the opinion of those around them (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998). In a school setting, when a student is asked after an exam, “how did it go,” they may report a high grade even when they failed the exam, in order to save their face from embarrassment.

As is written beforehand, people from different cultures can act, think and answer differently in similar situations (Realo & Allik, 1999; Shweder & Bourne, 1982). Based on their culture, people tend to act differently in situations related to face. When comparing individualists and collectivists, individualists tend to focus more on *self-face* while collectivists focus on *other-*

face (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998). The effect of C-I on face is direct in a modicum amount, but the effect is even more pronounced through the mediating factor of self-construal (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Interdependent self is strongly positively associated with other-face, while independent self is positively associated with self-face (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). As such, people with an interdependent self-construal will focus more on others in uncertainty situations while people with independent self-construal tend to focus more on themselves. When your friend has gotten a bad score on an exam, a person with an interdependent self-construal will focus on their friend's face and may even try to manage it if an uncertainty situation arises, whereas a person with an independent self-construal is often not focused on their friend's face and therefore won't try to manage it.

Language as a Tool to Manage Face

Face concerns affect our language use in multiple ways. When a future situation is face-threatening (e.g., a conflict may ensue) and people must choose how to describe the possible scenario, they choose to talk about the event in more uncertain terms (Holtgraves & Perdeu, 2016). This effect is intensified the more severe the face-threatening outcome is perceived to be (Holtgraves & Perdeu, 2016). If a friend might fail an exam and the consequence of it is that they will be expelled from the school, you will tell them that the possibility of failing is low, but if the consequence is lighter, like having to do the class again, you will most likely communicate a higher possibility of failing. In a way, people are more likely to try and "soften the blow" if its impact is larger (i.e., the situation is face-threatening to a person). Talking with uncertainty in this situation can be seen as an other-face focused action and might in that case be more evident in a collectivistic culture.

Despite the abundance of studies on the use of language to manage face, there are limitations. First, most linguistic studies of culture and the self have focused on negative effects like conflict-situations (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998) and face-threatening contexts (Bonneton et al., 2009; Holtgraves & Perdeu, 2016). Studies on the effects of positive contexts (i.e., face-enhancing or non-face-threatening situations) have been very limited. Secondly, most of earlier research has studied situations in a speaker-hearer communicative dyad (Bonneton et al., 2009; Holtgraves & Perdeu, 2016; Oetzel & Ting-

Toomey, 2003; Togans et al., 2021), whereas face in communication has not been researched enough in a communicative triad or more. How people communicate in a complex situation where more people are involved is worth exploring.

Estonian Culture

The question of Estonian culture's I-C has been a contentious one. Earlier studies have labelled Estonia as collectivistic based on the culture's high conservatism and low autonomy (Schwartz, 1994). Others have theorized that by some I-C factors, Estonia is individualistic, but other factors predict a collectivistic culture, therefore Estonia stands in between individualism and collectivism (Realo, 2003). In a study by Realo & Allik (1999), Estonians were found to be even less collectivistic than the American sample, which is generally regarded as the echelon for an individualistic country. While in a family setting, Americans and Estonians were similarly low on collectivism, while in a societal context and with peers, the Estonian culture was found to be less collectivistic than the American one (Realo & Allik, 1999). Of note is that C-I seems to not be a fixed value in a culture and can be subject to change (Realo, 2003). However, the mapping of cultural C-I of Estonia was mostly done in the 90s and early 00s. Estonia went through a big change in the early 90s, switching from being under the Soviet regime to a democratic republic. With such a drastic change in leadership, an effect on culture is bound to happen. There is value in remapping Estonia's cultural C-I to investigate the possible changes and effects in said research area.

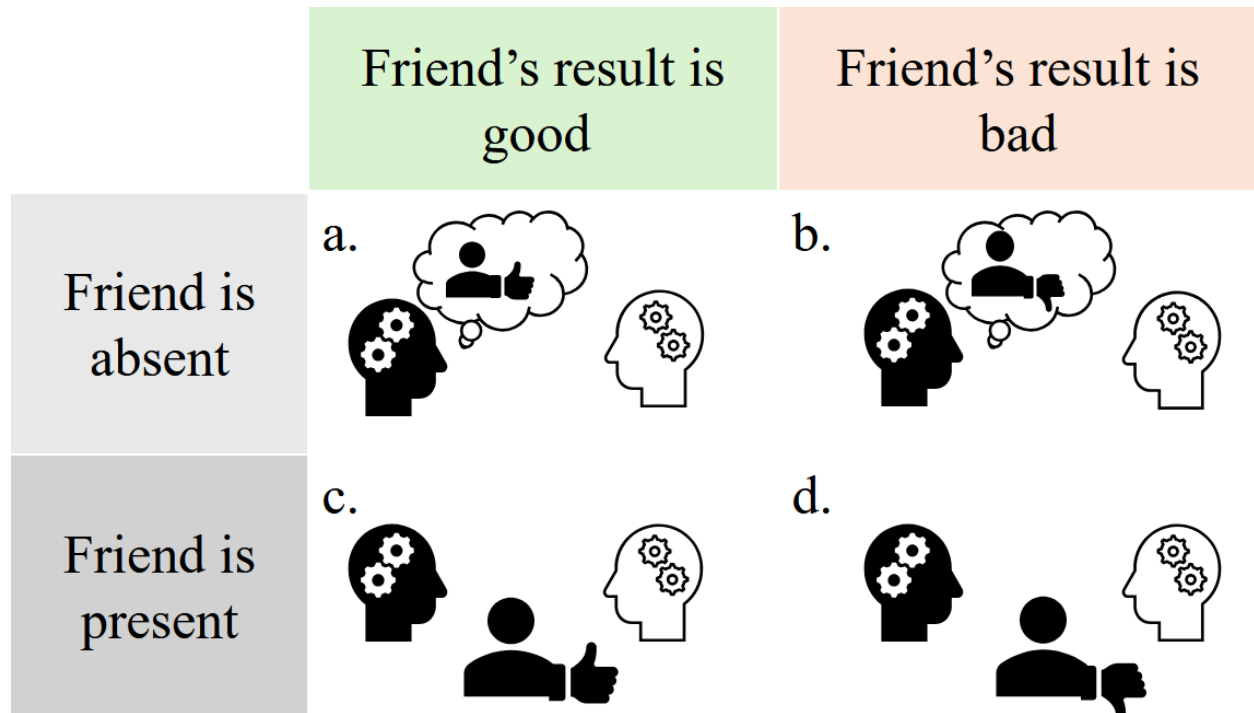
Tõugu et al. (2018) compared Estonian people's self-construal to German (considered to have more independent values) and Russian (more interdependent values) between generations. It was found that Estonians in two older generations, mothers and grandmothers, seem to have more independent values than Russians but less than Germans. Russian and Estonian adolescents valued independence the same amount (Tõugu et al., 2018). Regarding interdependent values, the Estonian mothers and adolescents showed similar results to German mothers and adolescents, both showing a lower score than the Russian mothers and adolescents (Tõugu et al., 2018). The Estonian grandmother's interdependent score was the lowest. Estonians' self-construal seems to fall somewhere between independence and interdependence, a similar result as some researchers

have gotten on Estonian culture's C-I. Still, studies on the Estonian culture and how it affects people's language are rather limited, especially through the mediating factor of face.

The Present Study

In the present study, we will investigate how culture affects language use through the mediating concept of face. We will examine how participants use language in different situations that affect face-focus and how their language choice is modulated by culture. We will ask participants to imagine they got an A from an exam and describe their performance by choosing from the given lexical choices: "*I failed*", "*very bad*", "*bad*", "*so-so*", "*ok*", "*good*", "*very good*", and "*excellent*". When asked "How did the exam go?" and knowing that the friend got a bad score, people might use a weaker term (e.g., "OK" instead of "Very good") to describe themselves because they will want to make their friend's bad score look not as bad. The effect might be especially strong when the friend is present versus when the friend is absent because the presence makes saving the friend's face more relevant and gives the participant higher motivation to do so. Also, because people from a collectivistic country tend to focus more on other-face, the motivation to save the friend's face might be higher for them, because they are more cognizant of other-face compared to a participant from an individualistic country.

Specifically, in the present study, we will compare Estonian culture with Chinese culture which is a collectivistic culture and American culture which is an individualistic culture. Within each culture, we will manipulate two aspects of the conversational situation to examine participants' face concerns (see Figure 1). Firstly, we will manipulate the presence or absence of a close friend of the speaker. Secondly, we will manipulate the friend's performance to be good (non-face-threatening) or bad (face-threatening). In other words, the current study will adopt a 2 (friend is present vs. friend is absent) by 2 (friend got a good result vs. friend got a bad result) by 3 design (Estonian culture vs. Chinese culture vs. American culture).

Figure 1*Design of the present study*

Note. The figure illustrates the 2 by 2 design within each culture; Dark head icon on the left = Participant, Light head icon on the right = Questioner, Dark person icon in the middle = Friend, Thumbs up icon = good result of Friend, Thumbs down icon = bad result of Friend.

We have the following three hypotheses. First (H1), we are expecting a main effect of friend's score, so that in the conditions a and c, where the friend gets a good score, the participant will choose a stronger term to describe their score than in conditions b and d, where the friend gets a lower score. The face of the friend is not threatened in conditions a and c, where the participant and the friend get a similarly good score. When the friend gets a bad score (i.e., conditions b and d), there is a need to consider and possibly save their face. Second (H2), we are expecting the effect of friend's score to be mediated by the friend's presence (i.e., score by presence interaction). When the friend is present, compared to when they are absent, there is a bigger chance that the participant will focus on the friend's face and try and save it. Therefore, we expect the effect of a participant using a weaker term to describe their score when the friend

has gotten a bad score to amplify when they are present (i.e., conditions c and d), but such an effect is smaller when the close friend is absent (i.e., conditions a and b). Thirdly (H3), and most importantly, we expect the face concerns about friends to be modulated by culture (i.e., score by presence by culture interaction). Because collectivists focus more on other-face and individualists focus more on self-face, we expect the difference between conditions a and c on the one hand (i.e., when friend got a good score) and conditions b and d on the other hand (i.e., when friend got a bad score) to be more pronounced with people from a collectivistic culture.

Method

Participants

A total of 374 participants from three different cultures took part in this study. We started with recruiting Estonian young participants born after 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed and Estonia regained its independence. The American and Chinese samples were then matched to the Estonian sample by demographics as much as possible. The demographic information of the participants from the three cultures is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic information of the study participants

	CHN (N = 119)	USA (N = 122)	EST (N = 113)
Mean age (yr)	22.286	24.926	22.097
Minimum age (yr)	17	18	18
Maximum age (yr)	32	32	34
Male participants (N)	41	40	14
Female participants (N)	76	80	95
Other gender (N)	2	2	4

Note. yr – years, N – number of participants

The Estonian sample consisted of students from the University of Tartu and the Estonian Academy of Arts (EKA). The American sample was collected using the online data collection platform Prolific (<https://www.prolific.com>), and the Chinese sample was collected by collaborators in Mainland China. For all participants, the questionnaire was presented through the University of Tartu LimeSurvey (<https://survey.ut.ee/index.php/>). Participants were provided informed consent forms and had to agree to the participation in the study and the processing of their data before starting the survey. They had the choice of leaving the study at any time by closing the browser and all their study-related data was anonymized in addition to no IP-addresses being collected.

Materials

All participants completed the survey in their native language. We first created the English version of the questionnaire based on the literature and then translated it into Estonian and Chinese. The Estonian and Chinese versions were translated back to English to ensure the quality of the translation. Given that the grading system differs among the three cultures, we used different scores that are the most culturally valid. In the English and Estonian versions, we adopted the A–F grading system, where A is usually considered a very good score and F failed; in the Chinese version, we adopted the 0–100 grading system, where 95 is usually considered a very good score and 55 a failed score.

The survey consisted of four parts. The first part was a vignette where participants were asked to imagine a situation where they got a very good score in an exam. To increase the believability of the vignette, participants were first asked to think of a best friend (not a romantic partner) and write down the friend's name. The name was referred to in the following vignette. The examples of the vignettes in each condition are shown in Appendix A, where [Name] refers to the friend's name written down by the participant. We adopted a between-subject design so that each participant was randomly assigned to one of the conditions.

After reading the vignette, participants were asked to choose from the given lexical choices to describe their own good performance. The lexical choices were: “*I failed*”, “*very bad*”, “*bad*”, “*so-so*”, “*ok*”, “*good*”, “*very good*”, and “*excellent*”. The lexical choices were presented in an ordinal scale format with “*I failed*” being the lowest and “*it was excellent*” being

the highest. After that, the participant was asked a question that taps into their motives in making the lexical choice: “Why did you choose the above answer?” Six motives were provided: “To be truthful”, “To show my competence”, “To be modest”, “I did not want to brag”, “To not hurt my friend’s feelings”, and “To change the topic”.

In part two of the questionnaire, we included three manipulation check questions to ensure our score manipulation was valid. Participants were asked what score would be a very good/medium-quality/very bad result and given a scale of “A, B, C, D, E, F” (or 50, 60, 70, 80, 90,100 in the Chinese version) to choose from.

The third part of the questionnaire measured the culture of the country the participant is from and their own self-construal. To measure C-I, we used Hofstede’s (2013) Values Survey Module’s four questions regarding the Individualism Index (IDV). To measure self-construal, we used a shortened version of Singelis’s (1994) Self-Construal Scale (SCS) with 10 items developed by D’Amico and Scrima (2016).

The fourth part of the questionnaire asked for the participant’s demographic information, which consisted of the participant’s gender, age, education, job status, current nationality, and nationality at birth (if different). The demographic information was based on Hofstede’s (2013) Values Survey Module.

Results

Data was analysed using the statistical analysis program JASP. 20 participants were excluded because they did not pass the attention check, resulting in a total of 354 participants included in the analysis.

Manipulation Check

Participants’ answers to the manipulation check questions are summarized in Table 2. Of all the participants, 98.9% perceived 90 (B) – 100 (A) as a very good score. 63.3% perceived 80 (C) as a medium-quality score. 94.6% perceived 50 (F) – 70 (D) as a very bad score. The results showed that participants perceived the grading system used in our materials (A–F in Estonian and English versions; 0–100 in the Chinese version) as expected. The scores of A/95 and E/55 in

our scenarios were indeed perceived as very good and very bad, respectively. We can say that our manipulation was valid.

Table 2

Participants' perception of a very good, medium-quality and very bad score (%)

	Very good score			Medium-quality score			Very bad score		
	EST	CHN	USA	EST	CHN	USA	EST	CHN	USA
A (100)	94.7%	50.4%	92.6%			3.3%			0.8%
B (90)	5.3%	47.1%	6.6%	25.7%	8.4%	42.6%		0.9%	0.8%
C (80)		2.5%	0.8%	68.1%	68.9%	53.3%	1.8%	2.5%	9.0%
D (70)				6.2%	22.7%	0.8%	21.2%	40.3%	38.5%
E (60)							31.9%	32.8%	2.5%
F (50)							45.1%	23.5%	48.4%

Note. Scores in bold fall under mean \pm 2SD

Lexical Choice

We treated participants' lexical choice as an interval numeric variable. The lowest lexical choice "*I failed*" was coded as 1 and the highest lexical choice "*it was excellent*" was coded as 8. We ran an analysis of variances (ANOVA) to test the three independent variables in our 2 (score) by 2 (presence) by 3 (culture) design (Table 3).

Table 3*ANOVA of the effects on the participant's lexical choice*

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2_p
Score	25.158	1	25.158	41.619	< .001***	0.108
Presence	1.131	1	1.131	1.872	0.172	0.005
Country	112.781	2	56.391	93.286	< .001***	0.353
Score * Presence	5.705	1	5.705	9.438	0.002**	0.027
Score * Country	5.284	2	2.642	4.371	0.013*	0.025
Presence * Country	1.437	2	0.718	1.188	0.306	0.007
Score * Presence * Country	0.968	2	0.484	0.800	0.450	0.005
Residuals	206.736	342	0.604			

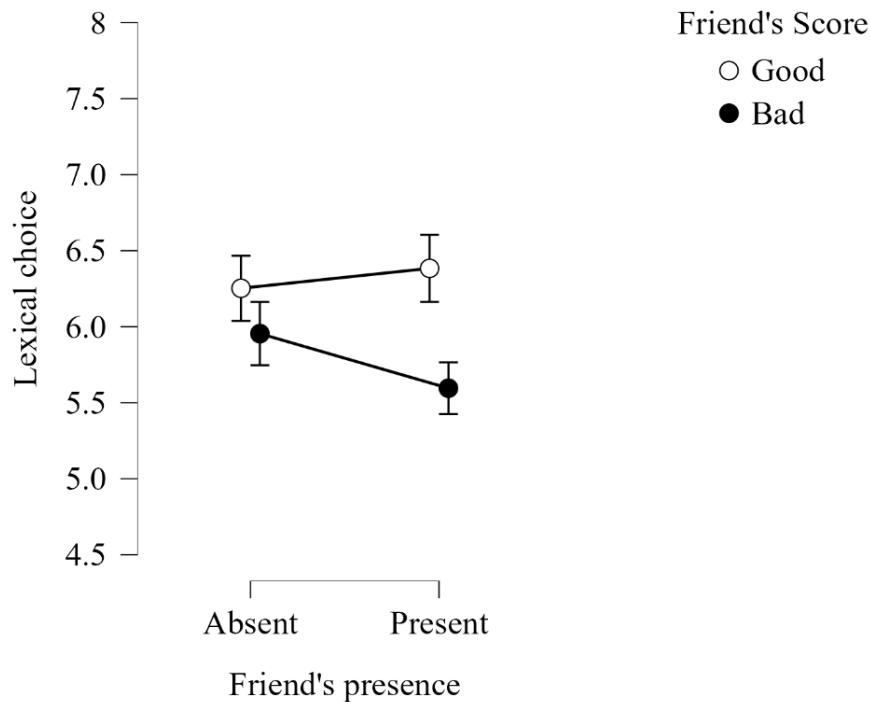
Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $.001 < p < .01$; * $.01 < p < .05$; η^2_p – partial eta squared; Score – Friend's score (good or bad); Presence – Friend's presence (present or not present); Country – Estonia, China or the USA

Firstly, we tested whether the friend's score affects the participant's lexical choice. The ANOVA results indicate that there is a significant difference between the condition where friend got a bad score and the condition where friend got a good score. The mean lexical choice for participants whose friend got a good score was 6.316, which is between “*it was good*” and “*it was very good*”, whereas for participants whose friend got a bad score, the mean lexical choice was 5.774, which is between “*it was ok*” and “*it was good*”. Participants tended to use a weaker term to describe their own good performance when their friend got a bad score. Based on this, we confirmed our first hypothesis.

The second hypothesis tested is whether the main effect of score is mediated by the friend's presence. ANOVA results show that there is a significant interaction between the friend's presence and score on the participant's lexical choice. Tukey post hoc tests show that when the friend has gotten a good score, there is a no significant difference between the lexical choice whether the friend is present or absent ($p = 0.624$); however, when the friend has gotten a bad score, there is a significant difference in what was communicated whether the friend is present or not ($p = 0.010$) (Figure 2). When the friend's score was good, participants' lexical choice did not differ regardless of whether the friend was present or absent (i.e., the white dots in Figure 2). When the friend's score was bad, participants significantly chose weaker terms to describe their good performance when the friend was present compared to when the friend was absent (i.e., the black dots in Figure 2). Based on this data, we can say that hypothesis 2 of the friend's score and presence interaction effect is confirmed.

Figure 2

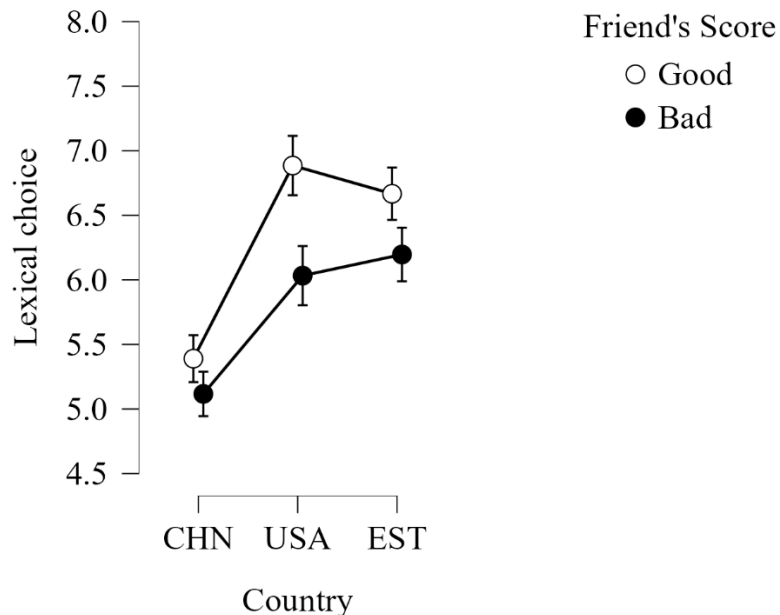
Descriptive ANOVA plot of the friend's presence by friend's score effect on lexical choice.



The last hypothesis tested is whether there is a score by presence by culture three-way interaction. ANOVA showed no significant three-way effect. There is only a significant two-way interaction between what score the friend got and what country the participant is from. These effects are demonstrated in Figure 3. In the American and Estonian samples, participants tended to lower their performance when their friend got a bad score compared to when they got a good score (Estonian: $p < .018$; American: $p < .001$). On the contrary, for the Chinese sample, the participant's lexical choice doesn't differ if the friend has gotten a good score or not ($p = .390$). Regardless of whether the friend got a good or bad score, the Chinese tended to use a very moderate term to describe their good performance. The mean lexical choice was 5.252, which is "it was ok". Based on this data, our third hypothesis, that there will be a country by score by presence effect, was not supported.

Figure 3

Descriptive ANOVA plot of the country by friend's score effect on lexical choice.



Motives

Following the score by country interaction in the lexical choice results, we checked participants' motives in making their lexical choices. Whereas the dominating motives of the lexical choice were the same across cultures when the friend's score was good, the motives differed across countries when the friend's score was bad (Table 4). When the participant's friend's score was good, the dominating motive in every culture was "To be truthful" followed by "I did not want to brag". When the friend's score was bad, the US sample made their lexical choice to "To be truthful," and "To be modest," and "Did not want to brag," and the Estonian sample made their lexical choice because they wanted "To be truthful" and they "Did not want to brag." Differently, in the Chinese sample, participants dominantly chose "To not hurt my friend's feelings" when the friend got a bad score.

Table 4

Motives of the participant's lexical choice split by the friend's score (n)

Motive	Friend's score is good			Friend's score is bad		
	EST	USA	CHN	EST	USA	CHN
To be truthful	34	32	22	20	24	12
To show my competence	3	2	5	2	1	1
To be modest	-	13	13	3	16	13
I did not want to brag	19	14	17	23	10	13
To not hurt my friend's feelings	-	1	5	8	8	25
To change the topic	1	-	2	-	-	3

Note. n – number of participants who chose the motivation. The dominant motives are highlighted in bold.

Cultural Dimension and Self-construal

Individualism was calculated based on the Values Survey Module manual (Hofstede & Minkov, 2013). The IDV in Hofstede's system gives a score of 0 to 100, where the number indicates the relative position of the countries compared. The individualism score of the Chinese group, at 11.17, is lower than the American score, at 36.44. A surprising result, however, is that the Estonian group has the highest individualism score, at 66.05.

The self-construal scores were calculated by averaging the independent items and the interdependent items, respectively, in the SCS we used, with a higher score meaning a stronger self-construal in independence or interdependence, respectively. A one-way ANOVA was run on the independent scores of the three countries and on the interdependent scores of the three countries, respectively. For the independent self-construal, the American sample scored 4.64, which is significantly higher than the Estonian (scored 3.961) and Chinese sample (scored 3.825) ($F(2,351) = 25.840, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .128$). There is no significant difference between the Estonian and Chinese group ($p = 0.514$). Regarding the interdependent self-construal, we find that the Chinese sample scores significantly lower in terms of interdependence than the Estonian and American one ($F(2,349) = 20.417, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .105$), and no significant difference between the American and Estonian sample occurs ($p = 0.790$). The Chinese sample scoring lowest in interdependence is not what we assumed. Since it has been reported that the interdependence scales tend to have a bit lower validity than the independence scales (D'Amico & Scrima, 2016; Singelis & Brown, 1995), we will not interpret the interdependent scores in the present study.

Discussion

This study investigated how people from different cultures communicate their good performance. Using an exam situation, we proposed that (H1) people use a weaker term to describe their good performance when their friend has gotten a bad score than when the friend gets a good score because people will make use of their language to save the friend's face. This hypothesis turned out to be supported. The second hypothesis (H2), that the presence of the friend amplifies the weakening of the lexical choice, was also supported by our findings. What

we did not find supporting evidence on, however, was the additional effect of culture on the score by presence design, as our third hypothesis (H3) was not met.

Face Concerns in Complex Communication Contexts (H1 and H2)

Our results support the theory that face is most timely in uncertainty situations (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998), such as embarrassment or interpersonal conflict. Previous studies have focused on how people use language to manage face when their own face is threatened or in a relatively simple situation (e.g., speaker-hearer dyad). What we found additionally is that facework persists even when one's own face is not directly threatened but a close friend's face is. When receiving a good score and being asked, "how did you yourself do in the exam," we still have the tendency to focus on the other's face (i.e., a close friend in our materials) if the exam is somehow related to the other person, although the question is not directly about that person. When the friend's exam score is as good as yours, there shouldn't be any basis for an uncertainty situation, therefore no need to save anyone's face. Whereas when your friend gets a worse exam score than you, the need to think about face and participate in facework arises. While focusing on the other's face, in this case the friend's face who got a bad score, you try to manage it to not cause embarrassment for the friend or to try and not to create any interpersonal conflict situations.

In addition, it seems that other-face-saving actions are affected by whether the other is present or not. In the cases where the other's face is needed to be saved, i.e. when they get a bad score, people tend to exercise facework, in this case choose a weaker term for their own good score. This tendency is more prominent when the friend is present compared to when the friend is not. It might be because other-face is more relevant when they are present at uncertainty situations, whereas when they are not present, other-face is not that relevant to the situation. Again, when the friend has gotten a good score, no difference in the lexical choice is reported whether the friend is present or not, as no uncertainty situation has transpired and there is no need to save the other's face.

Cross-Cultural Differences in Language Use (H3)

Our hypothesis was that participants from a collectivistic culture would be more concerned about the friend's face than participants from an individualistic culture and therefore,

we expect the difference between conditions a and c on the one hand (i.e., when friend got a good score) and conditions b and d on the other hand (i.e., when friend got a bad score) (see Figure 1) to be more pronounced with the Chinese sample than the American and Estonian samples. We found that Chinese participants always described their scores with a weak item, regardless of whether the friend got a good or bad score. The American and Estonian participants, on the other hand, showed a significant difference between when the friend got a bad score and when the friend got a good score, with a weaker lexical item being used for the former.

It is interesting to find that the Chinese participants, in general, tended to be modest and use a weaker term to describe their good performance, regardless of whether the friend got a good or a bad score. A widely used theory called the General Strategy of Politeness (GSP) divides the term “politeness” into two: (1) valuing the other favourably (heightening the other) and (2) valuing oneself unfavourably (lowering the self) (Leech, 1983, 2014). The modesty maxim in Leech (1983, 2014)’s theory proposes that people usually self-deprecate in order to be polite towards your co-communicators. If a person asks you “How did you do on your exam?”, it is often felt to be polite to reply with a modest term even if you did well, because it is socially expected to be modest. Using a praising term on oneself, i.e., self-enhancing oneself, on the other hand, can seem arrogant and a detriment to one’s personality (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It has been argued that modesty is deeply rooted and prevalent in Chinese culture. China has a culture that strongly relies on politeness, and it affects everyday communication in ways that is unique to politeness cultures (Gu, 1990). Although modesty is usually considered a universal phenomenon, it seems that the Chinese are more deeply bonded with it, as reflected in our results.

Unlike the Estonian and American samples, the Chinese tended to use a weak term to describe their good performance when the friend also got a good score. It may be possible that in the Chinese culture, when your friend has gotten a good score as you did, there is no need for you to say that you did very well. Participants will perceive the situation in relation to the others, thinking that the test might’ve been easy, and they are being “truthful” even when self-disclosing that they “did okay” in a test that they got a 95 on. When your friend has also gotten a 95 in the exam, you may see your equal score as average and nothing outstanding, so self-disclosing truthfully that you “did just okay” is relevant for you.

It is interesting that when looking at the motives behind participants' lexical choices, we found a stark difference between the Chinese sample and the American and Estonian samples, especially when the friend got a bad score. Although participants from all three cultures tended to use a weak term to describe their own good performance when the friend got a bad score, the language behaviour was motivated by different concerns. When the friend has gotten a bad score, Chinese participants choose to lower their performance because they do not want to "hurt their friend's feelings," thinking from a relational perspective. However, the motives among the American and Estonian samples were either "to be truthful" or that they "did not want to brag", which are both more from a "self" perspective. While choosing a word to describe their own performance in that situation, Chinese participants are motivated and affected by the others and trying to save the other's face. American and Estonian participants, on the contrary, perceived the situation from a self-perspective, which demonstrates an individualistic mindset.

Estonian Culture on the C-I Dimension

While China and America are stable in relation to each other in individualism and independence, we found the Estonian sample to be quite unstable in scoring. Estonia's individualism is considerably the highest, which does not match the results of Hofstede et al. (2010), but echoes the findings of Realo & Allik (1999), whose sample also consisted of students from the University of Tartu. This might point towards our limited sample (e.g., the gender is extremely unbalanced). To come to a stronger conclusion on Estonia's individualism, we must get a better representative sample of the country's population. Estonia scoring lower in terms of independence than a strongly independent country, in this case the US, was expected (Tõugu et al., 2018), but Estonia being as low in independence as China is surprising, as China is usually considered one of the lowest on that scale (Singelis & Brown, 1995). Again, the possibilities for these results could be the effects of our sample being a different age and generational group than earlier research, and that getting a conclusive answer on a term as large as self-construal might be difficult with our limited sample size.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study is the violation of some assumptions to run an ANOVA on the data, because we used a Likert scale to evaluate a participant's lexical choice. This may

negatively affect the validity of the collected data, which is something that we must be mindful of. Secondly, as mentioned beforehand, the Estonian sample may not be representative for the whole Estonian population of people born after 1991, especially regarding the gender unbalance. Lastly, because our study has many variables, we have 12 separate unique groups with 29-30 subjects in one group on average. Around 30 subjects per group are only a little more than the lowest number of subjects per group that we were aiming for. As in most studies, there could always be more research subjects to strengthen our study's validity and reliability.

In terms of future research, there is value in conducting similar studies with stronger statistical validity and assumptions. For example, finding a solution to measure a person's lexical choice in a way which gives ratio data, or with multiple Likert scale questions to calculate an average. Additionally, as most studies in this field have focused on negative and self-face-threatening situations, there is a need for more research that explores a myriad of different communication situations, a gap that the study at hand is trying to fill. In our everyday lives we are not only limited to negative situations, therefore the effect of face might persist even in positive conversational situations for the speaker, especially if this idea is supported by our present findings. Finally, a cross-generational study on the Estonian sample may be another valuable research topic. We currently only picked subjects from a specific age group, but especially in Estonia, there is a considerable cultural difference between generations (Tõugu et al., 2018). Investigating the differences between Estonia's generations in the context of this study could give us a better understanding of the hypotheses and data that did not meet our expectations.

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Appendix A

Vignettes of the survey

English:

a. Imagine you came from an exam where you got a stupendous A. You feel very happy and are excited about your achievement. Your best friend [Name] also got a stupendous A as you did. After the exam, [Name] leaves. A little later, a classmate from another course approaches you and asks you about your own performance, “How did it go?”

b. Imagine you came from an exam where you got a stupendous A. You feel very happy and are excited about your achievement. Your best friend, [Name], however, only got a very moderate E on the exam. After the exam, [Name] leaves. A little later, a classmate from another course approaches you and asks you about your own performance, “How did it go?”

c. Imagine you came from an exam where you got a stupendous A. You feel very happy and are excited about your achievement. Your best friend [Name] also got a stupendous A as you did. While you and your friend [Name] are standing together, a classmate from another course approaches you and asks you about your own performance, “How did it go?”

d. Imagine you came from an exam where you got a stupendous A. You feel very happy and are excited about your achievement. Your best friend, [Name], however, only got a very moderate E on the exam. While you and your friend [Name] are standing together, a classmate from another course approaches you and asks you about your own performance, “How did it go?”

Estonian:

a. Kujuta ette, et sa tulid eksamilt, kus sa said hämmastavalt hea hinde A. Sa tunned end väga õnnelikuna ja oled tulemuse üle elevil. Sinu parim sõber [Name] sai ka hindeks A, nagu sina. Pärast eksamit [Name] lahkub. Natukese aja pärast tuleb sinu juurde klassikaaslane teisest õppeainest ja küsib sinult sinu enda tulemuse kohta: “Kuidas läks?”

b. Kujuta ette, et sa tulid eksamilt, kus sa said hämmastavalt hea hinde A. Sa tunned end väga õnnelikuna ja oled tulemuse üle elevil. Samas sinu parim sõber [Name] sai eksamil väga

kesise hinde E. Pärast eksamit [Name] lahkub. Natukese aja pärast tuleb sinu juurde klassikaaslane teisest õppeainest ja küsib sinult sinu enda tulemuse kohta: “Kuidas läks?”

c. Kujuta ette, et sa tulid eksamilt, kus sa said hämmastavalt hea hinde A. Sa tunnend end väga õnnelikuna ja oled enda tulemuse üle eevil. Sinu parim sõber [Name] sai ka hindeks A, nagu sina. Samal ajal kui sina ja [Name] olete koos, tuleb teie juurde klassikaaslane teisest õppeainest ja küsib sinult sinu enda tulemuse kohta: “Kuidas läks?”

d. Kujuta ette, et sa tulid eksamilt, kus sa said hämmastavalt hea hinde A. Sa tunnend end väga õnnelikuna ja oled enda tulemuse üle eevil. Samas sinu parim sõber [Name] sai eksamil väga kesise hinde E. Samal ajal kui sina ja [Name] olete koos, tuleb teie juurde klassikaaslane teisest õppeainest ja küsib sinult sinu enda tulemuse kohta: “Kuidas läks?”

Chinese:

a. 假设你刚参加完一个考试，满分 100 分，你考了非常高的 95 分，你对这个成绩非常满意，很开心，特别激动。你的好朋友[Name]跟你考得一样好，也是 95 分。考试结束后，你的好朋友[Name]有事先离开了。过了一会儿，隔壁班的一个同学来到你身边，问你：“你考得怎么样？”

b. 假设你刚参加完一个考试，满分 100 分，你考了非常高的 95 分，你对这个成绩非常满意，很开心，特别激动。然而你的好朋友[Name]分数很低，只考了 55 分。考试结束后，你的好朋友[Name]有事先离开了。过了一会儿，隔壁班的一个同学来到你身边，问你：“你考得怎么样？”

c. 假设你刚参加完一个考试，满分 100 分，你考了非常高的 95 分，你对这个成绩非常满意，很开心，特别激动。你的好朋友[Name]跟你考得一样好，也是 95 分。你跟好朋友[Name]正站在一起说话，隔壁班的一个同学来到你身边，问你：“你考得怎么样？”

d. 假设你刚参加完一个考试，满分 100 分，你考了非常高的 95 分，你对这个成绩非常满意，很开心，特别激动。然而你的好朋友[Name]分数很低，只有 55 分。你跟好朋友[Name]正站在一起说话，隔壁班的一个同学来到你身边，问你：“你考得怎么样？”

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