

Describing the social world: How is a person, a group, and a relationship described in the East and the West?

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Abstract

The cross-cultural research on person description has shown that Westerners are more likely to describe both the self and other by personality trait words than do East Asians. Although this finding has been interpreted as an indication of the Western emphasis on the individual person, it can also be interpreted as Westerners' preference for objectifying descriptions (preference for nouns and adjectives rather than verbs) of the social world. To provide a competitive test between these two interpretations, Koreans and Australians were asked to describe three types of social targets: person (self and friend), group (one's and friend's family), and relationship (one's and friend's relationship). English speakers used more objectifying descriptions than Korean speakers whether a self or other is described at the individual, interpersonal, or group level. Furthermore, objectifying language use could statistically account for the cultural difference in trait ascription to the individual. The results were discussed in terms of the role of language in cultural dynamics.

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How do people in different cultures describe the self and other? In nearly two decades of research, this has become a central question in the cross-cultural investigation of individualism and collectivism. Using open-ended descriptions of an individual person, the research has shown that Western person descriptions are more *trait based* and less *contextualized* than Asian person descriptions (for reviews, see Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Kashima, 2001). In their seminal study conducted in Bhubaneswar (Orissa), India, and Chicago, USA, Shweder and Bourne (1984) examined 17 Americans' and 70 Oriyans' descriptions of a person, and reported that the Americans described their acquaintances in dispositional terms by using traits (e.g., friendly) more than the Oriyans. They also reported that the Indian descriptions

more often accompanied contextual qualifications (e.g., "she brings cakes to my family *on festival days*"; p. 178, emphasis added) than the American ones. Similarly, examining self-descriptions of European Americans and Koreans, Rhee, Uleman, Lee, and Roman (1995) showed that Americans were more likely to use traits and less likely to use contextual qualifiers than Koreans. Similar trends were found in studies of person descriptions regardless of whether the self or other was described (e.g., Bochner, 1984; Cousins, 1989; Dhawan, Roseman, Naidu, Thapa, & Rettek, 1995; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991) though some researchers examined the underlying psychological meaning more closely than others (e.g., Miller, 1984, 1987). Semin, Gorts, Nandram, and Semin-Goossens (2002) made a similar observation in descriptions of emotion events.

This cultural difference has been interpreted as reflecting the Western individualism (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). The trait-based

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description of an individual without a contextual qualification implies an individualist conception of the person as a “distinctive whole ... set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background” (Geertz, 1984, p. 126). People from Western European cultural backgrounds (hereafter Westerners) highlight the individual as a focus of construal, while deemphasizing the social context in which the individual is embedded. This *individualism interpretation* emphasizes the level of analysis: it is the individual that is emphasized, implying that other social objects such as interpersonal relationships and groups may not. However, we contend that there is another *linguistic practices interpretation* in which the Western person descriptions are seen as a symptom of a general linguistic practice to objectify *any* social objects without contextual qualifications by extracting the focal point of construal (figure) from its context (background). Under this interpretation, anything in the social world other than individuals may also be objectified. To test between these interpretations, we examined Australian and Korean open-ended descriptions of the self and other at three levels of analysis, an individual, a relationship, and a group.

Language use and culture

Open-ended descriptions of the social world are linguistic communication. To develop our linguistic practice interpretation, let us take a closer look at some examples that are typical of the cultural difference, which we modified from Shweder and Bourne (1984):

- (1) Jane is friendly.
- (2) Jane brings cakes to my family on festival days.

In (1), the target is described by a personality trait, “friendly,” rather than by an action, “brings cakes,” without a contextual qualification present in (2) such as “to my family” and “on festival days.” The accepted individualism view typically interprets (1) as more individualistic than (2), suggesting that it is the individual person that is profiled, as opposed to her context. This interpretation focuses on the *level of analysis*: because the target is the individual, it is described in the way that highlights his or her disposition. By implication, it may suggest that if the target is not an individual, then, it is not described that way.

In contrast, our contention is that it can be interpreted as a difference in the prevalence of two linguistic practices: *objectifying* tendency to use adjectives and *decontextualizing* tendency not to include a contextual qualification. The linguistic practice interpretation, therefore, focuses on the use of different *linguistic forms*: the type of linguistic categories (e.g., adjectives rather than verbs) used in a description and the presence or

absence of a contextual qualification. However, we believe they are not a trivial issue of linguistic habits. Let us theorize psychological implications of these linguistic practices. First, the use of different linguistic categories such as adjectives as opposed to verbs invites different inferences about the target of a description, according to Semin and Fiedler’s (1988, 1991; Fiedler et al., 1989; Semin & Marsman, 1994) linguistic category model (LCM). When targets are described by adjectives rather than by state verbs (e.g., like, hate) or action verbs (e.g., hug, hit), they are seen to be more temporally enduring and contextually generalizable. So, a person who “is dishonest” is seen to have a more stable and general characteristic of dishonesty than a person who “told a lie.” Likewise, nouns too imply more stable and generalized characteristics than verbs (e.g., Gelman & Heyman, 1999) and even some adjectives (e.g., Gelman & Coley, 1990; Hall & Moore, 1997). For instance, calling a person a *liar* would imply at least as stable and general a character of dishonesty and moral corruption as calling him dishonest, if not more.

This can be understood from a cognitive linguistic viewpoint. According to Langacker (1987), each linguistic category implies a different construal of what it describes. Generally speaking, nouns and adjectives tend to describe a target in an *object-centered* manner, but verbs in a *process-centered* manner. A noun-based description of a person such as an *extrovert* would profile the person, thereby highlighting the object as a central focus of construal. An adjectival description such as a *friendly* person would profile both the person and the property of extroversion. Therefore, like noun-based descriptions, the central focus of construal is still on the object that the adjective describes. However, verb-based descriptions such as “brings cakes to my family” profile processes, so that the central focus is no longer on the object, but rather on the process of *doing*. In short, both nouns and adjectives highlight the object of a description, whereas verbs focus on the process in which the object is engaged. As such, object-centered nouns and adjectives *objectify* what they describe, but process-centered verbs tend to retain the information about the context which embeds what they describe.

If the linguistic practice to use adjectives and nouns objectifies what they describe, the provision of a contextual qualification contextualizes it. Therefore, the second linguistic practice of not using a contextual qualification further *decontextualizes* what is described. Indeed, some of the past studies can be interpreted as indicating a cultural difference in contextualizing or decontextualizing linguistic practice. Cross-cultural studies showed that, although Westerners use more personality traits for describing the self than Japanese, when asked to describe the self in specific contexts (e.g., home, school), the cultural difference was reduced (Leuers & Sonoda, 1996) or even reversed (Cousins, 1989). In other words, when a

target was contextualized, Japanese had no further need to contextualize a target, and therefore showed a less cultural difference in language use. In combination, the two linguistic practices, namely, the use of adjectives or nouns and the non-use of contextual qualifications, extract the target of a description by focusing on the object (objectification) and shedding the context (decontextualization).

We believe that the objectifying and decontextualizing linguistic practices are compatible with an analytical thought system (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001), in which the world is assumed to consist of discrete objects and their interactions; an object is assumed to have properties, and these properties determine its movements in the world. In contrast, an Eastern holistic thought system regards the entire field as a primary ontological existence, which shifts and turns dynamically. Here, the world is seen to be the unceasing process. Their claim is that East Asian and Western cultures differ in general cognitive style of holism and analyticism. If in fact the East–West cultural difference reflects different general cognitive styles and cultural ontologies as they say it does, Westerners may engage in objectifying and decontextualizing linguistic practices more than East Asians in general whether they are describing an individual, an interpersonal relationship, or a group. Consistent with this reasoning, East Asian children (Choi & Gopnik, 1995 on Korea; Tardif, 1996; Tardif, Gelman, & Xu, 1999 on China) tend to acquire verbs earlier than nouns in some cases, although Western children learn verbs later than nouns. This difference in language acquisition may reflect the differential prevalence of verbs in different cultural contexts.

Present study

To test between two interpretations of the Western tendency to describe individuals using traits without contextual qualifications when compared to East Asians, we conducted an experiment in which Australian and Korean participants described not only individuals, but also interpersonal relationships and groups. The individualism interpretation would predict that Australians are likely to describe the individual by using more adjectives and fewer contextual qualifications than Koreans, but this tendency may be absent for relationships or groups. Moreover, this interpretation may imply the reverse: if Koreans are more collectivist, emphasizing groups and interpersonal relationships more than Australians, then, Koreans may describe their family and relationship, using more adjectives and fewer contextual qualifications than Australians. However, the linguistic practice interpretation suggests that Australians would engage in objectifying and decontextualized linguistic practices more than Koreans regardless of levels of analysis, whether the target is an individual, a group, or a relationship. We coded for the use of linguistic categories and contextual qualifications, which are clearly

applicable to all three levels of analysis, enabling us to compare language use across the levels of analysis.

In addition, although researchers often explained the cultural difference in person descriptions for both the self and other in terms of self-construal, in the attribution literature (e.g., Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Maracek, 1973; see Watson, 1983 for a review), self and other perspectives have been said to differ in a fundamental way. To highlight a potential difference between self and other descriptions, we asked our participants to describe self and other at the three levels of analysis: oneself vs. a friend, a significant interpersonal relationship of one's own and a friend's, and one's own and a friend's family as the individual, interpersonal, and group levels, respectively. These targets were selected because both Koreans and Australians can provide well-informed and rich descriptions; any cultural differences identified are less likely attributable to differences in availability and accessibility of knowledge about the targets.

Finally, to investigate whether the cultural difference in personality trait ascription can be statistically explained by the cultural difference in linguistic practices, we also coded descriptions following Rhee et al. (1995). Most personality trait terms are adjectives; there is a real possibility that the cultural difference in personality trait ascription in person description is a byproduct of the tendency to use the objectifying linguistic practice. To investigate this possibility, we adopted Rhee et al.'s coding system, which is probably the most elaborate and sophisticated coding scheme to date, thus enabling us to test their finding's generality and also to examine the comparability of our theoretical analysis with the past research. Most of all, because their system provides an explicit coding for *trait* attributions, we could examine the relation between language use and trait attribution.

Method

Participants

Sixty Korean students (30 men and 30 women; age = 18.3) at Chung-Ang University, Seoul, and 60 Australian students (30 men and 30 women; age = 19.1) at La Trobe University, Melbourne, participated in this study. In each culture, participants were randomly assigned to three conditions (individual, group, and relationship). All Korean participants were Korean nationals who spoke Korean as the first language, and all Australian students were native speakers of English with a European cultural background.

Material

A modified Twenty Statement Test was constructed for this study. Instead of twenty statements, participants

were told to give up to 10 open-ended responses, and the prompt, “I am ...” was not provided to avoid a personal pronoun (Kashima, 2001). The Ten Statement Test was repeated once about the participant him or herself, and another time about his or her friend. The order was counterbalanced. Finally, the TST was done at three levels: individual, family, and interpersonal relationship. At the individual level, a participant was asked to make statements about him or herself, and also about his or her friend. At the family level, a participant described his or her own family, and his or her friend’s family. At the relationship level, one’s own relationship and a friend’s relationship were described. This amounted to a three-way factorial design with three levels (individual, group, and relationship), two targets (self vs. other), and two orders (self vs. other first). The target variable was a within-subject factor. The ratio of men and women were 50:50 in each condition.

Coding

Two native speakers of each language were trained on the coding schemes. They were blind to the hypotheses, and independently coded all responses. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion. All responses were codable in terms of the LCM. The inter-coder reliability was high (Korean = 88%; Australian = 91%). For each participant’s self and other descriptions, the proportions of noun phrases, adjectives, state verbs, and action verbs were computed. We collapsed across descriptive and interpretive action verbs because there were very few of either kind. The presence or absence of qualifications of a description was coded. The inter-coder reliability was very high for this (Korean = 98%; Australian = 99%). The proportions of statements with contextual qualifications were computed.

Responses for the individual level were coded by Rhee et al.’s (1995) scheme. It proved untenable for the other levels. For both samples, inter-coder reliability was acceptable (Korean = 85%; Australian = 89%). According to their scheme, traits, social identities, specific attributes, evaluations, physical descriptions, emotional states, and peripheral information can be differentiated (see Table 4 for examples) with further subcategories within each category. Each subcategory was designated as either abstract or specific, or autonomous or social. If a subcategory implies a characteristic invariant across contexts, it was deemed autonomous; if it implies a specific context, it was regarded as specific. An internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, actions, desires, preferences, and abilities were classified as autonomous, whereas a subcategory that refers to social context, other people, time, and place was regarded as social. We computed the proportions of abstract, specific, autonomous, and social statements in accordance with their scheme. For further details, see Rhee et al. (1995, p. 145).

Results

Linguistic practices

Fig. 1 displays the mean proportions for self and other descriptions at each of the three levels in both cultures. There is a clear cultural difference in use of linguistic categories. Australians use adjectives most, whereas Koreans use state verbs most. A series of *t* tests comparing Australians’ and Koreans’ use of linguistic categories (Table 1) confirms that, for all targets, Australians used more adjectives and fewer state verbs than Koreans. For noun phrases and action verbs, there was not as clear a cultural difference. Noun phrases were used more in Korea than in Australia for the individual self, group self, and group other; otherwise, there was no significant difference. Koreans used action verbs more than Australians only for the individual other.

The hypothesized cultural difference is based on the theoretical consideration that nouns and adjectives would indicate an object-centered construal, whereas verbs a process-centered construal. To bring out this theoretical contrast clearly, and also given the scarcity of noun phrases in Australia, adjectives in Korea, and action verbs in both samples, noun phrases and adjectives were combined to indicate the tendency for object-centered description; likewise, state and action verbs were combined to indicate the tendency for process-centered description. An *objectification index* was then computed by the following formula, $(NP + Adj) - (SV + AV)$, where NP, Adj, SV, and AV are the proportions of noun phrases, adjectives, state verbs, and action verbs. This indicates the degree of object centered as opposed to process-centered language use. Typically in LCM, the adjectives (and nouns), state verbs, interpretive action verbs, and descriptive action verbs are given the abstraction scores of 4 through 1, and weighted by the proportion of each linguistic category to yield the score of abstraction. However, the objectification index was chosen because it affords a clear theory-based interpretation. Nevertheless, the correlations between the objectification index and the traditional index were very high, .97 for both targets. Using the traditional index, all the significant main effects were replicated. Correlations between the objectification index and proportion of contextual qualifications (see Table 2) were significant but moderate in size, suggesting that these indices are not redundant.

Objectification: object- or process-centered descriptions

The objectification index was analyzed by an ANOVA with culture (Australia vs. Korea), gender (men vs. women), level (individual, group, and relationship), order (self first vs. other first), and target (self vs. other) as factors. Target was a within-subject variable. As expected, there was a culture main effect, $F(1, 96) = 117.09, p < .001$,

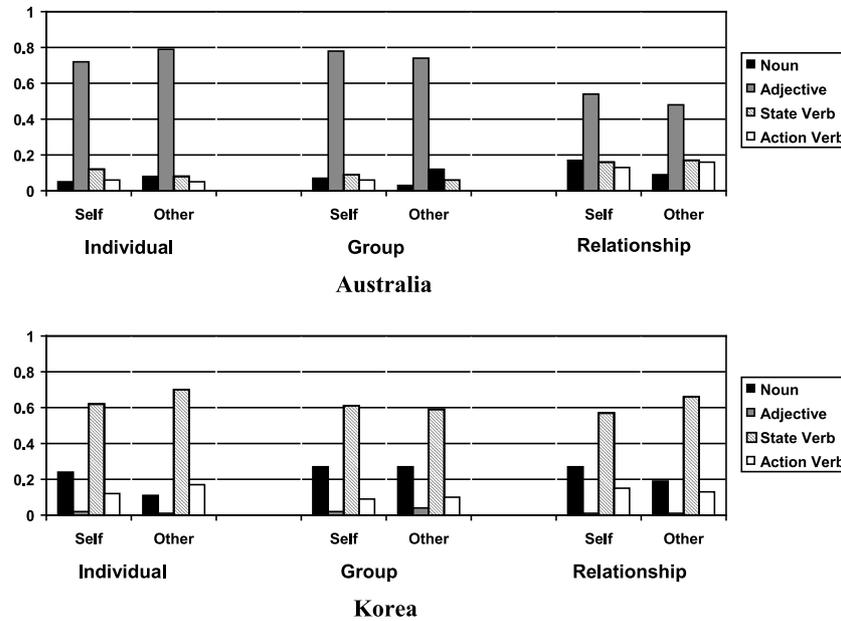


Fig. 1. Mean proportions of noun phrases, adjectives, state verbs, and action verbs in the descriptions of one’s own self, family, and relationship as well as a friend’s person, family, and relationship in Australia and Korea.

Table 1
t Values for Australian–Korean comparisons in use of adjective, noun, state verb, and action verb

	Target	Individual	Group	Relationship
Adjective	Self	10.37**	18.93**	6.93**
	Other	13.47**	10.33**	6.46**
Noun	Self	−2.24*	−2.28*	−1.00
	Other	−0.66	−2.83**	−1.17
State verb	Self	−5.92**	−6.15**	−4.34**
	Other	−9.84**	−5.54**	−6.00**
Action verb	Self	−1.71	−0.89	−0.26
	Other	−2.76**	−1.14	0.05

Note: Positive *t* values indicate that Australian means are greater than Korean means; negative *t* values indicate the reverse.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

Table 2
Correlations between the objectification index and the proportion of qualified statements for self and other

	Objectification		Qualification	
	Self	Other	Self	Other
Objectification				
Self		.63	−.50	−.30
Other	.47		−.47	−.54
Qualification				
Self	−.47	−.43		.33
Other	−.28	−.31	.33	

Note: All correlations were significant at least at .05; Australia above the diagonal, Korea below the diagonal.

$\eta^2 = .55$, with Australians more object-centered ($M = .54$) and Koreans more process-centered ($M = −.51$). A four-way interaction effect of culture, target, level, and order,

Wilks’s $\Lambda = .93$, $F(2,96) = 3.79$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$, suggested that Australians’ and Koreans’ descriptions differed as a function of target, level, and the order in which they described self and other.

To explore this, a level \times order \times target ANOVA was conducted separately for each sample. For Australians, two effects were reliable. First, a target main effect, $F(2,54) = 3.91$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .14$, showed that the individual and group were described in a more object-centered way than the relationship (Fig. 2). This may suggest that persons and groups are entities, but relationships are what transpires between entities and therefore less likely to be objectified. Second, a target \times order interaction was also significant, Wilks’s $\Lambda = .87$, $F(1,54) = 6.93$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .11$, suggesting that the first target tended to be more objectified than the next target. When the self was described first, it was more objectified ($M = .71$) than the other ($M = .49$), but this was reversed when the other was described first (M for self = .43; M for other = .55). For Koreans, a level effect was not signifi-

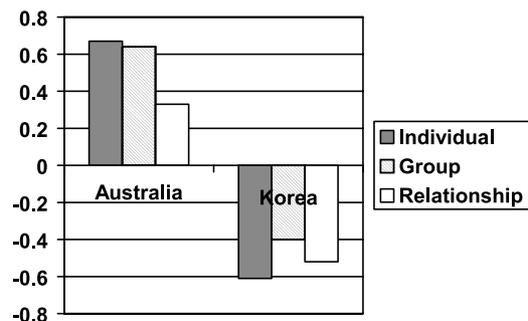


Fig. 2. Mean levels of objectification of individual, group, and relationship in Australia and Korea.

Table 3
Means of men's and women's levels of objectification for self and other descriptions at the individual, group, and relationship levels

	Men		Women	
	Self	Other	Self	Other
Individual	.18	.11	-.06	-.11
Group	.32	.32	-.03	-.11
Relationship	.29	-.13	-.14	-.23

cant (Fig. 2), and a reliable effect was only due to order, $F(1, 54) = 4.50$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$, where the descriptions were more process centered overall when the other was described first ($M = -.69$) than when the self was described first ($M = -.33$).

There was also a gender main effect on objectification, $F(1, 96) = 11.36$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .11$, with men more object-centered ($M = .18$) than women ($M = -.15$). No culture \times gender interaction effect was obtained. There was a three-way interaction due to gender, level, and target, Wilks's $\Lambda = .94$, $F(2, 96) = 3.22$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Generally, women described all targets at all levels in a process-centered way. By contrast, men's descriptions changed as a function of target and level. Men's descriptions were object centered in all cases except when they were describing their friend's relationship. It was only then that their description became process centered (i.e., the value was negative). Table 3 displays the relevant means.

Contextual qualification

The proportion of contextually qualified statements was analyzed by a culture \times gender \times level \times target \times order ANOVA. A main effect of gender was significant, $F(1, 96) = 6.16$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$, with women ($M = .48$) qualifying their statements more than men ($M = .35$). There was an interaction due to culture and target, Wilks's $\Lambda = .94$, $F(1, 96) = 5.94$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$. The relevant means are shown in Fig. 3. Koreans were more likely to qualify their descriptions about others than Australians, $t(118) = 2.93$, $p < .01$, but there was no difference for the description of the self, $t(118) = .27$. Finally,

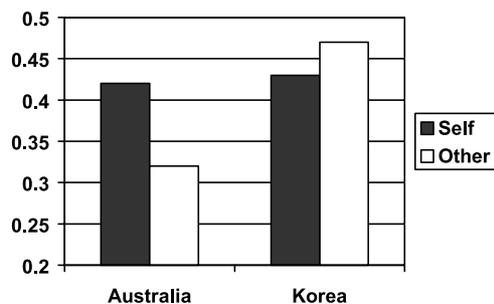


Fig. 3. Mean levels of qualification of self and other in Australia and Korea.

there was a target \times order interaction, Wilks's $\Lambda = .90$, $F(1, 96) = 10.43$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$. The self description ($M = .36$) was less qualified than the other description ($M = .43$) when the self was first described; however, the reverse was the case when the other was first described (M for self = .49; M for other = .38).

Person description

Average proportions of person description categories, namely, traits, social identities, specific attributes, evaluations, physical descriptions, emotional states, and peripheral information, were computed for the Korean and Australian samples. The present results were similar to Rhee et al.'s results as shown in Table 4. For instance, Rhee et al. found that European Americans listed greater proportions of traits and social identities than Koreans, but Koreans mentioned greater proportions of specific attributes and evaluations than European Americans. We found the same pattern although there were some minor differences, which may have obtained because only 10 statements were required in this study instead of the usual 20.

Because the proportions of traits, attributes, and evaluations were sufficiently greater than zero, they were analyzed by a culture (Australia vs. Korea) \times gender (men vs. women) \times target (self vs. other) \times order (self vs. other first) ANOVA. The relevant statistics are reported in Table 3. Consistent with Rhee et al.'s findings, Australians made a higher proportion of trait ascriptions than Koreans, $F(1, 32) = 76.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$, but Koreans included higher proportions of specific attributes (e.g., interests, aspirations, activities), $F(1, 32) = 20.93$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .40$, and evaluations (e.g., good in math, good listener), $F(1, 32) = 32.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .51$.

Table 4

Mean proportions of traits, social identities, specific attributes, evaluations, physical descriptions, emotional states, and peripheral information for Australia and Korea

Examples	Current study		Rhee et al. (1995)	
	A	K	U	K
Traits: kind, friendly	.71	.19	.35	.17
Social identities: student, woman, musician	.04	.01	.21	.16
Attributes: likes, wishes, activities	.11	.33	.09	.26
Evaluations: good in maths, good listener	.06	.21	.07	.17
Physical descriptions: short, age, near sighted	.04	.06	.07	.03
Emotional states: worried, in love	.01	.11	.07	.03
Peripheral information: tired, live at home	.00	.03	.03	.02

Note: A, Australia; K, Korea; and U, USA.

Table 5
Effects of culture when the preferences for object-centered descriptions were and were not controlled

	No control		Object-centered descriptions controlled	
	<i>F</i> (1, 32)	η^2	<i>F</i> (1, 30)	η^2
Traits	76.39**	.71	0.28	.01
Attributes	20.93**	.21	2.78	.09
Evaluations	32.67**	.51	2.51	.08
Abstractness	40.01**	.56	0.97	.03

** $p < .001$.

In addition, the tendency to make trait ascriptions was greater for the other person ($M = .49$) than for the self ($M = .41$), as indicated by a main effect of target, Wilks's $\Lambda = .89$, $F(1, 32) = 3.95$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .11$, consistent with the well known actor–observer difference in attribution (e.g., Nisbett et al., 1973; Watson, 1983). Conversely, the tendency to ascribe attributes such as interests was greater for the self ($M = .27$) than for the other ($M = .17$), Wilks's $\Lambda = .79$, $F(1, 32) = 8.76$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .21$.

Can the cultural difference in using traits, attributes, and evaluation be explained by the tendency to prefer object- or process-centered descriptions? To answer this question, an analysis of covariance was conducted for each of these variables using the same factors, while including the proportions of adjectives and noun phrases as covariates. For all these dependent variables, the covariates reduced the culture effects to non-significance (see Table 5), suggesting that the tendency to prefer object-centered descriptions explained the tendency to make trait attributions or evaluations.

Abstractness and autonomy

Table 6 reports the correlations among the proportions of abstract as opposed to specific and those of autonomous as opposed to social descriptions. They generally replicated Rhee et al.'s results for self; a similar pattern was observed for other descriptions as well. In Australia, as among European Americans, the abstract-

Table 6
Correlations between abstract, specific, autonomous, and social descriptions for self and other in Australia and Korea

	Self		Other	
	Abstract	Specific	Abstract	Specific
Australia				
Autonomous	.91**	-.58**	.84**	-.78**
Social	-.70**	.90**	-.78**	.83**
Korea				
Autonomous	.61**	-.02	.40	-.35
Social	-.49*	.46*	-.30	.42

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

specific dimension correlated with the autonomous–social dimension highly significantly to the point where the distinction between them seems meaningless. However, in Korea, the corresponding correlations were much weaker, suggesting that these dimensions have differentiated meanings in Korea. To examine whether the objectification index taps dimensions that are different from Rhee et al.'s measures of abstract-specific and autonomous–social, correlations were computed for Australians and Koreans (Table 7). Although the relevant correlations were moderate to high in Australia, the corresponding correlations in Korea were relatively small.

Furthermore, the proportions of abstract and specific descriptions were subjected to an ANOVA with dimension (abstract vs. specific), target (self vs. other), culture, gender, and order as factors. Again consistent with Rhee et al.'s results, this yielded a highly significant dimension \times culture interaction, Wilks's $\Lambda = .44$, $F(1, 32) = 40.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .56$, suggesting that Australians' self and other descriptions were more abstract and less specific than Koreans' (Australian abstraction = .63, Korean abstraction = .23, Australian specific = .33, Korean specific = .68). However, when an analysis of covariance was conducted with the same independent variables while including the proportions of nouns and adjectives for the self and other as covariates, the culture \times dimension interaction became non-significant (see Table 5). This implies that the cultural difference in abstractness in person description can be accounted for by the cultural difference in object-centered language use.

Interestingly, Rhee et al. found no cultural difference between European Americans and Koreans in the extent to which self-descriptions were autonomous or social. To see if this is the case with the present data, the proportions of autonomous and social descriptions for self and other were analyzed by an ANOVA with dimension (autonomous vs. social), target (self vs. other), culture, gender, and order as factors. We replicated their finding: there was no cultural difference in autonomous or social descriptions, Wilks's $\Lambda = .90$, $F(1, 32) = 3.71$, n.s., $\eta^2 = .10$.

Table 7
Correlations of objectification index with Rhee et al.'s indexes of abstract and autonomous descriptions in Australia and Korea

	Abstract	Concrete	Autonomous	Social
Australia				
Self	.72**	-.53*	.70**	-.52*
Other	.70**	-.58**	.67**	-.49*
Korea				
Self	-.37	-.22	-.56*	.09
Other	.16	-.43	.05	-.28

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The results are unambiguous. There is a global tendency to objectify and decontextualize among English speakers than Korean speakers regardless of levels of analysis. As predicted, whether a self or other was described at the individual, interpersonal, or group level, Australians tended to use object-centered descriptions, whereas Koreans tended to use process-centered descriptions. Australians were less likely to provide contextual qualifications than Koreans at least for other descriptions. Furthermore, the use of different linguistic forms could statistically account for the cultural difference in trait ascription in their descriptions of an individual person. When the proportions of linguistic forms were included as covariates, the critical effects of culture on person descriptions became non-significant, suggesting the mediating role of the linguistic practice. We also found a consistent gender effect: men are more decontextualizing than women in both cultures. Clearly, this gender effect requires further investigation in future research.

The present results challenge the accepted individualist interpretation of the cultural difference in person description. Westerners describe a person using traits because they adopt an individualist conception of the person, whereas Asians describe actions of a person because of their sociocentric conception of the person (Shweder & Bourne, 1984), interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), or collectivist conception of the self (Triandis, 1995). If the tendency to use a trait adjective is interpreted as an expression of an individualist cultural tendency broadly conceived, then, one would expect that the preference for traits should be found for describing an individual person, but not for describing interpersonal relationships and groups. However, the results show that Australians use more objectifying and decontextualizing descriptions than Koreans no matter what the level of analysis is, that is, whether it is an individual, a relationship, or a group.

These results also bear on the interpretive ambiguity currently present in the literature on culture and person description. As Kashima (2001) pointed out, some researchers interpret the cultural difference in person description as a reflection of cultural conceptions of the person (e.g., Shweder & Bourne, 1984), whereas others have interpreted it to have come from cultural differences in self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). In the former, person concept perspective, it is supposed that there is a general concept that is applicable to the self and others, which then affects both the self and other descriptions. In contrast, according to the latter, self-concept perspective, the self is assumed to be primary, and then the self-concept is hypothesized to influence the descriptions of other people as well. The present results seem to make this question rather moot. Instead, the results suggest that the significant process

that drives the cultural difference in person description is neither self nor person concept, but rather a domain-general tendency to use objectifying and decontextualized descriptions.

It is important to note that our claim here is neither linguistic determinism (strong Whorfian) nor cognitive determinism. Rather, we suggest that linguistic practices and cognitive style are mutually constitutive. The tendency to objectify using adjectives and the tendency not to contextualize by contextual qualifications may be regarded as two different linguistic devices to express or to invite an analytic or holistic construal of thought. Recall that the objectification and contextualization indices are only moderately correlated in our study, suggesting that they are not completely redundant though related. On the one hand, linguistic practices may be one of the factors that help to sustain the Western analyticism and East Asian holism. If adjectival descriptions of social targets tend to objectify them, and invite the inference on the part of the receivers of the communication that they are stable objects in the world, the receivers may chronically construe the social world in an object-centered manner. Conversely, if verb-based descriptions tend to invite the process-centered representations of the social world, this linguistic practice may lead to the activation of more holistic representations of the world. On the other hand, once acquired, analytical or holistic cultural ontologies may encourage people to use object-centered and process-centered descriptions of the social world with or without contextual qualifications just as the Indian adults' causal explanations in English are more dispositional than their American counterparts (e.g., Miller, 1984, 1987).

More generally, the present study joins a growing literature on language use in cultural processes (e.g., Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004; Kashima & Kashima, 1998, 2003; Krauss & Chiu, 1998; Lau et al., 2004; Masuda & Nisbett, 2001). Language provides the basic ingredients of much of the symbolic world that we humans construct. Language is without doubt a ubiquitous part of our everyday life. Just as Roger Brown's (1958) seminal question, "How shall a thing be called?" stimulated the development of the voluminous research on categories and conceptual structures, a slightly differently worded question "How shall the social world be described?" may point to a need for more research in the theoretical nexus of culture, language, and cognition. Clearly, a further expansion of the theoretical horizon is called for in the investigation of culture–mind relationship.

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