

# A comparative study of diminutives: Pragmatic expansion of Korean *com* ‘a little’ and Japanese *chotto* ‘a little’

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## 1 Introduction

The diminutive is a semantic category that includes any morphological devices that mean ‘small’. It is among the grammatical primitives, and therefore occurs universally, or near-universally (Jurafsky, 1996). Diminutives share similar pragmatic functions crosslinguistically; one of their most common functions is as a semantic or pragmatic hedge that softens the illocutionary force and increases the politeness of an utterance. However, they are also used for the contrary function of enhancing illocutionary force in certain situations. This study investigates speech data from multimedia and spoken corpora to explore the pragmatic functions of the Korean diminutive *com* ‘a little’ and the Japanese diminutive *chotto* ‘a little’. The study addresses three questions: (1) Do *com* and *chotto* share the universal tendencies characteristic of diminutives? (2) What are the similarities and differences between *com* and *chotto*? (3) Do they serve any pragmatic functions not yet observed in prior research?

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## 2 Pragmatic functions of *com* and *chotto*

As adverbs, *com* and *chotto* share the same syntactic category, as well as the same semantic meaning ‘a little’. In addition, both share the same pragmatic function as a politeness marker used to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs; Brown & Levinson, 1987). My datasets also show that the pragmatic functions of both *com* and *chotto* have expanded. They both serve the traditional politeness function, which is to reduce illocutionary force; at some point, they came to be used as fillers; finally, they now can both be used to increase illocutionary force. From the polite hedge to the filler to the intensifier, the propositional meaning ‘a little’ grows weaker.

### 2.1 Reduce Illocutionary Force

First, both *com* and *chotto* reduce the force of FTAs. For example, *com* is used, almost formulaically, before the verb *-cwuseyyo* ‘do so’ to make requests, like English *please*. It lessens the imposition by making the request sound less important, based on its propositional meaning ‘a little’, and thus raises the politeness level.

Another common way to lessen illocutionary force is omission of a performative verb (Sohn, 1999). Both *com* and *chotto* can be used as a sentence ending with the performative verb omitted, or even stand alone, suggesting the speaker’s polite hesitation to explicitly express other elements of the sentence. In Korean, *com* can be attached to the politeness marker *-yo*, which is usually a sentence ender.

Excerpt 1 is taken from a Korean drama, *Capayk* ‘Confession’, episode 15. In this scene, an assemblyman’s secretary requests the assemblyman to look at something on an iPad, which is bad news about the assemblyman. The potential threat to the assemblyman’s face in the secretary’s request is reduced by the secretary’s omission of the performative verb *pwa cwuseyyo* ‘please take a look’, and his use of the sentence-final *cwum*, which is a phonological variation of *com*.

#### Excerpt 1

- 1 → Secretary: ce, uywennim, ikes *cwum*  
 well assemblyman this *com*  
 ‘Well, Mr. Assemblyman, [please take a look] at this.’
- 2 Assemblyman: (looking at the iPad)
- 3 Secretary: neythicuntuli ppalun soktolo phenaluko issupnita.  
 ‘People are spreading it quickly on the internet.’

Excerpt 2 is from a Japanese drama, *Mukai No Bazuru Kazoku* ('Buzzing family across the street'; episode 5). It is a conversation between the manager of a store and a new employee Sakotaki Kun. The manager is asking if the employee is available that night. By using *chotto* as a sentence ending, the employee can politely decline without explicitly refusing. Both interlocutors understand that he is rejecting the manager's request.

### Excerpt 2

- |     |                |   |
|-----|----------------|---|
| 1   | Manager:       | otsukaresama.<br>'Good work.'   |
| 2   | Female employ: | o tsukare desu.<br>'Good work.'   |
| 3   | Manager:       | jā osakini<br>'Well, I'm leaving first.'  |
| 4   | Sakotaki Kun:  | a ano tenchō<br>'Well, excuse me, Mr. Manager,'   |
| 5   | Male employ:   | a sō da tenchō<br>'Oh, that's right, Mr. Manager,'  |
| 6   |                | sorosoro Sakotaki kun no kangeikai yan nai to<br>'We should hold Sakotaki Kun's welcome party sooner or later.' |
| 7   | Manager:       | a<br>'Right.'   |
| 8   | Female employ: | yarimashō yo!<br>'Let's do it.'   |
| 9   |                | watashi kon'ya demo ii desu yo<br>'I can make it even tonight.'   |
| 10  | Manager:       | kon'ya. dō?<br>tonight how<br>'How about tonight?'  |
| 11→ | Sakotaki Kun:  | a kon'ya wa <i>chotto</i> ...<br>well tonight Top <i>chotto</i><br>'Well, tonight is a little...'               |
| 12  |                | oreka tōi shi<br>home far and<br>'My home is far, too.'   |
| 13  | Manager:       | a so ka ja a mata kondo<br>'Oh, is that so? Well, next time then.'  |

## 2.2 Filler

Second, *com* and *chotto* function as fillers, “a category which contains words least loaded with semantic meaning” (Onodera, 2004). In my data, speakers frequently use *com* or *chotto* when there is no need to hedge, and no FTA to mitigate; for example, when searching for words. This function is more speaker-oriented than interactional.

Excerpt 3 is taken from a post on Facebook, where the speaker is describing a new product (a Pringles brand chip with a new flavor for the holiday season). In line 3, the speaker tries to think of an appropriate expression, beginning with *chotto* followed by *nanto iu ka* ‘what should I say’.

### Excerpt 3

- 1        tadaima “Puringuruzu” no horide- fure-ba- ga hatsubai shite  
           imasu.  
           now     Pringles            Lk holiday flavor    Sub release do exist  
           ‘The holiday flavor of "Pringles" is now on sale.’
- 2        daga shikashi, 2016 nen no horide- fure-ba- no rainnappu ga  
           but but            2016 year Lk holiday flavor    Lk line.up    Sub
- 3→     ***chotto, nanto iu ka***, daijōbuna no ka, to iu yōna kanji ga  
           shite imasu.  
           *chotto* what    say Q be.alright Lk Q QT say like    feeling Sub do  
           exist  
           ‘But, the 2016 Holiday Flavor line up is, how can I say, I feel like,  
           ‘is this ok?’’

Excerpt 4 is taken from a TV interview aired on YTN on November 25, 2018. It is about the popularity of baked goods made from rice. They interview a baker who bakes bread with rice flour. The baker uses *com* in conjunction with *mwela kulelkka* ‘what should I say’ in line # as he tries to find a word to describe what eating wheat flour does to the stomach.

### Excerpt 4

- 1        ppangul tusiko namyenun milkalwuhako talukey  
           ‘After customers eat this bread, unlike with wheat [bread]’
- 2→     mwela kulel-kka ***com*** sok-to            tepwulwukha-ci-to anh-ko  
           what say-Q     *com* stomach-also    be.bloated-NOM-even not-  
           and  
           ‘what should I say, your stomach doesn’t feel bloated and’

- 3 ssali kulayse manhi cehuycipun kokayktuli chacko issupnita."  
‘therefore rice bread is sold a lot in our bakery.’

Korean *com* has another function as a filler, which *chotto* does not share. In some situations *com* is used for filled pauses, which are “pauses (not words) that are filled with sound (not silence)” (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002, p. 75). They fill potential gaps with a semantically empty item that “occur[s] frequently in spontaneous speech” (Cook, 1971, p. 135). They are “usually idiosyncratic” (Fromkin, 1973, p. 42); individuals choose the item they use as well as whether and when to use it. In this function, *com* is syntactically free: it can occur anywhere in the utterance. In Japanese, other fillers such as *ano* ‘well, uh’, *nanka* ‘like’, *ma* ‘kind of’, *koo* ‘like this’, *uun* ‘uh, well’, and *ee(to)* ‘well, uh’ are used for this function (Philips, 1998).

Excerpt 5 is taken from the drama *Pinguy* (‘Possessed’; episode 4), where a man and a woman are talking about her bicycle. In explaining why she rides, she adds *com* to almost every prosodic unit, without any specific pragmatic intention. In my dataset, this type of *com* appears to be habitual for some speakers but not for others.

### Excerpt 5

- 1 Man: a wayn cacenke-y-a ike?  
oh what bicycle-be-INT this.thing  
‘Oh, what is this bicycle for?’
- 2→ Woman: a yocum **ccom** kkwumcali-ka **ccom** an coh-ase  
well recently *ccom* dream-NM *ccom* not be.good-  
because  
‘Well, because I have bad dreams recently’
- 3→ **com** swukmyen **com** chwiha-y po-lyekwu-yo.  
*com* deep.sleep *com* take-INF try-intending-POL  
‘I try to sleep deeply.’

### 2.3 Increase Illocutionary Force

Third, contrary to their hedging function, *com* and *chotto* have developed the function of increasing illocutionary force. This paradox occurs because *com* and *chotto* are often used in situations where a performative verb or negative connotation is omitted to lessen an FTA. As the frequency of such omissions increased, *com* and *chotto* eventually came to carry the meaning of imposition. Both *com* and *chotto* in this function can become a

sentence ending or can even stand alone. *Com* can co-occur with the politeness marker *-yo*. Other Japanese diminutives such as *sukoshi* ‘a little’, *yaya* ‘a little, somewhat’, *isasaka* ‘a little, somewhat’, and *tashō* ‘somewhat’ also can be used for these two contrary functions (Koike et al., 2002).

Excerpt 6 is taken from a Japanese drama *1 rittoru no namida* ‘A Litre of Tears’, episode 1. The younger sister (YS), Ako, is a middle-school student, and she is not happy that her parents always compare her with her older sister (OS), Aya. One day, YS wakes up late and gets upset because her OS didn’t wake her up. In line 5, the mother says *chotto*, which here means roughly ‘wait’, to stop YS from rushing off before eating properly. When her mother starts to compare YS with OS, YS gets more upset, eventually saying she wishes her OS didn’t exist (line 12). YS goes too far by saying such an extreme thing, and her mother tries to stop her, again saying *chotto* in Line 13.

### Excerpt 6

- 1       YS:       na nde okoshitekurenakatta no yo.  
                  ‘Why didn’t you wake me up?’
- 2       OS:       okoshita yo, nan do mo.  
                  ‘I did [try], many times.’
- 3       YS:       uso da yo.  
                  ‘That’s a lie.’
- 4       OS:       honto. demo zenzen oki nai n da mon.  
                  ‘I mean it. But you don’t wake up at all.’
- 5→   Mom:      **chotto**, chanto tabeteiki nasai yo.  
                  ‘Wait, eat well and then go.’
- 6       YS:       ā, mō ii.  
                  ‘Ah, enough.’
- 7       Mom:      nē, sukoshi amaesugi nan janai no?  
                  ‘Hey, aren’t you acting a little too spoiled?’
- 8                   o nēchan ga chū 2 no toki wa nexe,...  
                  ‘When your sister was a sophomore in middle school...’
- 9       YS:       dō se watashi wa o ne chanto chigatte dehisokonai no  
                  ochikobore desu yo.  
                  ‘Anyway, unlike Sister, I am a failed leftover.’
- 10      OS:       sugu sōiu koto iu !  
                  ‘You say such things right away!’
- 11      YS:       nani yo, itsumo itsumo ii ko butte.  
                  ‘What is it, always, always you pretend to be a nice kid.’

- 12            a ya ne nanka inakya yokatta no yo.  
               ‘Aya sister, such a person, it would be better if she  
               doesn’t exist.’
- 13→ Mom: **chotto**, ako!  
               ‘Stop, Ako!’
- 14        OS: na n na no yo, mō.  
               ‘What is it, I’m tired of it.’

Excerpt 7 is taken from the Korean drama *Sky Castle* (episode 1); in it, a doctor is trying to sleep and his wife is trying to wake him up. The husband persistently refuses. In lines 1, 2, and 4, *com* (or *ccom*, a phonological variation that adds even more force) functions to boost requesting speech acts. In line 1, *ccom* intensifies the explicit request to ‘wake up!’, but in line 2 and 4 the form stands alone and means ‘please stop trying to waking me up’. The utterances do not require explicit performative verbs because *com* or *ccom* already carries the meaning of imposition.

### Excerpt 7

- 1→Wife:            ilen-a, ilen-a, **ccom**!  
                       wake.up-INT    wake.up-INT *ccom*  
                       ‘Wake up, wake up, *ccom*!’
- 2→Husband:        a **ccom**...na ecey    swuswul tases ken-ina  
                       oh *ccom*    I yesterday surgery    five times-as.many.as  
                       ha-yss-ta-n    mal-i-ya.  
                       do-PST-DC-RN words-be-INT  
                       ‘oh *ccom*...I had as many as five surgeries.’
- 3    Wife:                            ilen-a!  
                       wake.up-INT  
                       ‘wake up!’
- 4→Husband:        **com**  
                       *com*  
                       ‘*com*’

## 3 Conclusion

The diminutive is a category that occurs across languages with similar pragmatic tendencies. This study focused on Korean *com* ‘a little’ and Japanese *chotto* ‘a little’. Both *com* and *chotto* share the universal tendencies of diminutives to function as a semantic or pragmatic hedge that softens the illocutionary force and increases the politeness of an utterance. They are also used for the contrary function of enhancing illocutionary force in

certain situations. They function as fillers as well. In addition, in my data, Korean *com* functions as a filled pause.

#### 4 Abbreviations used in Korean word-for-word translations

DC	Declarative sentence-type suffix
INF	Infinitive suffix
INT	Intimate speech level or suffix
NOM	Nominalizer
POL	Politeness speech level, suffix, or particle
PST	Past tense and perfect aspect suffix
RN	Relativizer suffix

#### Abbreviations used in Japanese word-for-word translations

Lk	Linking nominal
Q	Question marker
QT	Quotative marker
Sub	Subject marker
Top	Topic marker

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