On the Diachronic Change in the Distribution of the Korean Subject Honorific Suffix *(u)si*: from the Perspective of Generative Grammar

This study compares the distributional patterns of the subject honorific suffix *-(u)si* in Middle Korean and Modern Korean, and aims to account for its historical development from a generative-grammar perspective. I argue that the relevant change is best characterized not as a shift pertaining to *-(u)si* itself, but as a change triggered by the functional development of the adjacent suffix *-te*. In this respect, the present study aligns with earlier work (Choe 1988, 2015; Ahn & Lee 1990), while further claiming that this change is not a uniquely Korean phenomenon but rather one that is predicted from cross-linguistic considerations of the Universal Grammar.

Previous studies have noted that Middle Korean *-(u)si* follows the suffix *-te*, unlike in Modern Korean. It has long been proposed that this difference arises from a semantic change in *-te* (Ahn 1967; Lee 1973; Choe 1988, 1995/2015; Chu 1990; Ahn & Lee 1990). The semantic divergence between Middle and Modern Korean *-te* is further supported by recent studies analyzing Modern Korean *-te* as an evidential marker rather than an aspectual one (Park 2006; Song 2007; Park 2011; Lee 2020). Building on this line of research, I assume that *-te* functioned as an aspectual marker in Middle Korean but has developed into an evidential marker in Modern Korean.

Regarding the subject honorific *-(u)si*, there is ongoing discussion about what exactly is being honored in actual language use. Nonetheless, it is uncontroversial that when *-(u)si* is realized, the honorified element is located in the subject noun phrase. In this study, I analyze *-(u)si* as the morphological reflex of an agreement relation involving an honorific feature between the subject NP and the Agreement Phrase (AgrP). The AgrP hosting *-(u)si* establishes agreement with the subject in the specifier position of the higher Tense Phrase (TP).

Generative syntax has repeatedly shown that languages share a universally ordered clausal architecture (Cinque 1999, among others). In this framework, Middle Korean *-te* corresponds to an Aspect Phrase (AspP), whereas Modern Korean *-te* corresponds to an Evidential Phrase (EvidP). Cross-linguistically, EvidP is known to occupy a structural position higher than both TP and AspP. This naturally explains why the distribution found in Middle Korean no longer appears in Modern Korean: Korean is a head-final language, meaning that morphemes associated with higher syntactic projections surface further to the right in the verbal complex. Thus, when *-te* shifted from AspP (below AgrP) to EvidP (above AgrP), its surface position shifted from appearing to the left of *-(u)si* to appearing to its right.

The distributional change of *-(u)si* induced by the semantic and functional reanalysis of *-te* carries broader significance from the perspective of language universals. Cross-linguistic research shows that functional categories tend to move upward in the syntactic hierarchy over time (Roberts & Roussou 1993; Roberts 2022), and that such changes follow structurally universal pathways. The Korean development thus exemplifies a diachronic shift that accords with universally attested patterns of syntactic reorganization.