

Korean *what*-exclamatives and their implications

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While *what*-exclamatives have been extensively studied in other languages, it has been traditionally believed that Korean may not employ *what*-exclamatives. The present study, however, challenges the traditional view by proposing to treat *mwe(-l) {ku/i}lehkey* ‘what so’ clauses like (1B), (1B’), and (1B’’) as variants of Korean *what*-exclamatives.

(1) A: 존이 3억짜리 차를 샀대.

B: wa, mwe(-l) kulehkey pissan cha-lul sa-ss-e!
wow what-ACC so expensive car-ACC buy-PST-DECL
‘Wow, what an expensive car he bought!’

B’ wa, mwe(-l) kulehkey pissa!
wow what-ACC so expensive
‘Wow, how very expensive it is!’

B’’ wa, mwe(-l) kulehkey pissakey sa-ss-e!
wow what-ACC so expensively buy-PST-DECL
‘Wow, how very expensive it is!’

A: 그렇게 말야!

Close investigation of Korean *what*-exclamatives provides an unusually rich set of linguistic diagnostics that we can use to investigate cross-linguistic variation in *what*-exclamatives. For example, there is an ongoing debate in the literature about whether *what*-exclamatives denote sets of propositions (Zanuttini & Portner 2003) or degree properties (Rett 2011, Castroviejo 2021) and whether they count as assertions (Trotzke & Giannakidou 2021) or expressives (Rett 2011, Castroviejo 2021). This study presents fresh insights into the aforementioned issues by arguing that Korean *what*-exclamatives denote maximal degrees derived via a maximality operator *{ku/i}lehkey* ‘so’ and that they have assertive speech acts toward which the speaker expresses their evaluative stance. This view allows us to account for regular as well as idiosyncratic properties of Korean *what*-exclamatives.

References

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