

## Some Restrictions on Word Relationships in Korean

**Author:**

Shin, Seong-Chul

**Publication details:**

Perspectives on Korea  
pp. 402-410

**Publication Date:**

1998

**License:**

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/39433> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-04-24

# Some Restrictions on Word Relationships in Korean

Seong-Chul Shin

University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052. [s.shin@unsw.edu.au](mailto:s.shin@unsw.edu.au)

## 1. Introduction

It is possible for a form of a word to carry a meaning<sup>1</sup> when it is placed in an appropriate position within a sentence. This means that the relationships between words, generally called concord,<sup>2</sup> usually vary subject to the syntactic position of each word, even if two or more words represent the same meaning. Linguistic devices such as syntactic rules or a morphological analysis are unable to completely explain this semantic operation. This process involves an agreement relationship of meaning whereby each word must be placed in a certain position due to a number of restrictions (e.g. semantic, notional or socio-cultural) which require words to strictly differentiate their agreement to each other even in cases where the meaning is the same or similar.

In everyday situations, native speakers use their language without being aware of this process, but in a foreign language learning situation there are a number of occasions when learners of the language produce awkward expressions because of their failure to keep the right relationship between words. And it is often noticed that repeated practice in a certain grammatical system such as substitution or pattern drills do not pave the way for a high rate of success in producing expressions in the right relationship. In other words, learners' sufficient knowledge about the conceptual meaning of a word and grammatical rules to combine words do not satisfy their mastery of the foreign language. In addition to the knowledge, it is necessary for learners to have a complete understanding of complex semantic relationships as well as socio-cultural implications surrounding the relationships in order to acquire a high level of fluency and accuracy in

---

<sup>1</sup> This is one of the most controversial and ambiguous terms in linguistic theory. I shall take the term in its everyday sense—lexical and grammatical/structural meaning.

<sup>2</sup> There are some linguists who use the word "agreement" as a synonym for the term "concord". Some American linguists including Bloomfield use the word "congruence". *A Dictionary of Grammatical Terms in Linguistics* (R. L. Trask, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p. 54) defines concord as "the grammatical phenomenon by which the appearance of one item in a sentence in a particular form requires a second item which is grammatically linked with it to appear in a particular form...". *The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* (J. Richard, J. Platt and H. Weber, Longman, Harlow, 1985, P. 56) defines it as "a type of grammatical relationship between two or more elements in a sentence, in which both or all elements show a particular feature."

the foreign language (cf. Ch'on and Kim, 1994: 337-338).

As in other languages, Korean contains a large variety of words in complex concord relationships, which may be one of the characteristics of the language and needs particular attention in learning Korean as a foreign language. In fact, there are a number of occasions when learners of Korean, particularly Korean as a foreign language, make mistakes on account of their complete unawareness of or lack of skill in concord relationships between words in Korean. For instance, take these examples.

- (1) \* *Nu-ga yi yuri myŏlmang shik'yŏnni?*

Who destroyed this [window] glass?

- (2) \* *Pilm-e jongmar-i wassŏyo.*

(Lit.) The end came to the film.<sup>3</sup>

The above two examples may have nothing wrong with them grammatically, i.e. syntactically, but they are wrong semantically. These mistakes made by non-native speakers of Korean are brought about by discord or disagreement in the relationships between words. Concord between words, therefore, is important in not only the syntactical aspect but also in the semantic aspect, and in order to facilitate the learner achieving a high level of proficiency in the language, identifying the right concord between words in Korean should not be overlooked.

By examining some practical examples where learners make mistakes most often and/or that have a high potential for causing mismatch in their speech acts, this paper intends primarily to identify from the viewpoint of teaching and learning Korean as a foreign/second language some major restrictions in meaning which are followed to keep the right concord relationships between words. In this regard, this study aims to provide an understanding of the characteristic relationships between words in Korean, which will in turn minimize communicative errors which can be caused by mismatching words, and will thereby develop in students accurate and fluent communication skills in the Korean language.

The materials presented in this study, although limited, have been collected from various sources such as Korean course books and textbooks for foreign learners, Korean language learners' essays and composition, bilingual dictionaries and everyday language.

---

<sup>3</sup> It is not possible to identify exactly who said these sentences, but it appears that Sentence (1) was said by a Peace Corpsman working in Korea in the sixties who found a window pane broken in a junior high school classroom and Sentence (2) was created by a missionary who meant to say that his camera film had run out.

For other appropriate examples some previous studies in this area<sup>4</sup> have been referred to.

## 2. Semantic Restrictions in Word-Relationships

As in syntax, where there are a number of syntactic restrictions including so-called “co-occurrence restriction”<sup>5</sup> that are followed to maintain “co-occurrence relation” between syntactic features, so too there are at semantic and lexical levels some important restrictions that follow semantic concord relationships between words. It is therefore possible—and this in fact is occasionally noticed from students' writing and speech—that lack of knowledge about and familiarity with the semantic restrictions in Korean may lead learners of the language to make mistakes by matching as follows:

- (3) *Os-ŭl ssŏyo.* (or ...*shinŏyo*).  
Put [your] clothes on.
- (4) *Moja-rŭl ibŏyo.* (or ...*kkyŏyo*).  
Put [your] hat on.
- (5) *Changgab-ŭl shinŏyo.* (or ...*ibŏyo*).  
Put [your] gloves on.
- (6) *Shin-ŭl ibŏyo.* (or ...*ssŏyo*).  
Put [your] shoes on.

There are various categories of semantic restrictions. The above examples are controlled by one of those restriction factors; other word-relationships are affected by other categories of restrictions. For instance, sentences like the following:

- (7) *Haraboji-nŭn yŏlshi-e chayo.*  
Grandfather goes to bed [lit. plain form (PL) of “sleep”] at 10.
- (8) *Ŏje mŏri-rŭl peŏssŏyo.*  
[I] had my hair cut [lit. “cut down”, as a tree/finger] yesterday.

---

<sup>4</sup> About twenty years ago a handful of Korean linguistics started doing research in this area, but little progress has been made so far. In particular, viewed from the standpoint of teaching Korean as a foreign language, little or no results of a systematic study in this field have been produced. The examples given in the previous studies were, in principle, for Korean speakers and some of them are included in this article because of their potential applicability, especially to advanced-level students.

<sup>5</sup> “...any kind of limitation on the simultaneous occurrence in a syntactic structure of two elements, with reference either to their presence or absence or to their form.” R. L. Trask, *op.cit.*, p.63.

are unacceptable in concord relationships, irrespective of their concepts or grammatical domain. The verbs in (7) and (8) must be changed to *chumuseyo* (the honorific form of “sleep/go to bed”) and *kkakkassŏyo* (past tense form of “to cut” [hair]) in order to produce correct expressions to match one another. These correlations are not defined by syntactic restrictions but by semantic and non-linguistic restrictions of socio-cultural or customary nature.

After analysing and classifying some practical examples collected from various sources including the ones produced by learners of Korean, this study was able to identify five major restriction factors most likely to control the acceptability of word-relationships. These semantic restrictions will be discussed with some examples in the following five sections.

## 2. 1 Restriction in Usage of Words

It seems that one of the frequent errors produced by learners of Korean as a foreign language is due to insufficient understanding of the lexical meaning of an individual word or its usage in the sentence. In other words, learners of Korean tend to fail to produce an expression appropriate to a certain context, first, because of a failure to grasp the accurate lexical meaning of a word but, more importantly, also because of lack of knowledge about how it is properly used in their speech acts, i.e. how to properly match other constituents in the sentence. The cause of this mismatch is not likely to be learners’ lack of knowledge of a contrastive or opposite meaning of a word, but from their insufficient understanding of how an independent word relates to other lexical elements in the sentence. In the following examples, it is no wonder that native speakers of Korean would feel a certain degree of resistance one way or another.

- (9) \**Kim-sŏnsaengnim sŭngjin-ŭl ch’ihahamnida.*  
[I] congratulate [you] upon [your] promotion, Teacher Kim.
- (10) \**Murŭp sangch’ŏga pokku toeŏssŭmnida.*  
The wounded knee has been restored-[to its former condition].
- (11) \**Nae shigye-hago chŏnhyŏ ttok kat’ŭn got kat’ae.*  
It [your watch] looks perfectly/entirely like mine.

In the example sentence (9), it is understood that the word *ch’ihaha* (“to congratulate”) is only used when a superior or senior praises a subordinates or junior.

To honour a colleague or superior/senior, it is appropriate to use the word *ch'ukhaha* ("to congratulate"). The word *pokku* ("recovery/restoration") in example (10) can be used for rehabilitation work on railway and road, but to describe the healing of a wound on the body of a human and an animal, *hoebok* ("recovery") is considered the right word to use. And in example (11), the word *chŏnhyŏ* ("entirely") is only used when emphasizing the speaker's negative assertion, always accompanied by a negative verb ending. To emphasize a positive assertion, it is correct to use the word *aju* ("quite/entirely"). The use of a word here, therefore, is restricted by its relationship with other lexical constituents appearing both explicitly and implicitly in the speakers' sentence. A sentence controlled by this restriction can carry a sentential meaning only when a word satisfies its semantic features within the sentence.

## 2. 2 Restriction in Relative Meaning

A number of Korean vocabulary items carry a contrast in inclination of meaning, such as happiness and unhappiness or positive and negative (cf. Chon, Park *et al.* 1982: 201-203). Contrastive meanings of a word are often not clearly defined even in dictionaries so that even some native speakers of Korean may become confused when attempting to make a distinction between them. However, there is a restriction which controls relative meaning of words. The following examples show sentences that are semantically abnormal or unnatural due to the disagreement in meaning between words and the misunderstanding of the relative meanings of a word:

- *mae-u*, meaning "very" (positive), and *mopshi*, meaning "terribly" (negative)

(12) \**Kŭ soshik-ŭl tŭrŭni mopshi kippŏyo.*

I'm terribly happy to hear that news.

(13) ?*Kŭ soshik-ŭl tŭrŭni mae-u sŭlp'ŏyo.*

I'm very sad to hear that news.

Korean-English or English-Korean dictionaries usually define the words underlined in the above examples as items which contain the two opposite meanings within the same entry. In sentence (12), however, it is appropriate to use the word *mae-u* when something has turned out happily or something has been solved, while the word *mopshi* in sentence (13) is used when something has turned out unluckily or something remains wrong. Although these words and other vocabulary items of this sort can be interpreted as their opposites, this would only happen in an unusual or extreme context, when it

would be accepted as an exceptional situation. It may be possible that certain speakers use *mae-u* to express “negative” and *mopshi* to express “positive” as in English, but this is not likely for the majority of Korean speakers in normal contexts. In a usual context, therefore, sentences (12) and (13) would be rectified as follows:

(12)’ *Kŭ soshik-ŭl tŭrŭni mae-u kippŏyo.*

I’m very happy to hear that news.

(13)’ *Kŭ soshik-ŭl tŭrŭni mopshi sŭlp’ŏyo.*

I’m terribly sad to hear that news.

Two other pair words are shown below with their example sentences.

- *mach’im*, meaning “opportunistically” (fortunately), and *konggyoropkke*, meaning “unexpectedly” (unfortunately).

(14) \**Mach’im chinagadŏn ch’a-e ch’iŏssŏyo.*

Opportunistically, [he/she] was run over by a passing-by car.

(15) \**Konggyoropkke ch’inhan ch’in-gu hana-rŭl manassŏyo.*

Unexpectedly, [I] met one of my close friends.

(14)’ *Konggyoropkke chinagadŏn ch’a-e ch’iŏssŏyo.*

Unexpectedly [i.e., unfortunately] [he/she] was run over by a passing-by car.

(15)’ *Mach’im ch’inhan ch’in-gu hana-rŭl manassŏyo.*

Opportunistically [i.e., fortunately] [I] met one of my close friends.

Although this may not happen frequently in the learner’s language production in the early stage of language learning, it is highly possible to produce this type of inappropriate expression at advanced levels. This mismatch may arise partly because one word can carry opposite meanings and partly because the learner has a poor grip on the difference between Korean and English concepts of meaning.

### 2.3 Restriction in Pattern of Expression

This restriction involves unusual, characteristics and special features of the Korean language. In the following examples, the expressions in (16), (17) and (18) are all wrong in terms of their syntactic and semantic structures.

(16) *Mun tatikko tŭrŏwa.*

- [Lit.] Close the door and come in.
- (17) *Kkomjjak malgo son tŭrŏ.*  
[Lit.] Don't move and hands up.
- (18) *Bolp'en-i an naonda.*  
[Lit.] [My] ball point pen doesn't come out.

Strangely enough, however, these expressions have found general and natural acceptance with native speakers of Korean and are spoken by them in everyday situations without any hesitation. On the contrary, the expressions like those below, which are correct in syntactic relations, feel unnatural to Korean speaker, who resist speaking them:

- (16)' *Tŭrŏwasŏ mun tada.*  
[Lit] Come in and close the door.
- (17)' *Son tŭlgo kkomjjakma.*  
[Lit] Hands up and don't move.
- (18)' *Bolp'en-ŭi inkŭ-ga an naonda.*  
[Lit] My] ball point pen's ink isn't coming out.

It is understood that these expressions show urgency and intensity of a situation or an ease of utterance, without taking into account the concord relationships between the individual expressions themselves (cf. Kim 1979). Nevertheless, so long as we agree that a particular expression or language in general is composed on the basis of a social agreement between the speakers, we cannot but use an expression if it is used in the speech society without any rejection symptoms, even if that particular expression carries an illogical or irrational sentence structure. On this point, Chomsky (1965: 8) expressed a similar view when he maintained that while there are sentences that cannot be accepted in communication activities even though they are grammatical, there are many ungrammatical sentences that are smoothly accepted by the speech community.

## 2. 4 Restriction in Social Ethics

As in other languages, there are certain Korean words concerned with social ethics, taboos, customs or traditions practised in Korean society. Some expressions which may sound quite normal to non-Korean speakers may cause a sense of shame or give an unfavourable impression in Korean-speaking society. Native speakers of Korean are



thus subject to the restriction that they try to avoid using straight or direct words and instead replace them with indirect euphemistic expressions or loan words. Viewing this type of restriction as a matter of emotion and atmosphere, Ullmann (1974: 10-11) and Noh (1988: 85-86) claims this as the psychological reason for a change of a meaning. Below are some examples where the words given first are perfectly correct standard Korean, but where Korean people in general use indirect words as shown in the second sentence with an arrow:

- (19) *Kũ yŏja-nŭn chŏshi chagayo.*  
 The woman's breasts are small.  
 → *Kũ yŏja-nŭn kasŭmi chagayo.*  
 The woman's chest/bust is small.
- (20) *Kũ saram-ŭn pyŏngshin-i-e-yo.*  
 He is a maimed man.  
 → *Kũ saram-ŭn chang-ae-ja-yeyo.*  
 He is a disabled man.
- (21) *Ch'ŏnyŏndu-e kŏllyŏtta.*  
 [S/he] came down with smallpox.)  
 → *Mama-e kŏllyŏtta.*  
 [S/he] came down with smallpox.)

This feature is also found with English speakers with such topics as death and bodily functions, as well as unlucky numbers—4 in Korean, 13 in English. In fact, every culture has its taboos and its own social ethics, which are not restricted to verbal communication but are also found in nonverbal communication, e.g., finger gestures.

## 2. 5 Restriction in Honorific Phase

In Asian languages, the use of a particular vocabulary item is often restricted by the “high” and “low” relationship between speaker and hearer. As mentioned previously, Korean is a language which is “strongly class-conscious” (Chon, Park *et al.*, 1982: 204) so a variety of honorific words have developed that are used in the language as the following examples show, where the plain form of a word must be replaced with the respectful or humble form indicated with the long arrows:

- (22) \**Harabŏji, nai-ga ŏttŏk'e toeseyo?*

[Lit] What's your age [plain word], grandpa?

*nai* (plain form of "age") → *yŏnse* (honorific term for "age")

(23)? *Yi-paksanim, pot'ong myŏtshi-e chaseyo?*

Dr Lee, what time do you usually go to bed?

*cha* (plain form of verb stem "to sleep") → *chumushi* (honorific form of verb stem "to sleep")

(24)? *Yun-kyosunim, nae-ga haedo toegessumnikka?*

Professor Yun, would you mind if I do it?

*nae* (plain form of "I") → *che* (humble form of "I")

The restriction concerning respect words like this changes a concord relationship, as discussed before, according to such factors as the other party's age, social position, familiarity with his/her counterpart and emotion; the choice of vocabulary is also exclusive. This is one of the challenging tasks frequently faced by all learners of Korean and is perceived as one of the most difficult and probably most frequently questioned. The real challenge for learners is that these types of expression are many and varied and that many distinctions in honorific levels exist in Korean. While learners of Korean may not encounter many of these levels, it is reasonable to expect that they understand Korean honorific relationships and that they master a minimum of honorific levels.

### 3. Summary and Conclusion

After analysis of the data collected from various sources the restrictions in word usage by Korean speakers have been classified into five categories as follows: restrictions in individual word meaning; restrictions in relative meaning between word pairs; illogical expressions that are normally used by Korean native speakers; restrictions due to social taboos; and use of the honorific systems. These features of language usage are not unique to Korean but are also found in other languages, e.g. Japanese, some being present in English as well. Some of these features, however, are peculiar to Korean and are highly contextualized. Understanding these restrictions is particularly important if we expect learners to achieve a high level of accuracy and fluency since these features highlight not only a complexity of linguistic aspects but also socio-cultural understanding.

In the context of teaching and learning, some of the following implications should be considered: 1) including explanation of linguistic and cultural background of new

material in order to contrast it with learners' experience when necessary; 2) using audio-visual materials for effective acquisition of word relationships, e.g. words-connection cards, computer games; 3) giving practical examples of word-relationships when writing or editing teaching materials including course books and dictionaries for non-native speakers.

This study is limited to examining some of the key controlling features of the Korean language with particular focus on semantic meanings. The restrictions presented are not exhaustive and it is necessary to identify comprehensive features with more scientific data.

## References

- Chŏn, Chae-ho, Pyŏng-ch'ae Park *et al.* 1982. *Shin Kugŏhak Kaeron* (A New Introduction to Korean Linguistics), Hyongsolch'ulp'ansa, Seoul.
- Ch'ŏn, Shi-gwon and Chong-t'aek Kim 1994, *Kugŏ Ŭimiron* (Korean Semantics), Hyŏngsŏlch'ulp'ansa, Seoul.
- Chomsky, Noam 1965, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, MIT Press.
- Kim, Chong-t'aek 1979, "Lexical Restrictions and Syntactic Restrictions", *Studies on Korean Language Education* 10 (Kyŏngpuk University, Taegu).
- Klopf, Donald W. and Myong-Sok Park 1982, *Cross-Cultural Communication: An Introduction to the Fundamentals*, Hanshin Publishing Co., Seoul.
- Koyama, Tomoko 1992, *Japan: A Handbook in Intercultural Communication*, Macquarie University, Sydney.
- Noh, Tae-Gyu 1988, *A Study on Korean Semantics*, Kukhacharyowon, Seoul.
- Ullmann, S. 1974, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Yŏnhap News Agency 1994, *Korean Identity*, Yŏnhap News Agency, Seoul.