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Lost thoughts behind Korean words

According to Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity, thought and culture are influenced by language, and the story of the evolution of linguistic expression in man "is the story of man's linguistic development—of the long evolution of thousands of very different systems of discerning, selecting, organizing, and operating with relationships" (Whorf 1956: 84). Thus, by examining the roots of and the relationship among a group of words, we can gain a glimpse of the mind and the cultural thought pattern of speakers of a particular language, in this case, Korean.

Korean historical linguists have examined numerous native Korean words that are related through a common root and thus share common meanings. In this discussion, the words I present are connected by a concept of 'circularity' or 'cycle' in the pattern of life. Lee Nam-Duk (1985: II, 99-121) has investigated these words along with some possible correspondences from Japanese and found the root *sVl- for words conveying the process from life to death, which also carries the meaning of the 'cycle' (e.g., *sɨl-ta > sitɨl- 'to wilt'; *sɔl-ta > sa.ra.cita 'to disappear'). She also notes that it is likely that this root has developed from the root *tVl- (*tVl- > sVl-), which gave rise to verb stems like *tol-* 'to turn' and *tɨl-* 'to wind'.

Regarding the root *sal-* for 'to live', Jung Ho-Wan (1991) proposes an antecedent root *sarɨ-* meaning 'to burn to ashes', a change resulting from the process of losing the final vowel and the *r* being replaced by its allophonic variant *l* as *sVrV- > *sVl-*. The root *sal-* 'to live' has derivatives

including, *salm* 'life', *saram* 'human', *sal* 'flesh', and *hɨlk* 'earth/ash'. The word *hɨlk* 'dirt/earth' has

gone through a initial consonant sound change from *s > h*, which is a regular Korean sound change.

 Also, the consonant cluster *lk* in syllable-final position is in morphophonemic form, which is

different from its phonetic form, where either *l* or *k* may be dropped, depending on the

phonological environment (Sohn 1999: 171). Thus, the sound change from *sɨl* to *hɨl(k)* can be

explained.

According to Jung (1991), the word *saram* 'human', from the root *sal-* 'to live', ultimately

derives from the root *sarɨ* 'to burn to ashes'. This means that a 'human' is a 'living being' and 'a

being who burns to ashes'. It seems plausible that 'human' originally carried the transparent

definition, 'a being who burns to ashes', which conveyed the native's fundamental thought of what

it meant to be 'human'.   Millennia later, it became simply 'a living being', bequeathing everyone

the obscure task of finding out what it means to live for themselves.

The connection between the concepts 'to burn to ashes' and 'to live' comes from the view

of life as analogous to fire, as in the expression *pul-i sara-na-ta* (*pul-i* 'fire-Nom' + *sar-a* 'burned

to ashes-INF' + *-na-* 'out' + *-ta* DCL) which describes the fire that comes back to life from the

ashes, conveying a cyclic pattern (Jung 1991:227). There exists the notion 'living is burning', and

the cycle of the fire emerging from the ashes has been analogized to the cycle of life with the belief

that humans are reborn after the completion of a life cycle. Further, the metaphor of fire as 'life'

can be observed both in Korean and English, e.g., when referring to an active volcano as being

alive, and when it is said that the fire that is burning is 'a live fire'.

Moreover, other derivatives that share the same root *sal-* 'to live' show closer connection to

the root *sar-* 'to burn to ashes', i.e., the derivatives *sal* 'flesh' and *hɨlk* 'dirt/earth' are more closely

related in that *sal* is essentially the same element (ashes) as *hɨlk* when the fire of life extinguishes

(Choi 1986:194). An interesting account of the notion of being 'human' exists among other languages where the meaning embedded in Korean *saram* is parallel to those in languages different from Korean. Hebrew's word for 'man', *adam* (lit., 'one formed from the ground'), comes from *adamah* meaning 'ground', and 'human' in English is from Latin's *humus* 'earth, soil'. This semantic relation to Korean's *saram* 'a being who burns to ashes' proposes that the concept of human was partly universal at least in some ancient civilizations.

Among many expressions denoting 'death' and 'to die' in Korean, the expression *tol-a.ka-si-ta* (morphophonemic form) [to.ra.ga.si.ta] 'to go back' is used euphemistically to indicate the death of an elder person who is at least one generation older than the speaker. The *si-* in *tol-a.ka-si-ta* (*tol-a* 'back'-INF *ka* 'go' *si* HON *ta* DCL) is an honorific marker that is inserted between verb stem and suffix. In order to mean that a person has died, the honorific marker *-si-* is required; otherwise, i.e., (*tol-a.ka-ta*), it suggests not respect but merely indicates that a person has returned (the disclosure of the destination is obligatory in the phrase). Unlike other phrases in Korean that denote 'death', which also carry the notion of cycle in their roots (e.g., **kut- > kut.ki.ta* 'to die/to turn back' [archaic] Lee 1985: II, 105), the expression *tol-a.ka-si-ta* 'to go back' communicates lucidly what it meant to die for ancient Koreans.

A question might arise regarding the destination of the verb in the phrase *tol-a.ka-si-ta* 'to go back'. This phrase implies 'the return to the original place', further entailing that when a person dies, he or she goes back to where they came from. It also connotes continuance after the return to the origin. The relationship between the derivatives *saram* 'human', *hɨlk* 'earth/ashes', *sal* 'flesh', *salm* 'life' and the expression *tol-a.ka-si-ta* indicates that the flesh goes back to its original place, the earth, and the soul returns to its original place and continues to exist.

By examining a certain root for Korean lexemes as essential as the 'human' and 'life' as well

as the expression denoting 'death', the underlining concept of the 'cycle' can be detected. From the ancient Koreans' point of view, life was perceived as a cycle which repeats continuously, and this perception seems to have had a significant influence on their thought in creating the Korean words containing such abstract concepts as 'living' and 'being human'.

Unfortunately, most Koreans are unaware of the native thoughts of their ancestors rooted deep in their language. Loanwords, primarily Sino-Korean (Koreanized Chinese loanwords) and English, already constitute a significant part of Korean lexemes and continue to enter the language. Native Korean lexemes are being threatened and are disappearing. This phenomenon prompts the question: will the thoughts behind the native Korean words that are rich with simple but profound and ancient cultural perspectives also be lost?

References

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