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# Pragmatic effects of number and person in Korean pronominal system: Three uses of first person plural *wuli*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the pragmatic effects of a combination of number and person in Korean pronominal system. Korean has specialized associative plural markers such *ney*, *huy*, and *li*. First person plural *wuli* is composed of first person pronoun *wu* and associative marker *li*. In this regard, *wuli* not only represents normal plurality, but also has special uses. Such special uses of *wuli* can be classified into opinion-presenting *wuli*, non-possessive *wuli*, and solidarity-expressing *wuli* based on their opposition relations, distributions, and pragmatic effects. Opinion-presenting *wuli* is used to display the effect of objectification and impersonalization. Non-possessive *wuli* indicates that the following referents are not individual possessions of the speaker. Solidarity-expressing *wuli* is used before a nominal to refer to the hearer as a device that shows solidarity. Opinion-presenting *wuli* is not usually used when a superior speaks to an inferior. Non-possessive *wuli* can be replaced by singular *ney* when the following kinship term is downward. Solidarity-expressing *wuli* functions as a minimal/dual inclusive. All these phenomena point to close relatedness between *wuli* uses and politeness. © 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Korean; Number; Associative plural; First person plural pronoun; Politeness

## 1. Introduction

In Korean, common nouns are not obligatorily marked for numbers. A common noun by itself is neutral with regard to plurality.<sup>1</sup> When there is a need to specify the number of a noun, a suffix *tul* is added. In this respect, most studies (Im, 1979; Kwak, 2001, *inter alia*) on Korean numbers have focused on the meaning of suffix *tul*. For example, there were questions about whether the plural meaning of *tul* is distributive. The difference in meaning between a nominal form with *tul* and that without *tul* under the context of plural meaning was at issue. However, scanty studies have been focused on the categorial nature of *tul* or other number expressing devices such as *ney* (e.g., *Chelswu-ney* 'Chelswu and his members'), *li* (e.g., *wu-li* 'I-PL'), or *huy* (e.g., *ne-huy* 'you-PL'). Non-plural meanings of plural expressions have not been investigated thoroughly either.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the objective of this study was to examine the categorial nature of plural markers *tul*, *ney*, *li*, and *huy* and their pragmatic effects resulting from a combination of plural markers and person category based on typological findings,

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations in the glosses are as follows: ACC, accusative; CL, classifier; COM, comitative; CONV, converb; DEC, declarative; EV, evidential; FOC, focus; HON, honorific; IMP, imperative; INST, instrumental; INT, interrogative; LOC, locative; MOD, modality; NEG, negator; NOM, nominative; PAST, past; PL, plural; POL, polite; PRES, present; REL, relative marker; SG, singular; TOP, topic.

focusing on first plural pronoun *wuli*. For systematic examination, the following procedures were performed. First, we examined the distribution and combination constraints of *tul*, *ney*, *li*, and *huy* and determined their categorial differences. Second, based on findings for *li*, various uses of first person plural pronoun *wuli* were discussed and the relationship between *wuli*'s categorial nature and its non-plural uses was explored. Third, theoretical explanation for non-plural uses of *wuli* was pragmatically presented. We attempted to answer the following questions: (1) What mechanism renders plural expressions non-plural; and (2) What is the difference between Korean and other languages in this respect.

## 2. Two kinds of plurals

In Korean, *tul* is a plural marker. If plurality is not restricted to something that refers to a homogeneous set, bound morphemes such as *ney*, *huy*, and *li* found in *acessi-ney* 'uncle-PL', *ne-huy* 'you-PL', and *wu-li* 'I-PL' might also be counted as plural markers. In this section, these morphemes are all considered as plural markers, in contrast to *tul* which represents additive plural. They are associative plural markers that refer to heterogeneous sets.

Plural marker *tul* is optional even in reference to plurality. A bare nominal does not always represent a singular meaning. Bare nominals can have plural meaning, class/kind meaning, and singular meaning.

- (1) a. *na-nun sakwa-lul ttelettuli-ess-ta.*<sup>3</sup>  
I-TOP apple-ACC drop-PAST-DEC.  
'I dropped an apple/apples.'
- b. *na-nun sakwa-lul cohaha-n-ta.*  
I-TOP apple-ACC like-PRES-DEC.  
'I like apples.'

In (1a), *sakwa* is most often interpreted as a singular. However, under a context where apples are dropped out of a paper bag in the bus, it is naturally interpreted as a plural. In contrast, *sakwa* in (1b) refers to a class/kind of apples or apple as stuff/mass.

As seen in examples shown above, Korean bare nominals do not specify numbers. They only represent a thing. Therefore, they can be treated as something representing 'general number' or 'transnumeral'.<sup>4</sup> When there is a need to specify number, numeral classifier construction is employed (for instance, *sakwa sey gay* 'apple three CL 'three apples') or plural marker *tul* is attached (for instance, *namu-ey maytalli-n sakwa-tul* 'tree-LOC hang-REL apple PL 'apples hanging from a tree').

Plural marker *tul* tends to be used more often when there is a greater need to specify number. When humans use numbers, they tend to do more for animates than for inanimates. On the basis of this logic, we can divide argument positions into position A (where only animate nouns occur), position B (where both animate and inanimate nouns occur), and position C (where only inanimate nouns occur). *Tul* tends to be used in this order (Lim, 2012).

- (2) a. *haksayng-i chongmyengha-ta.*  
student-NOM intelligent-DEC.  
'A student is intelligent.'
- a'. *haksayng-tul-i chongmyengha-ta.*  
student-PL-NOM intelligent-DEC.  
'Students are intelligent.'
- b. *haksayng-i iss-ta.*  
student-NOM exist-DEC.  
'There is/are a student/students.'
- b'. *haksayng-tul-i iss-ta.*  
student-PL-NOM exist-DEC.  
'There are students.'
- c. *secay-uy chayk-i tha-ass-ta.*  
study-GEN book-NOM burn-PAST-DEC.  
'Books of my study were burned.'

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, Yale Romanization system is used in Korean language examples (see S.E. Martin, 1992. Yale Romanization. In: A Reference Grammar of Korean. Charles E. Tuttle Publishing, 8–12).

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of 'general number' and 'transnumeral', see Corbett (2000:9–14).

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