

# Reevaluating the Korean Aspectual System: A Biclausal Perspective-Pragmatic Nature of the Result Reading of ‘-*ko iss-*’\*

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## 1 Introduction

Aspect is a key grammatical category that captures how events unfold over time. Comrie (1976: 3–9) defines it as the internal temporal structure of situations, expressed morphologically in some languages (e.g. Spanish *leyó* ‘he/she read’ vs. *leía* ‘he/she was reading’) and periphrastically in others (e.g. English *he was reading*).

Korean, unlike inflectional languages, marks aspect analytically. Kim (1992) and Park (2007) observe that aspect is expressed through *-ko* and *-e* constructions. Park (2010) classifies *-e iss-* and *-ko iss<sub>2</sub>-* as resultative, while *-ko iss<sub>1</sub>-* marks continuous aspect.

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- (1) a. Swuho-ka huyn syechu-lul ip-ko iss-ta.  
 S-NOM white shirt-ACC wear-CONN exist-DECL  
 ‘Swuho is putting on a white shirt.’<sup>1</sup> [Progressive reading]  
 ‘Swuho is wearing a white shirt.’ [Result state reading]
- b. kyoswunim-i mun-ul yel-ko iss-ta.  
 professor-NOM door-ACC open-CONN exist-DECL  
 ‘The professor is opening the door.’ [Progressive reading]  
 ‘The professor opened the door and is in the state of having it open.’ [Result state reading]

As can be seen above, the *-ko iss-* construction exhibits both progressive and resultative readings, raising questions about its defining characteristics. While lexical reflexivity (Lee 1981, Han 1999, Kim 2006) contributes to resultative readings, other factors remain unexplored. This study reevaluates *-ko iss-* from a biclausal perspective, aiming to clarify its role in Korean aspectual interpretation.

## 2 Issues Surrounding the Korean Aspectual System

### 2.1 The Categorical Issue of *-ess-*: Tense or Aspect

In the classification of the Korean aspectual system, one of the most controversial issues is the categorization of the morpheme *-ess-*. Specifically, there is ongoing debate over whether *-ess-* should be interpreted as a marker of tense or aspect. The following examples illustrate this controversy:

- (2) a. Swuho-ka akka.ceney pap-ul mek-ess-ta. [Tense, temporal location of event]  
 S-NOM little.ago rice-ACC eat-PST-DECL  
 ‘Swuho ate rice a little while ago.’
- b. Swuho-ka emma-lul talm-ass-ta. [Aspect, way event unfolds at specific point in time]  
 S-NOM mother-ACC resemble-PST-DECL  
 ‘Swuho resembles her mother.’

Many scholars have attempted to resolve this issue, yet no theoretical consensus has been reached. While this paper does not aim to address this debate in depth, it acknowledges the complexity of *-ess-* within the Korean TAM system. A more thorough examination may be pursued in future research. The primary focus of this paper is outlined in the next subsection.

### 2.2 The Ambiguity Issue of *-ko iss-*: Progressive and Resultative Reading

Another major issue in the Korean aspect system is the ambiguity of *-ko iss-*, which can represent both progressive and resultative states. This raises questions about whether *-ko iss-* should be classified as a marker of progressive aspect or perfective aspect.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the following acronyms are used for glossing: NOM = nominative; ACC = accusative; CONN = connective; DECL = declarative; PST = past; TOP = topic; HON = honorific; LOC = locative.

- (3) Swuho-ka sinpal-ul sin-ko iss-ta.  
 S-NOM shoes-ACC wear-CONN exist-DECL  
 Event Structure: e1 = the process of putting on (e1, x, y)  
                   ‘The process of x attaching y to its foot’  
                   ‘Swuho is putting on shoes.’ [P-reading]  
 e2 = wearing state (e2, y, x)  
                   ‘y is attached to x state’  
                   ‘Swuho is wearing shoes.’ [R-reading]

Among existing studies, Kim (1992) proposes that *-ko iss-* represents both durative and terminative aspects, while Kim (2007), Ko (2006), and Park (2007) categorize it as both imperfective and perfective. Park (2010) classifies it as resultative and continuative, whereas Chong (1994) describes it as durative.

To address ambiguity in prior research, most studies classify *-ko iss-* into two types based on the nature of the preceding verb: *-ko iss<sub>1</sub>-* and *-ko iss<sub>2</sub>-*. Alternatively, some research treats it uniformly as *-ko iss-* without further distinction. How this ambiguity can be resolved is discussed in Section 4.

### 3 Main Claims

This study addresses the longstanding ambiguity of *-ko iss-* in Korean, which allows both progressive and resultative readings. The analysis demonstrates that this ambiguity is fundamentally resolved by its syntactic structure. Specifically, the resultative reading of *-ko iss-* arises from a biclausal structure, whereas the progressive reading emerges from a monoclausal structure.

Previous studies have attributed the resultative reading to lexical reflexivity (Lee 1981, Han 1999, Kim 2006); however, this paper challenges that view by showing that the result reading is pragmatically driven rather than lexically determined. The findings suggest that within the Korean aspectual system, *-ko iss-* functions exclusively as a progressive aspect marker when it originates from a monoclausal structure. In contrast, its resultative interpretation depends on a biclausal construction, providing new insights into the syntactic and pragmatic mechanisms governing aspect in Korean.

### 4 Resolving Ambiguities in the Korean *-ko iss-* Construction

The progressive<sup>2</sup> *-ko iss<sub>1</sub>-* syntactically forms a monoclausal structure, whereas what is interpreted as a resultative state, *-ko iss<sub>2</sub>-*, is analyzed syntactically as a biclausal structure. This distinction reflects a deeper level of complexity in how aspects are expressed and understood in Korean grammar.

- (4) Swuho-ka mun-ul yel-ko iss-ta  
 S-NOM door-ACC open-CONN exist-DECL  
 a. Progressive reading: ‘Swuho is opening the door, i.e., he is currently in the process of opening the door.’  
 b. Resultative reading: ‘Swuho opens the door and then stays/remains with it open.’

<sup>2</sup> The progressive aspect is a subset of the imperfective aspect, which I will briefly discuss in Section 5.

As seen in the above examples, *-ko iss-* manifests both progressive and resultative state readings. Let us address this ambiguity by presenting relevant evidence.

#### 4.1 The Two Syntactic Structures of *-ko iss-*

There are several pieces of evidence that establish the biclausal structure of *-ko iss-* in its resultative reading. According to Kim (2009), one key piece of evidence is that syntactic elements such as manner adverbs can intervene between *-ko* and *iss-*, supporting the biclausal analysis (5). Another piece of evidence is that the short-form negation marker *an* can appear directly before *iss-* in a biclausal structure.

- (5) Swuho-nun mun-ul [yel-ko] coyonghi [iss-ta].  
 S-TOP door-ACC [open-CONN] quietly [exist-DECL]  
 ‘Swuho opened the door and then remains quiet with it open.’  
 (Biclausal *-ko iss-* with resultative reading)

In the sentence above, the manner adverb *coyonghi* ‘quietly’ is positioned between *-ko* and *iss-*, modifying only *iss-*. If *iss-* were an auxiliary verb, such modification would not be possible. Kim (2009) further examines this by comparing purely progressive sentences, where a manner adverb cannot appear between *-ko* and *iss-* to modify *iss-*.

As mentioned earlier, another syntactic piece of evidence comes from negation, where the short-form negation marker *an* appears directly before *iss<sub>2</sub>-* in a biclausal structure (6).

- (6) Swuho-nun changmun-ul [tat-ko] an [iss-ta].  
 S-TOP window-ACC [close-CONN] not [exist-DECL]  
 ‘Swuho remains with the door unclosed.’  
 (Biclausal *-ko iss-* with resultative reading)

#### 4.2 Reflexivity Semantics in Relation to *-ko iss-*

Another critical factor contributing to the ambiguity of *-ko iss-* is reflexivity semantics. Verbs that display ambiguity when combined with *-ko iss-* are typically lexically reflexive verbs. Reflexive events indicate that two arguments within the sentence refer to the same entity, meaning the subject also serves as the locative argument.

Lexically reflexive verbs include those related to putting things on or taking things off, such as *ip-ta* ‘to wear’, *kki-ta* ‘to wear’, *cha-ta* ‘to wear’, *ssu-ta* ‘to wear’, and *pes-ta* ‘to take off’. Previous studies by Kim (2006), Han (1999) and Lee (1981) have examined reflexivity in relation to *-ko iss-*.



the window open' in the resultant event. In contrast, such connectivity is not apparent in (8b), making it sound unnatural. The issue in (8b) is that pragmatically, based on our common sense, it is not fitting for the teaching assistant to be in the professor's office with the window open. Therefore, (8b) does not represent a resultative state reading. However, if the professor says, 'You use my room and keep the window open,' a resultative state reading could be implied. Similarly, a resultative state interpretation is possible if the teaching assistant stays in or is around the professor's office. Hence, the interpretation must be contextually and pragmatically derived from general common sense. Below is another example of the spatial involvement of the agent.

- (9) a. *kyoswunim-kkeyse yenkwusil pyek-ey kacok sacin-ul puthi-ko kyeyisi-ta.*  
 professor-NOM lab wall-LOC family photo-ACC put-CONN exist.HON-DECL  
 'The professor is putting up a family photo on the office wall.' [Progressive Reading]  
 'The professor put up a family photo on the office wall and remains by it as it hangs.' [Result state reading]
- b. *cokyo-ka kyoswunim yenkwusil pyeok-ey sacin-ul puthi-ko iss-ta.*  
 teaching.assistant-NOM professor lab wall-LOC photo-ACC put-CONN exist-DECL  
 'The teaching assistant is putting up a photo on the professor's office wall. [Progressive Reading]

#### 4.3.2 Possessive Involvement (*issta*)

The examples in (10a–b) illustrate a result state reading, as the interpretation of *iss-* in these contexts aligns with the notion of possession rather than existence. Specifically, *iss-* conveys the idea of 'having' or 'possessing' something, which directly contributes to the possessive involvement of the agent in the resultant situation. Consequently, interpreting these sentences with a progressive reading seems unnatural.

- (10) a. *Swuho-ka unhayng-ey 10ekwen-ul yeykumha-ko iss-ta.* [R-state reading]  
 S-NOM bank-LOC one.billion.won-ACC deposit-CONN exist-DECL  
 'Swuho has a 1 billion won deposit in the bank.'
- b. *Swuho-ka saylowun aiphon-ul kaci-ko iss-ta.* [R-state reading]  
 S-NOM new iphone-ACC have-CONN exist-DECL  
 'Swuho has a new iPhone.'

The example in (10a) expresses a state of possession rather than an ongoing action. The verb *yeykumha-* 'to deposit', when combined with *-ko iss-*, does not indicate an active, continuous process but rather signifies a completed action with a lasting resultant state—that is, Swuho's money remains deposited in the bank. This state of possession interpretation is crucial in distinguishing between progressive and resultative state readings. Similarly, (10b) sounds unnatural if interpreted as a progressive action.

#### 4.3.3 Force Dynamic Involvement

The examples in (11a–b) illustrate force dynamic involvement as a crucial factor in determining the resultative state reading of *-ko iss-* constructions. Unlike possessive involvement, where the agent's role is primarily defined by ownership or possession, force dynamic involvement entails

the agent exerting continuous physical force to maintain a particular state. In these cases, the agent's sustained engagement in the result situation is what licenses the result state interpretation.

- (11) a. Swuho-ga mulkhep-ul cap-ko iss-ta. [R-state reading]  
 S-NOM water.cup-ACC hold-CONN exist-DECL  
 'Swuho is holding a glass of water.'
- b. emma-ka aki-lul an-ko iss-ta. [R-state reading]  
 mother-NOM child-ACC hold-CONN exist-DECL  
 'The mother is holding her child.'

In (11a), the verb *cap-* 'to hold/grasp' inherently requires the application of physical force by the agent (Swuho) to maintain grip on the glass. The resultant state reading emerges because the action of grasping leads to a state where the object (the cup) remains held, sustained by the agent's ongoing effort. Unlike a typical progressive reading that implies an ongoing, dynamic action, the force exerted by Swuho is not about actively grasping but about maintaining the grasp, reinforcing a state of holding rather than an action in progress.

Similarly, in (11b), the verb *an-* 'to hold/embrace' signifies a sustained physical action rather than an instantaneous or momentary event. The force required to continue holding the child determines the resultative state interpretation. The meaning conveyed is not that the mother is actively beginning to embrace the child (which would align more with a progressive reading) but rather that she has already embraced the child and remains in that state.

#### 4.3.4 Episodic Eventual Involvement

'Episodic' refers to events that occur at a specific time and place, as opposed to habitual or generic properties. Let us now explore the episodic involvement of agents that leads to resultative state readings.

- (12) a. Swuho-ka il-khillomithe-lul talli-ko iss-ta.  
 S-NOM one-kilometer-ACC run-CONN exist-DECL  
 'Swuho has run one kilometer.'
- b. hankwuk chwukkwuthim-i cenpancen-ey sey kol-ul neh-ko iss-ta.  
 Korean soccer.team-NOM first.half-LOC three goal-ACC put-CONN exist-DECL  
 'The Korean soccer team has scored three goals in the first half.'
- c. Swuho-ka maykcwu twu pyeng-ul masi-ko iss-ta. (Episodic drinking event)  
 S-NOM bear two bottle-ACC drink-CONN exist-DECL  
 'Swuho has drunken two bottles of bear.'

In (12a), the verb *talli-* 'to run' can be interpreted either as progressive or resultative. In a progressive reading, the sentence suggests that Swuho is currently in the process of running. However, in the resultative interpretation, it implies that Swuho has already finished running one kilometer and remains in a state that reflects that event, such as being breathless or still in motion after finishing

the defined distance. The presence of a quantified object like ‘one kilometer’ establishes a telic boundary for the event, reinforcing its interpretation as a completed action with lingering effects.

Similarly, in (12b), the verb *neh-* ‘to put/score’ describes a punctual, telic event. The presence of the quantified object ‘three goals’ creates a bounded event, meaning the scoring action has already occurred within the first half of the game. The resultative interpretation suggests that even though the action of scoring is completed, its impact—the Korean team leading the match—persists as a relevant state. This highlights how episodic events with clear endpoints can still be interpreted in a result state reading depending on pragmatic factors such as the significance of the score in the ongoing discourse.

(12c) also conveys a result state reading from an episodic event perspective. The sentence (12c) refers to a specific, limited event in which Swuho engages in the action of drinking two bottles of beer. The key aspect of this construction is that the action occurs at a particular moment in time, distinguishing it as episodic in nature. In this sentence, the event of drinking (an episodic drinking event) does not describe a habitual action (e.g., ‘Swuho drinks beer every day’), but rather a specific instance of drinking that takes place at a particular time.

As observed above, the agent’s involvement in the result situation suggests that semantic conditions should be interpreted as pragmatic conditions, without drawing a distinction between the two. Consequently, all instances of semantic conditions are explained through the lens of pragmatic conditions. This perspective further implies that lexical reflexivity, too, should be considered a pragmatic condition.

## 5 The Aspect System of Imperfective-Perfective Opposition

Among existing proposals on the Korean aspect system, describing *-ko iss-* as spanning both imperfective and perfective aspects indicates a confused state in the grammatical aspect system, which is not suitable for a synchronic grammatical description. Therefore, it is not advisable to attribute two functions to *-ko iss-*, defining one as imperfective and the other as perfective aspect. Consequently, this paper recognizes *-ko iss-* solely as representing the imperfective aspect. Specifically, this paper divides the Korean aspect system fundamentally into imperfective and perfective aspects, where the imperfective is semantically further subdivided into progressive and habitual aspects. The perfective aspect is realized through *-e iss-*, and the progressive and habitual aspects through *-ko iss-*. This aspectual classification in the paper is based on the semantic aspect classification theory proposed by Comrie (1976).

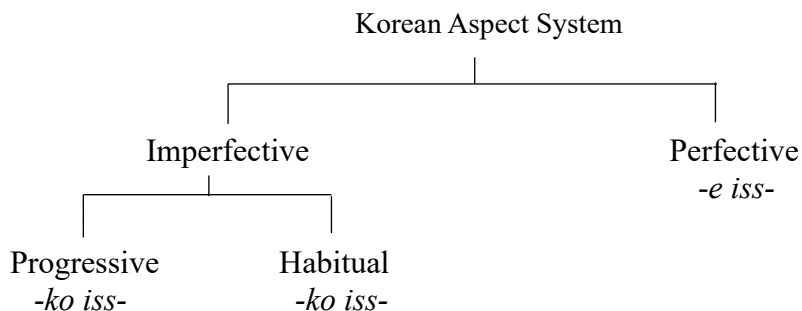


Figure 1: Korean Aspect System

Among the prior studies on the Korean aspect system, studies such as Kim (2007), Ko (2006), Park (2007), Chong (1994), Jo (2000), Lee (1997), Suh (1994) have primarily categorized Korean aspects into imperfective and perfective. In this paper, it is argued that the imperfective (progressive, habitual) marker *-ko iss-* forms a monoclausal structure, while the resultative state reading of *-ko iss-* is best analyzed as forming a biclausal structure. Let us briefly examine the Korean aspect system with some examples.

- (13) a. Swuho-nun mangko-lul mek-ko iss-ta. [Progressive Aspect]  
 S-TOP mango-ACC eat-CONN exist-DECL  
 ‘Swuho is eating a mango.’
- b. Swuho-nun mayil hakkyo-lul ka-ko iss-ta. [Habitual Aspect]  
 S-TOP daily school-ACC go-CONN exist-DECL  
 ‘Swuho is going to school every day.’
- c. Swuho-nun uyca-ey anc-a iss-ta. [Perfective Aspect]  
 S-TOP chair-LOC sit-CONN exist-DECL  
 ‘Swuho is sitting on the chair.’

As seen in the examples (13a–b), *-ko iss-* acts as an imperfective aspect marker. *-ko iss-* functions as an auxiliary verb and syntactically forms a monoclausal structure. In (13a), because the ‘eating process’ is ongoing, the aspect marker *-ko iss-* represents a progressive meaning. In (13b), because the action of ‘going to school’ occurs regularly every day, *-ko iss-* indicates a habitual aspect. Even without the adverb ‘every day’ in examples like (13b), *-ko iss-* can be interpreted as habitual based on context. Therefore, habitual aspect is considered a derivative meaning of the progressive aspect. In (13c), since the ‘state of being seated’ is continuing, *-e iss-* indicates a perfective aspect. Here, *iss-* functions as a lexical verb with the meaning of ‘to exist’; hence, *-e iss-* syntactically forms a biclausal structure.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

This paper has examined the syntactic structures associated with the Korean aspectual marker *-ko iss-*, highlighting its progressive and resultative state readings and the crucial role of pragmatic conditions in interpretation. The findings demonstrate a clear distinction between the progressive and resultative state readings, with the former aligning with a monoclausal structure and the latter requiring a biclausal structure to accurately capture the separation between the causing event and its resultant state. This structural differentiation is vital in resolving ambiguity in *-ko iss-* constructions.

Additionally, syntactic and pragmatic factors significantly influence the interpretation of *-ko iss-*. The presence of manner adverbs and short-form negation markers plays a key role in determining whether the reading is progressive or resultative. When *-ko iss-* functions as an auxiliary verb, it consistently denotes progressive aspect, whereas the result state reading emerges based on contextual and pragmatic implicatures. Various pragmatic conditions, such as spatial involvement, possessive involvement, force dynamics, and episodic eventuality, further contribute to the agent’s

role in the resultant situation, reinforcing the idea that aspectual interpretation cannot be purely syntactic or semantic.

Based on the analysis of *-ko iss-*, this paper recognizes *-ko iss-* solely as representing the imperfective aspect, which is further subdivided into progressive and habitual aspects. In contrast, the perfective aspect is realized through *-e iss-*, while the progressive and habitual aspects are expressed via *-ko iss-*. This classification contributes to a more precise understanding of the aspectual system of imperfective-perfective opposition in Korean.

Beyond theoretical linguistics, this research offers practical insights into Korean language education, particularly in the teaching of aspectual distinctions. Recognizing the biclausal structure of result state readings and the influence of pragmatic conditions helps learners develop a more nuanced understanding of Korean aspectual meanings. Ultimately, this study underscores the intricate interplay between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in aspectual interpretation, providing a more comprehensive approach to analyzing the Korean aspectual system.

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