

*As, ddeugeo(b)! ‘Oh, hot!’: Some Mysteries of bieub (Ir)regular Adjectives in Colloquial Korean**

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1 Introduction

In present-day Japanese, adjectives have colloquial shortened forms such as *ita* ‘painful’ or *yaba* ‘awful/awesome’, which are variously referred to as ‘*-i* dropped constructions’ (Konno 2012), ‘clipped adjectives’ (Iwasaki 2014), or ‘adjective stem-type sentences’ (Shimizu 2015). These shortened forms, hereafter referred to as clipped forms following Iwasaki (2014), are analyzed as resulting from dropping the final *-i* of *-i* ending adjectives, as in (1), and they have some variants like *itta*, *itat*, *ite*, *itte*, and *ittu*.

(1) *itai* > *ita* ‘painful’

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Previous studies have reported four main characteristics of such colloquial forms: (i) they are preferred by the younger generation (Agency of Cultural Affairs 2011; Harada 2013); (ii) the length of adjectives used in the forms is not too long or too short; adjectives whose conclusive forms consist of three morae (e.g. *itai*, *yabai*) are most common (Harada 2013); (iii) there is no strong preference for any specific adjective type: both emotional/sensory adjectives (e.g. *samui* > *samu* ‘cold’) and attribute adjectives (e.g. *hayai* > *haya* ‘fast’) are used in clipped forms (Harada 2013); and (iv) they often occur as an instant or immediate reaction to an incident the speaker encounters (e.g. *A ita* ‘A painful’) (Konno 2012), though the instantaneity or immediacy of the reaction is not a prerequisite for the use of clipped adjectives (e.g. *Aaa nemu* ‘Ahh sleepy’).

Some researchers of Korean who are interested in comparisons with Japanese may assume that these clipped forms are characteristic of Japanese, a language less fussy about the completeness of predicates (Ogoshi et al. 2018: 240). However, a brief internet search finds many examples of Korean clipped forms, especially of *bieub* irregular adjectives, as in (2):¹

- (2) a. ‘as **ddeugeo**’... *aepul*, *chagi aipon-e singaenyeom baeteori jangchag*.
 “‘Oh, hot’... Apple to equip next iPhone with new concept battery’.
 (Meonitudei, November 23, 2023)²
- b. *bagg-eun neomu chub*, *an-eun neomu deob geuraeseo gyesog jollyeob*
 ‘It’s too cold outside and too hot inside, so I’m always sleepy’
 (From Oh Hong-hak’s Instagram, cited in *Nyuseuweogseu*, December 22, 2018)³

As these examples illustrate, two types of clipped forms are observed with Korean *bieub* irregular adjectives: the *bieub*-absent form as in (2a) and the *bieub*-present form as in (2b). The former is created by deleting both the final *-da* and the preceding *bieub* (or deleting *-weo* from the adverbial form of a *bieub* irregular adjective), and the latter by deleting the final *-da* from a *bieub* irregular adjective, as shown in (3a) and (3b), respectively:

- (3) Two types of clipped forms of *bieub* (ir)regular adjectives
- a. ***bieub*-absent form**: *mugeo* < *mugeobda* ‘heavy’ (or *mugeo* < *mugeoweo*)
- b. ***bieub*-present form**: *mugeob* < *mugeobda* ‘heavy’

The present study investigates what kinds of *bieub* (ir)regular adjectives are used in Korean clipped forms and how one of the two clipped forms is preferred to the other. The motivational factors underlying the use of these forms are also examined in terms of relevant linguistic factors (semantic, morphological, phonological, and sociopragmatic factors).

¹ Since our paper deals with phonological and morphological phenomena of the current usage of Korean adjectives, our romanization system follows *hangeul romaja pyogibeob* (The Ministry of Education 1959), which closely reflects the spelling and pronunciation of standard Korean. It forms one of the bases for *saero gaejeongdoen ‘gugeo eui romaja pyogibeob’* (The Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2000).

² See https://m.mt.co.kr/renew/view.html?no=2023112306555431859&NG2_P

³ See <https://www.newsworks.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=321453>. The final word *jollyeob* contains a dummy *-b*, which may have been jokingly added to rhyme the word with *chub* and *deob*.

2 Data and Methodology

A questionnaire survey was conducted using Google Forms. The participants were 60 Korean native speakers between 18 and 65 years of age (35 males, 24 females, 1 no answer). The questionnaire was designed to investigate the use of thirteen adjectives in the two clipped forms (12 *bieub* irregular adjectives and 1 regular adjective whose stem ends with *bieub*). The following question was asked of the participants: ‘In the situations given in [1]-[13], would you say things like (a) [*bieub*-absent form] and/or (b) [*bieub*-present form]?’ One of the situations is given in (4):

- (4) [When you heard your neighbor having a big fight]
 (a) *Aaa siggeureo*. ‘Ahh, it’s noisy’.
 (b) *Aaa siggeureob*. ‘Ahh, it’s noisy’.

The participants were asked to choose from four options: ‘(a) is possible’, ‘(b) is possible’, ‘both (a) and (b) are possible’, and ‘neither (a) nor (b) is possible’. The thirteen adjectives were selected with an aim to cover different kinds of *bieub* adjectives in terms of the number of syllables (adjectives of two to four syllables), the type of meaning (subjective and objective adjectives), and the type of the vowel before *bieub* (*yang(seong) moeum* ‘bright vowel’ or *eum(seong) moeum* ‘dark vowel’), and the type of conjugation (irregular and regular conjugations).

3 Results

3.1 The Overall Results of the Questionnaire Survey

Figure 1 represents the overall results of the survey. The red and yellow bars show the number of responses indicating the acceptability of the *bieub*-absent and *bieub*-present forms, respectively, and the light blue bars represent the number of responses indicating that neither of the forms are possible. The figure illustrates that there is a large variation across adjectives in the possibility of the two types of clipped forms.

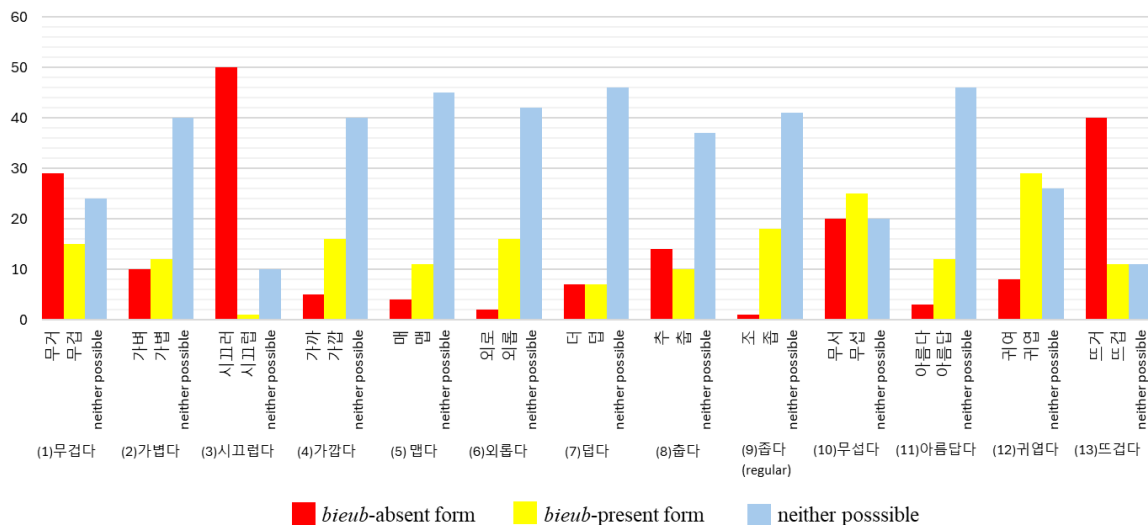


Figure 1: Acceptability of the Clipped Forms of *bieub* (Ir)regular Adjectives

Table 1 below summarizes the results in order of frequency. It shows that *bieub*-absent forms are more common than *bieub*-present ones. In particular, *siggeureobda* ‘noisy’ and *ddeugeobda* ‘hot’ were perceived to be highly possible in the *bieub*-absent form; *siggeureo* was accepted by 50 of the 60 participants and *ddeugeo* by 40 participants. For the *bieub*-present form, the two most acceptable adjectives are *gwiyeobda* ‘cute’ and *museobda* ‘scary’, of which the latter was also judged to be possible in the *bieub*-absent form by one third of the participants. On the other hand, four adjectives (*deobda* ‘hot’, *maebda* ‘hot, spicy’, *gabyeobda* ‘light’, and *areumdabda* ‘beautiful’) were considered not likely to be used in either form by 80 percent or more of the participants.

| neither possible | <i>bieub</i> -absent clipped forms | | <i>bieub</i> -present clipped forms | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|----|
| (7) <i>deobda</i> ‘hot’ | 46 | (3) <i>siggeureo</i> | 50 | (12) <i>gwiyeob</i> | 29 |
| (11) <i>areumdabda</i> ‘beautiful’ | 46 | (13) <i>ddeugeo</i> | 40 | (10) <i>museob</i> | 25 |
| (5) <i>maebda</i> ‘hot, spicy’ | 45 | (1) <i>mugeo</i> | 29 | (9) <i>job</i> | 18 |
| (6) <i>werobda</i> ‘lonely’ | 42 | (10) <i>museo</i> | 20 | (4) <i>gaggab</i> | 16 |
| (9) <i>jobda</i> ‘narrow’ | 41 | (8) <i>chu</i> | 14 | (6) <i>werob</i> | 16 |
| (2) <i>gabyeobda</i> ‘light’ | 40 | (2) <i>gabyeo</i> | 10 | (1) <i>mugeob</i> | 15 |
| (4) <i>gaggabda</i> ‘close’ | 40 | (12) <i>gwiyeo</i> | 8 | (2) <i>gabyeob</i> | 12 |
| (8) <i>chubda</i> ‘cold’ | 37 | (7) <i>deo</i> | 7 | (11) <i>areumdab</i> | 12 |
| (12) <i>gwiyeobda</i> ‘cute’ | 26 | (4) <i>gagga</i> | 5 | (5) <i>maeb</i> | 11 |
| (1) <i>mugeobda</i> ‘heavy’ | 24 | (5) <i>mae</i> | 4 | (13) <i>ddeugeob</i> | 11 |
| (10) <i>museobda</i> ‘scary’ | 20 | (11) <i>areumda</i> | 3 | (8) <i>chub</i> | 10 |
| (13) <i>ddeugeobda</i> ‘hot’ | 11 | (6) <i>wero</i> | 2 | (7) <i>deob</i> | 7 |
| (3) <i>siggeureobda</i> ‘noisy’ | 10 | (9) <i>jo</i> | 1 | (3) <i>siggeureob</i> | 1 |

Table 1: (Un)acceptability of Clipped Forms (In Order of Frequency)

3.2 Semantic and Morphological Factors

The above table and figure suggest that the *bieub*-absent form is likely to be used with adjectives that have a negative meaning, notably a sense of displeasure (e.g. *siggeureo*, *ddeugeo*, *mugeo*, and *museo*). In particular, it tends to occur as (part of) a speaker’s instantaneous reaction of discomfort. On the other hand, the *bieub*-present form does not seem to indicate such a semantic preference, as *gwiyeob*, a clipped form of *gwiyeobda* ‘cute’, was the most acceptable in the *bieub*-present form, followed by *museob* and *job*.

As for the type of conjugation, the *bieub*-absent form is predominantly favored with irregular adjectives, because *jo*, the *bieub*-absent form of the regular adjective *jobda* ‘narrow’, ranks the lowest in the order of acceptability. However, the *bieub*-present form is not so strongly sensitive to the type of conjugation, as *job* occupies the third place in the frequency order, which is quite reasonable in that, unlike *bieub* irregulars, the form does not presuppose the dropping of *bieub*.

3.3 Phonological Factors

The use of *bieub*-absent forms is also influenced by word length and vowel type. Table 2 shows the mean acceptability of the two types of clipped forms.

| | | <i>bieub</i> -absent | <i>bieub</i> -present | neither possible |
|-----------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| two syllables | (n = 4) | 6.5 | 11.5 | 42.25 |
| three syllables | (n = 7) | 16.3 | 17.7 | 29 |
| four syllables | (n = 2) | 26.5 | 6.5 | 28 |

Table 2: Mean Acceptability of Clipped Forms by Syllable Length (per Word)

The syllable length indicates the number of syllables that comprise the dictionary form of each adjective (e.g. *maebda* is classified as a two-syllable word). Each figure in Table 2 represents the mean acceptability score per word. The results reveal that the possibility of the *bieub*-absent form to some extent correlates with the length of syllables: the smaller the number of syllables, the less acceptable the *bieub*-absent form.⁴ This is obvious from the fact that when adjectives of two syllables such as *jobda*, *maebda*, and *deobda* are shortened, the resulting *bieub*-absent forms become unintelligible like *jo*, *mae*, and *deo*. On the other hand, the table suggests that two-syllable adjectives become more tolerable in the *bieub*-present form. For example, about one third of the participants answered that *job*, the *bieub*-present form of *jobda*, is possible, though *jo* ranks the lowest in the acceptability of the *bieub*-absent form.

Tables 3 and 4 compare the two clipped forms in terms of the type of the vowel before *bieub*.

| | | <i>bieub</i> -absent | | <i>bieub</i> -present | |
|----------------|---------|----------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| <i>-eobda</i> | (n = 5) | 146 | 71% | 59 | 29% |
| <i>-ubda</i> | (n = 1) | 14 | 58% | 10 | 42% |
| <i>-yeobda</i> | (n = 2) | 18 | 31% | 41 | 69% |
| <i>-aebda</i> | (n = 1) | 4 | 27% | 11 | 73% |
| <i>-abda</i> | (n = 2) | 8 | 22% | 28 | 78% |
| <i>-obda</i> | (n = 2) | 3 | 8% | 34 | 92% |
| TOTAL | | 193 | | 183 | |

Table 3: Acceptability of Clipped forms by Vowel Type Before *bieub*

| | | <i>bieub</i> -absent | <i>bieub</i> -present |
|---|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>eum(seong) moeum</i> ‘dark vowel’ | (n = 9) | 20.2 | 13.4 |
| <i>yang(seong) moeum</i> ‘bright vowel’ | (n = 4) | 2.8 | 15.5 |

Table 4: Mean Acceptability of Clipped Forms by Vowel Type (Dark/Bright) (per Word)

The results reveal that adjectives whose stems include *-eo* are more likely to be used in the *bieub*-absent form (71%) than the *bieub*-present one (29%). Four of the five adjectives with the stem

⁴ The higher number of the four-syllable words is primarily ascribed to the popularity of *siggeureo*. The other four-syllable adjective, *areumdabda* ‘beautiful’, may be less preferred as an utterance elicited in the questionnaire (i.e. an exclamation that would be uttered when one sees a beautiful landscape). Gim Chang-Goo (personal communication) points out that adjectives are less frequently used for exclamation than primary interjections (Ameka 1992), such as *oo* ‘oh’ and *uwa* ‘wow’ in Korean, which is also supported by the results of our earlier study (Izutsu et al. 2023).

vowel *-eo* (*siggeureobda*, *ddeugeobda*, *mugeobda*, *museobda*) obtained higher scores in the acceptability of the *bieub*-absent form (*siggeureo*, *ddeugeo*, *mugeo*, *museo*).⁵ This is probably due to the influence of phonological contraction, namely, the coalescence or reduction of the two vowels of the adverbial forms into a single vowel (*-eoweo* > *-eo*). This phonological factor is also pointed out by some of our participants, who note that the *bieub*-absent form is used because of the similarity in pronunciation between *-eoweo* and *-eo* or the difficulty in pronouncing *-eoweo*. Also, the use of the *bieub*-absent form seems to be extended to adjectives with dark vowels in their stems. As Table 4 shows, adjectives with dark vowels are more likely to be preferred in the *bieub*-absent form than those with bright vowels. The mean acceptability score is 20.2 for the former but 2.8 for the latter, the difference being statistically significant ($t(8) = 3.21, p = 0.013$). On the other hand, the type of stem vowel does not seem to be influential on the use of the *bieub*-present form.

3.4 Sociopragmatic Factors

There was some variation by age in the acceptability of clipped forms. Figure 2 shows that the mean number of ‘neither possible’ responses increases as the age of the participants increases. For the youngest group, the mean of ‘neither possible’ responses per person was only 6.7 (out of the 13 adjectives), but it increased to 8.2 for the oldest group. Although no significant differences were attested between any two age cohorts, the gradual increase by age suggests that the clipped forms are relatively more popular among younger Koreans.

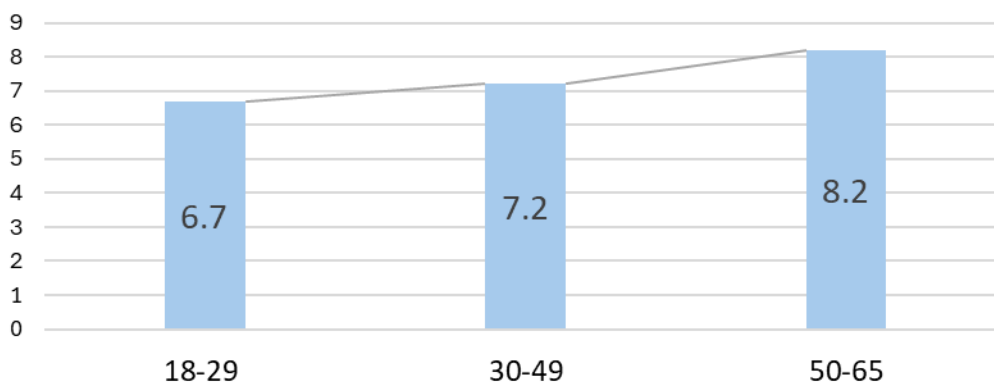


Figure 2: Means of ‘Neither Possible’ Responses by Age Cohort (per Person)

One of the possible reasons for the popularity of the clipped forms among the younger generation would be their frequent occurrence on the Internet. In particular, the *bieub*-present form is common in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). One of the participants wrote that the *bieub*-present form is like ‘a kind of Internet slang’, and another even ascribed the usefulness of such a clipped form in SNSs to the time-saving effect, saying: ‘I sometimes say (write) *ddeugeob* in messages (Kakao Talk), which require quick responses’. The time-saving benefit is also pointed out by Han Seunpyo (personal communication), who said that the *bieub*-present form is often observed in text chat in online games or comments on YouTube. For example, 귀엽 *gwiyeob* is frequently used in utterances like 귀엽ㅋㅋㅋ ‘cute lol’, where the dropping of 다 *da* from

⁵ The adjective *deobda* also has the stem vowel *-eo*, but it is less acceptable in the *bieub*-absent form because of the short syllable length (see Table 2).

귀엽다 *gwiyeobda* saves two strokes and the change of the first character 귀 into 쪼 further saves one stroke. Since chatting or writing messages in CMC requires speed and clarity, a tradeoff between typing economy and intelligibility is essential (see also Rhee 2023).⁶ Clipped forms save strokes, but it is also important that they be identified as the intended word, especially in a context where no paralinguistic features are available. Intelligibility can be increased by the retention of *bieub*, which is evident from the comparison between, say, *job* and *jo*, the latter of which can no longer be identified as *jobda*. It is this tradeoff between typing economy and intelligibility that leads to the use of the *bieub*-present form in CMC.

Also, the use of the *bieub*-present form seems to be associated with a dialectal difference. Figure 3 represents the mean (un)acceptability of the two forms per person in terms of whether the participants have a Gyeongsang-do background (birthplace and/or residence) or not.

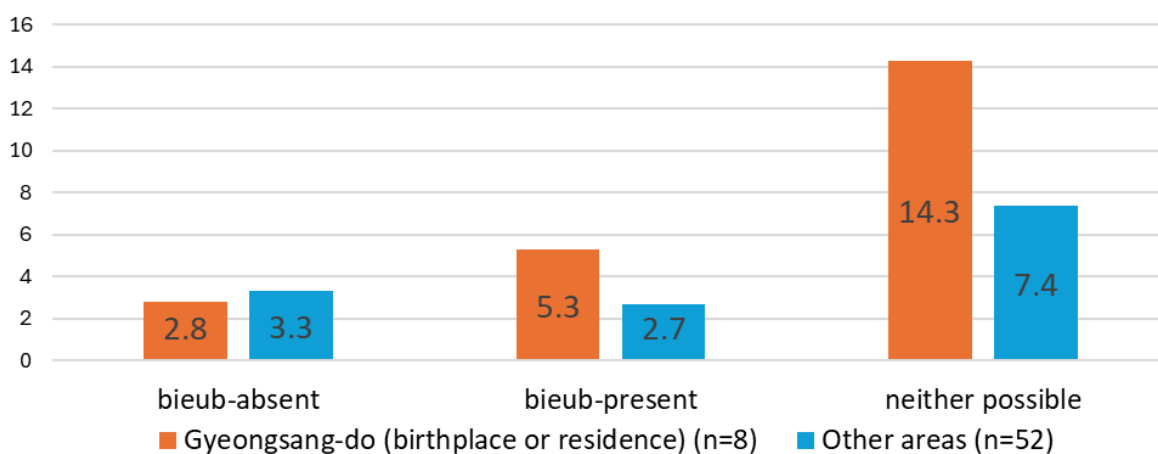


Figure 3: Regional Differences in Mean (Un)acceptability of Clipped Forms (per Person)

The results reveal that the *bieub*-present form was preferred by the participants with a Gyeongsang-do background, in comparison to those with other regional backgrounds. On average, 5.3 out of the 13 adjectives were judged to be acceptable in the *bieub*-present form by the participants with a Gyeongsang-do background, as compared to 2.7 by those who do not have such a background ($t(58) = 2.15, p = 0.036$). This is partly related to the fact that in the Gyeongsang dialects (North and South Gyeongsang), the phoneme /b/ represented by a *bieub* is retained where it disappears in other dialects. Notably, adjectives and verbs treated as irregulars in other dialects behave like regulars in the Gyeongsang dialects; for example, the adverbial form of *chubda* conjugates as *chubeo(seo)* rather than its irregular counterpart *chuweo(seo)* (Yeon 2012: 170–1). Along with the popularity among younger Internet users, this dialectal trait may serve as another sociopragmatic motivation for the use of the *bieub*-present form.

4 Summary

As seen in Section 3, several factors are involved in the acceptability of the two types of clipped forms, which poses a difficulty in proposing a simplistic generalization of the usage of each form.

⁶ Another example of typing economy is the simplification of the interrogative pronoun 뭐 ‘what’ as 모 *mo*, which saves one stroke (see Rhee 2023: 52 for this and other examples).

This study summarizes the results, using Ishikawa's 'cause and effect diagram', also known as 'fishbone diagram', which is used in various fields to represent the overview of potential factors influencing a certain effect (see Ishikawa 1978: Ch. 3 for details). Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the fishbone diagrams of possible factors contributing to the use of the two clipped forms:

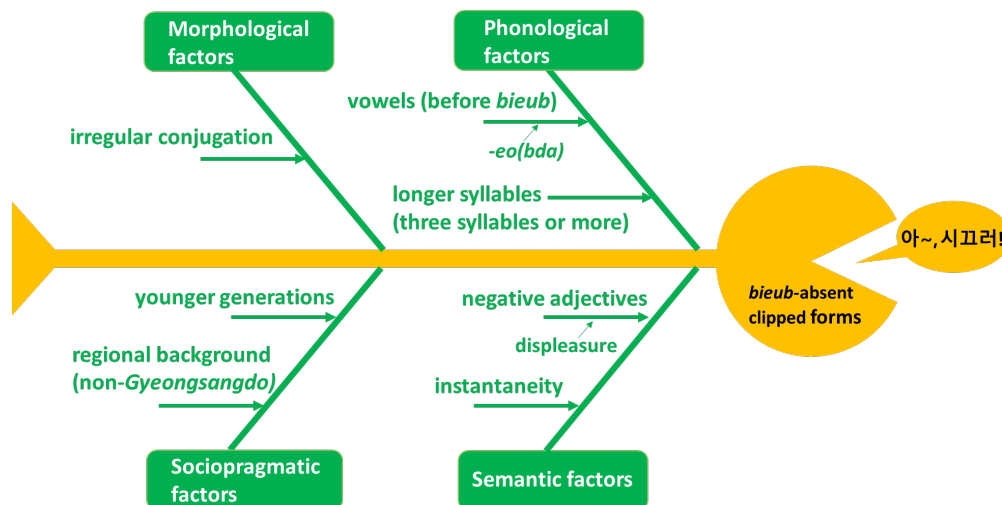


Figure 4: Fishbone Diagram of Possible Factors Contributing to the *bieub*-Absent Form

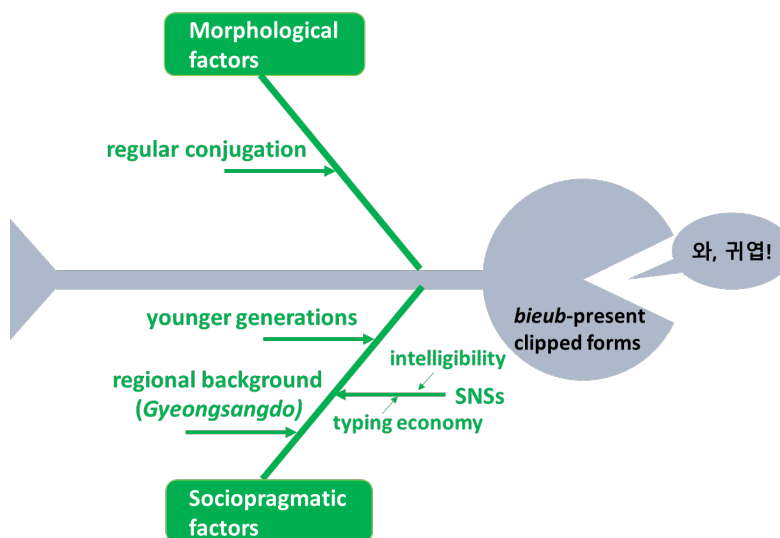


Figure 5: Fishbone Diagram of Possible Factors Contributing to the *bieub*-Present Form

It was revealed that four factors influence the use of the *bieub*-absent form. Morphologically, the form is strongly related to the *bieub*-irregular conjugation (e.g. *mugeoweo*), and semantically, it is preferred with adjectives expressing a speaker's negative feeling (e.g. displeasure), especially a feeling accompanied by a speaker's instantaneous reaction. Phonologically, adjectives with shorter syllables are less preferred (e.g. *chu*, *deo*), while those with the stem vowel *-eo* are more favored in the form (e.g. *siggeureo*, *ddeugeo*). From a sociopragmatic point of view, younger speakers seem to be less reluctant to use the form, though this may be more strongly so with the *bieub*-

present form. On the other hand, the *bieub*-present form is chiefly characterized by two factors: morphological and sociopragmatic factors. It is somewhat more acceptable with a regular-conjugation adjective (e.g. *job* < *jobda*) than is the *bieub*-absent form. Moreover, the retention of *bieub* increases the intelligibility of shortened forms, hence lending itself well to CMC, which requires both speed and clarity. Finally, just as the *bieub*-present form has some affinity with a regular conjugation, it is more likely to be used by speakers associated with Gyeongsang-do, where *bieub* adjectives retain a regular conjugation.

5 Conclusion

This study has illustrated that Korean adjectives, like their Japanese counterparts, can also be used in clipped forms. Two types of clipped forms were found with *bieub* (ir)regular adjectives (the *bieub*-absent and *bieub*-present forms). It was shown that they are more frequently used by the younger generation, which represents a common feature shared by Japanese clipped adjectives. In sociolinguistic terms, the popularity of such shortened forms among the younger generation is a widely observed phenomenon, which is spurred by the rapid spread of CMC (Tagliamonte 2011: 79). The influence of CMC plays a role in the increasing use of the *bieub*-present form because it satisfies a trade-off between typing economy and intelligibility. In addition to the rise of new communication media, the dialectal factor is also important for the occurrence of clipped forms. Just as Japanese clipped adjectives have their root in the Kansai dialect (Konno 2016), Korean *bieub*-present forms may have some association with the Gyeongsang dialects, though this needs to be verified by rigorous sociolinguistic investigation. Semantically, the use of clipped forms for an immediate reaction has also been observed for Japanese clipped adjectives (Iwasaki & Ono 2007, Iwasaki 2014, Konno 2016). The fact that Korean clipped adjectives, especially the *bieub*-absent form, likewise exhibit such a semantic inclination can be seen as another instance of iconicity between shorter forms and the meaning of instantaneity/immediacy, which Iwasaki (2014: 63) aptly describes as ‘the simpler the form, the simpler the neurological process’ it refers to.

Importantly, however, Korean differs from Japanese in that the *bieub*-absent form displays a preference according to the type of stem vowel. Adjectives with the stem vowel *-eo* are more likely candidates for the *bieub*-absent clipped form simply because it is cumbersome to pronounce the two similar vowels *-eoweo* in sequence. Such a phonological preference may not be so conspicuous in Japanese clipped forms. Harada’s (2013) research on *-i* dropped adjectives shows that the five most frequent adjectives in his data were varied in the type of stem vowel: *yaba(i)* ‘awful’, *sugo(i)* ‘great’, *kowa(i)* ‘scary’, *kimotiwaru(i)* ‘unpleasant’, *haya(i)* ‘quick, fast’. This contrast between the two languages is due to a difference in how interjection is verbalized. In Japanese, when adjectives are used for exclamation, they generally occur in the dictionary (or conclusive) form, from which their clipped forms are created via phonological changes involving the final vowel *-i*: the deletion of *-i* (*ita-i* > *ita* ‘painful’), its replacement with *sokuon* ‘moraic obstruent’ (*ita-i* > *itat*), and the coalescence of the two final vowels (*ita-i* > *ite*). In Korean, however, a similar exclamatory function can be expressed in the adverbial forms of adjectives, which, in the case of *bieub*-irregulars with the stem vowel *-eo*, result in the cumbersome sequence *-eoweo* and are therefore shortened into the *bieub*-absent clipped form.

Adjectives (and verbs) with *bieub* in their stems are mysterious in view of the fact that some retain a regular conjugation (e.g. *jobda* > *joba(seo)*), some have an irregular conjugation with their adverbial form ending in *-weo* (e.g. *areumdabda* > *areumdaweo(seo)*), and very few others show

another kind of irregularity with their adverbial form ending in *-wa* (e.g. *gobda* > *gowa(seo)*). In this sense, *bieub* (ir)regular adjectives (and verbs) in and of themselves present a number of intriguing issues to be investigated in future linguistic research. For the issue of clipped adjectives, our research only focused on thirteen *bieub* (ir)regular adjectives. It is of course necessary to broaden the scope of inquiry to other *bieub* (ir)regular adjectives (and verbs) and compare the results with those presented in this study. More generally, it is also important to explore whether *bieub* adjectives are the only locus for clipping or whether other types of adjectives also allow similar phenomena, and if the latter is the case, what kinds of variations are possible. With the advent of the digital era, investigation into such issues will inevitably present a more in-depth and comprehensive picture of colloquial Korean.

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