

From Short Time to Conditionals: The Semantics of Korean Adverb *iltan* (一旦)

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1 Introduction

一旦 is a Chinese character word shared across East Asian languages. The origins are shared, but in contemporary Korean (*iltan*), Chinese (*yidan*), and Japanese (*ittan*), the usages of this word appear to be different. The following examples illustrate the similarities and differences between Korean and Chinese.¹

- (1) a. **iltan** cemsim-ul mek-ko il-ul sicakha-ca.
first lunch-ACC eat-CONN work-ACC start-HORT
- b. * **yidan** chi wufan , zai kaishi ganhuo ba.
first eat lunch then start do.work HORT
'Let's first eat lunch and then start working.'

¹ The following abbreviations are used: ACC = accusative; ATTR(IRR)= attributive (irrealis); COND = conditional; CONN = connective; DECL = declarative; HORT = hortative; LOC = locative; NOM = nominative; PST = past; TOP = topic.

Japanese/Korean Linguistics 31.

Edited by William Giang, Lucien Brown, Shimako Iwasaki, Satoshi Nambu, and Daniel Pieper.

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- (2) a. ku-nun **iltan** sicakha-myen kkuth-kkaci ha-nta.
 he-TOP once start-COND end-until do-DECL
- b. ta **yidan** kaishi, jiu hui jianchi daodi.
 he once start then will keep.going until.end
 ‘Once he starts, he will keep going until he finishes.’

(1) presents examples of the temporal adverb 一旦 in Korean and Chinese. In (1a), the Korean *iltan* can be used with the meaning of ‘first’, assigning temporal priority to an event. However, as seen in (1b), this usage is impossible for the Chinese *yidan*. Meanwhile, (2) illustrates the use of this adverb in conditional sentences. In such contexts, *iltan* and *yidan* convey a meaning similar to the English ‘once’, forming a conditional construction. In (2a), the adverb *iltan* appears in the conditional clause along with the Korean conditional marker *myen*, adding the meaning of ‘as soon as’ or ‘once (something happens)’. In Modern Chinese, *yidan* is used in conditional sentences with modal auxiliary *hui*, where *hui* expresses a predictive future meaning, indicating a high probability of the event occurring in the future.

These observations suggest that *iltan* in contemporary Korean has undergone a semantic shift from denoting a short duration to functioning as a marker of sufficient condition. This study investigates how these meanings are interconnected and what mechanisms underlie this semantic extension.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews previous literature and establishes the foundation for our analysis. Section 3 investigates the temporal usage of *iltan*. Section 4 examines its conditional usage and discusses how its temporal meaning developed into a conditional one. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the findings and outlines directions for future research.

2 Previous Studies

Previous studies have not paid sufficient attention to *iltan*. In comparing the meanings of Korean *iltan* and Chinese *yidan*, Chong (2017) divided *iltan* into the following meanings: ‘first of all’; ‘for a moment’; ‘assumption of events that did not occur’; ‘assumption of events that have already occurred’; ‘sufficient conditionals’; and ‘high tendency’. Meanwhile, *yidan* in Chinese encompasses meanings such as ‘instantaneous nature of past realized events’; ‘assumption of events that did not occur’; ‘assumption of events that have already occurred’; ‘sufficient conditionals’; and ‘high tendency’. According to Chong (2017), the presence of *iltan*’s meaning of ‘first of all’, which is absent in *yidan*, causes errors in the use of *yidan* by Korean learners of Chinese due to negative transfer.

On the other hand, Kong (2024) examined the unique meanings and functions of *iltan* through a comparison of *iltan* with its synonyms *meonjeo* ‘first’, *useon* ‘first/primarily’, and *jamkan* ‘briefly’, as well as a quantitative corpus analysis. Kong (2024) suggests that *iltan* activates two distinct meanings, ‘priority’ and ‘tentative indeterminacy’, depending on the context.

Regarding the etymology and historical development of *iltan*, studies on the evolution of Chinese *yidan* provide relevant insights. According to Zhang (2015), the Chinese character 旦 originally depicted the rising sun on the horizon and, through metonymy, came to signify ‘morning’ or ‘day’. As a result, *yidan* was originally a noun phrase, with its etymological meaning interpreted

as ‘one morning’ or ‘one day’. During the Spring and Autumn Period (507–444 BCE), *yidan* developed into a temporal noun and adverb. As a temporal noun, it initially referred to ‘one morning’ or ‘one day’, and later extended to signify ‘a short period’ or ‘an unspecified time.’ As a temporal adverb, it acquired meanings such as ‘for a short time’ or ‘suddenly.’ By the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), *yidan* had further grammaticalized into a conditional connective used in hypothetical contexts.

Despite these findings, the development of Korean *iltan* and its relationship between temporal and conditional meanings remain largely unexplored. This study aims to propose a hypothesis regarding the synchronic semantic extension of *iltan*, rather than conducting a full diachronic analysis. A more comprehensive historical investigation will be included in future research.

3 The Temporal Usage of *iltan*

3.1 The Short Duration of an Event

Iltan initially expressed the short duration of an event. This meaning can be understood as originating from the etymological sense of 一且. In this context, *iltan* can be substituted with the adverb *camkkan*, denoting the sense of ‘a short time’.

- (3) ku pyeng-un **iltan** nas-ass-taka-to
 that illness-TOP temporarily recover-PST-CONN-also
 caypalha-l swu iss-ta.
 relapse-ATTR(IRR) possibility exist-DECL
 ‘That illness may temporarily recover but can relapse.’

In example (3), *iltan* modifies the predicate *nas* ‘recover’, indicating that the recovery from that illness is temporary. The connective *taka* signals a shift in state, while the emphatic *to* reinforces the idea that the recovery is not permanent. However, in contemporary Korean, this usage of *iltan* is largely obsolete and often ambiguous, as it may be misinterpreted since its more frequent usage indicates temporal priority.

3.2 The Temporal Priority of an Event

Iltan has been described in prominent Korean dictionaries as indicating temporal precedence. However, ‘precedence’ does not accurately capture the meaning that *iltan* represents. Instead, it activates an alternative set of events, which is associated with a scale. Within this scale, the speaker selects one element from the set, assigning it temporal priority. This selected event, however, may not necessarily be the optimal or most preferred choice. The following example (4) illustrates this usage.

- (4) **iltan** achim-ul mek-ko chwulpalha-ca.
 first breakfast-ACC eat-CONN depart-HORT
 ‘First, let’s eat breakfast and then depart.’
- Set of Alternatives: [Eat breakfast, Dress up, Brush teeth, Makeup ...]
 - Scale of priority: Eat breakfast > Dress up, Brush teeth, Makeup ...
 - Element chosen by *iltan*: Eat breakfast

Here, an alternative set is presented, consisting of a series of possible actions that can be performed in the morning, such as eating breakfast, dressing up, brushing teeth, and wearing makeup. The ‘scale of priority’ represents the order or hierarchy of importance among these actions. In this context, eating breakfast is regarded as the highest priority, followed by dressing up, brushing teeth, and wearing makeup, in descending order of significance. This suggests that, within the morning routine, eating breakfast is considered more important than the other tasks, such as dressing up or brushing teeth, though all these tasks are still part of the daily routine. The element selected by *iltan* in this context is eating breakfast. According to the scale of priority, the task chosen is the one that holds the highest rank. In other words, *iltan* prioritizes eating breakfast over the other tasks in the set, signaling that breakfast is the first action the speaker would choose to perform from the alternatives presented.

Given the involvement of the speaker’s intentional choice, *iltan* is confined to contexts that convey temporal priority with a clear sense of intentionality. Consequently, this adverb is not applicable in contexts involving events beyond the speaker’s control, such as natural phenomena, as illustrated in (5):

- (5) a. * *iltan* pi-ka o-ko ttang-i cec-nunta.
 first rain-NOM come-CONN ground-NOM get.wet-DECL
 ‘*It rains, then the ground gets wet.’
- b. * *iltan* pi-ka o-myen ttang-i cec-nunta.
 first rain-NOM come-COND ground-NOM get.wet-DECL
 ‘*Once it rains, the ground gets wet.’

4 The Conditional Usage of *iltan*

We have analyzed the semantic properties and usage of *iltan* as a temporal adverb. However, *iltan* is also commonly employed in conditional clauses. This leads to two questions: How did *iltan* come to be associated with conditional constructions, and what specific semantic function does it perform within these conditional contexts?

Conditional sentences with *iltan* indicate a sufficient condition; if event A occurs, event B will follow. Although event B may also occur due to factors other than A, *iltan* in a conditional clause indicates event A as the primary cause of event B. We propose that this interpretation stems from the temporal priority meaning of *iltan*.

- (6) ***iltan*** Chelswu-ka o-myen na-nun ttena-nta.
 first Cheolsu-NOM come-COND I-TOP leave-DECL
 ‘Once Cheolsu arrives, I will leave.’

Iltan conditional sentences have another temporal characteristic: They indicate that event B in the apodosis occurs immediately after event A in the protasis, representing a short interval between A and B. We speculate that this meaning originates from the etymological sense of *iltan*, namely, ‘a short time’. It is important to note that this short interval does not necessarily mean an objectively short time. Rather, it refers to an interval perceived as short by the speaker subjectively. Consider the following example (7). Although no one can go to prison ‘immediately’ in the literal

sense—given the necessary legal procedures such as arrest and trial— *iltan* is used because the speaker perceives the event of going to prison as occurring directly after the event of exposure.

- (7) i il-i **iltan** phoklotoy-myen ne-nun (palo)
 this matter-NOM first be.revealed-COND you-TOP (immediately)
 kamok-ey ka-nta.
 prison-LOC go-DECL
 ‘Once this matter is exposed, you will (immediately) go to prison.’

As seen in (6) and (7), *iltan* conditionals can convey a more specialized conditional meaning, namely, ‘predicting future events when a specific condition is met’. Given this characteristic, we classify them as ‘predictive conditionals’ (Thompson, Longacre, & Hwang 1985).

If the sequence of events A and B recurs consistently, a generalization can be made in which the occurrence of A leads to the occurrence of B. Based on this generalization, we can formulate a conditional construction in which, if a specific event A occurs among a set of possible events, event B follows as a consequence. This pattern characterizes *iltan* as a marker of habitual conditionals, as shown in (8).

- (8) a. ku-nun **iltan** ilena-myen meysince-lul hwakinha-nta.
 he-TOP first wake.up-COND messenger-ACC check-DECL
 ‘Once he wakes up, he checks his messenger.’
 b. Sisinkyeng-un **iltan** phakoytoy-myen hoypok-i
 optic.nerve-TOP first be.destroyed-COND recovery-NOM
 pwulkanungha-ta.
 impossible-DECL
 ‘Once the optic nerve is destroyed, recovery is impossible.’

The expansion of meaning explained so far can be summarized in the following figure.

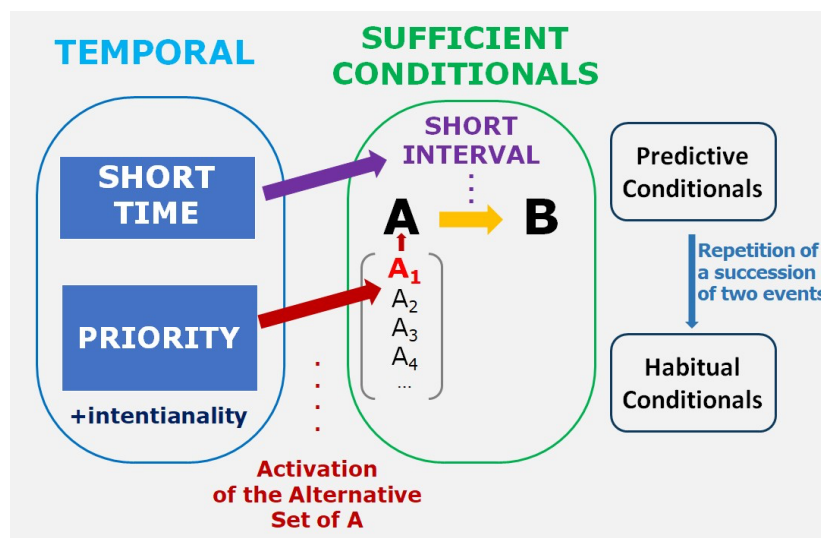


Figure 1: The Mechanism of the Semantic Extension of *iltan*

5 Future Research Directions

This study examines the semantic properties of *iltan* in contemporary Korean. The findings reveal that *iltan* originally denoted a short duration of an event before evolving to mark temporal priority, selecting one event as occurring first among a set of alternatives. This sense of temporal priority, often involving a relationship between two events, later extended to conditional constructions, where *iltan* signals a sufficient condition—indicating that once event A occurs, event B follows.

Beyond this synchronic approach, future research will incorporate a diachronic analysis to investigate its historical development and the evolution of its semantic and syntactic properties. Such an approach will provide a more comprehensive understanding of its usage and patterns of semantic change. While this study briefly touches on a contrastive linguistic perspective, a full comparative analysis was beyond its scope. Future research will conduct an in-depth contrastive study of *iltan* in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese, enabling a systematic comparison of its usage across these languages and offering insights into both shared and language specific characteristics.

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