

Some Questions Related to the Linguistic Essence of the Korean “*tho*”

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The great leader Comrade **Kim Il Sung** said as follows.

“It is a source of great pride and encouragement to us that our nation has a spoken and written language of its own. Because we Korean people have had our own language from remote antiquity, we were able to create an excellent national culture and to preserve intact the fine customs and traditions of our nation. And since our people have an excellent language, our national pride is high and our sense of unity, too, is great.”

(“**KIM IL SUNG WORKS**” Vol. 18 P. 16)

Korean language, both spoken and written, is incomparably superior to any other languages of the world and it serves as a powerful weapon in the development of economy, culture, science, and technology as well as in all fields of the socialist construction.

What makes it superior is that not only it flows easily in pronunciation and sounds very beautiful but also it has rich vocabulary and highly developed grammatical structure.

In particular, the system of the Korean *tho*, a grammatical morpheme, has developed so highly that it can express almost any grammatical expressions of any other languages of the world.

But some scholars and students studying Korean language did not have a correct understanding of the Korean *tho* and considered it to be a kind of postposition.

Ron Cowan, a scholar of English grammar said in his grammar book (“The Teacher’s Grammar of English” Cambridge University Press, 2008, page 162)

“ Many languages, such as English, express thematic roles by means of prepositions. Some languages, however, use postposition (i.e. morphemes that express the same thematic roles but come after head noun). Languages that use postpositions in this way include Korean and Japanese. For example, in Korean, the postposition –e, which corresponds to the goal-directed English preposition to comes after noun. This contrast between the English preposition and the Korean postposition is shown in this example.

ex. a *mikuk* *e* → Korean
 b to the US → English „

There have been many controversies over linguistic problems about the Korean grammatical morpheme *tho*.

Certain foreign scholars and students studying Korean language have claimed that the Korean *tho* is a kind of postposition, but I strongly disagree with them for the following reasons.

First, it is because they do not have a correct understanding of the linguistic essence of the Korean *tho* and the postposition.

The Korean *tho* is the only morpheme to express the grammatical meanings in Korean language which is an agglutinative language.

It differs from the preposition or postposition in English which a kind of lexical morphemes in that preposition and postposition express only some grammatical functions and meanings, while *tho* in

Korean language is an integral grammatical morpheme.

In general, morphemes are divided into lexical morphemes and grammatical morphemes. Lexical morphemes are morphemes used in word formation and so involve stems of word and roots of word, suffixes and prefixes. But, grammatical morphemes involve reflexive endings, grammatical endings and agglutinative affixes which express grammatical persons, numbers, tenses, voices, moods and aspects, etc.

ex: reflexive endings; build — built
 grammatical endings ; a school — schools
 agglutinative affixes ; *hakgyo-e* (to school)

Certain foreign scholars have alleged that the Korean *tho* can be attached to the noun to do grammatical function while English prepositions can be added to the noun(in front of it) to express grammatical meaning. This incorrect interpretation comes from their misunderstanding of the linguistic essence of the English preposition and the Korean *tho*. The difference between the two is not simply a question of the places of word formation. If Korean *tho* functioned as a lexical morpheme which also expresses grammatical meaning, like English preposition, it could be right to regard it as a “postposition”.

Second, it is because they have failed to correctly understand that the Korean *tho* has all the typical features of grammatical morphemes.

The main feature of the Korean *tho* as a grammatical morpheme is that it can play all kinds grammatical roles and express meanings of grammatical persons, numbers, tenses, voices, moods and aspects, etc.

But English preposition can express semantic and grammatical meanings only when given lexical meanings such as places, time, causes, purposes, means, manners, etc., and the grammatical meanings of persons, numbers, tenses, voices, moods and aspects, etc. can be expressed only by the complete or analytic forms.

As a matter of fact, most of English prepositions were formed by the combination of the independent parts of speech, so they are regarded as lexical morphemes, not grammatical morphemes.

ex: prepositions ; about— on + by+ out (adverb)
 along— on + long (adjective)
 beside— by + side (noun)

When we consider the Korean *tho* to be a postposition, there might be some contradictions to the fact that they do not consider prepositional adverb that come after the verb to be a postposition.

The main reason for this contradiction is that these prepositional adverbs are linguistic morphemes to form phrasal verbs, so we should think these prepositional adverbs to be words that have some characteristics of a preposition and an adverb or sometimes to be unchangeable particles.

ex: defend + on/upon
 rely + on/upon

The Korean *tho* is similar to the affix of Japanese but there are some differences between them. They are similar in that Japanese affix includes linguistic morphemes (prefix and suffix) as well as grammatical morpheme, and they are both agglutinate affixes and those affixes are not postpositions

The feature of Korean *tho* is that a morpheme has only a single meaning and when needed to express several grammatical meanings, several *thos* are added one after another in order to express the complete grammatical meaning. Thus it semantically corresponds to all grammatical forms in other languages.

Summing up all of these, it can be said that the Korean *tho* is not a postposition but such a specific grammatical morpheme or agglutinative affix as we can not find in any other languages of the world.

In view of this, it may be true that our spoken and written language is incomparably superior to any other languages of the world.

We should have a deep knowledge of our language, love it and try to further develop it.