Against a Distributed Morphology Analysis of Korean Negative Imperatives

Sukchan Lee (scleev@snu.ac.kr)

Aug 15, 2025

Introduction

Negation in Korean

Korean has two types of negation: short form *an* and long form *ani*.
An precedes the verb, whereas *ani* follows the verb and requires *do*-support.

(1)   a.   Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey *an* ka-ss-ta.
           Siwu-TOP school-to NEG go-PST-DECL
     b.   Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey ka-ci *ani* ha-yess-ta.
           Siwu-TOP school-to go-NMLZ NEG do-PST-DECL
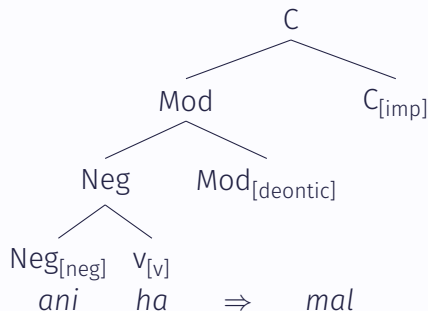   'Siwu didn't go to school.'

Negative imperatives in Korean

Negative imperatives in Korean cannot be formed with either *an* or *ani*.
Instead, they require a special form, *mal*, which **follows** the verb but does not
require *do*-support.

(2) a. *Hakkyo-ey *an*   ka-la!
          school-to NEG go-IMP

     b. *Hakkyo-ey ka-ci   *ani* ha-yela!
          school-to   go-NMLZ NEG do-IMP

     c. Hakkyo-ey **ka**-ci   *mal*-ala!
          school-to   go-NMLZ MAL-IMP
          'Don't go to school!'

A Distributed Morphology analysis

One of the most widely accepted account of this phenomenon is C.-h. Han and C. Lee's (2007) Distributed Morphology (DM) analysis. They argue that *mal* is a spell-out of *ani* + *ha* 'NEG + do' in the context of deontic modality.

```
                        C
                       / \
                    Mod   C[imp]
                   /   \
                Neg    Mod[deontic]
               /   \
          Neg[neg]  v[v]
            ani     ha      ⇒      mal
```

In a nutshell

I argue against a DM analysis of Korean negative imperatives.

- DM approaches to Korean negative imperatives make a strong prediction that plain negation *an(i)* and *mal* are in complementary distribution. I show that this is not the case; they are in fact interchangeable in several contexts.
- I propose that *mal* is a lexical item in its own right; specifically, an auxiliary verb with the semantics of subjunctive negation.
- The (un)grammaticality of *an(i)* and *mal* in Korean negative imperatives follow straightforwardly from independently motivated assumptions about the syntax of imperatives.

In a nutshell

I argue against a DM analysis of Korean negative imperatives.

- DM approaches to Korean negative imperatives make a strong prediction that plain negation *an(i)* and *mal* are in complementary distribution. I show that this is not the case; they are in fact **interchangeable** in several contexts.
- I propose that *mal* is a lexical item in its own right; specifically, an **auxiliary** verb with the semantics of **subjunctive negation**.
- The **(un)grammaticality** of *an(i)* and *mal* in Korean negative imperatives follow straightforwardly from independently motivated assumptions about the **syntax of imperatives**.

In a nutshell

I argue against a DM analysis of Korean negative imperatives.

- DM approaches to Korean negative imperatives make a strong prediction that plain negation *an(i)* and *mal* are in complementary distribution. I show that this is not the case; they are in fact **interchangeable** in several contexts.
- I propose that *mal* is a lexical item in its own right; specifically, an **auxiliary** verb with the semantics of subjunctive negation.
- The (un)grammaticality of *an(i)* and *mal* in Korean negative imperatives follow straightforwardly from independently motivated assumptions about the syntax of imperatives.

In a nutshell

I argue against a DM analysis of Korean negative imperatives.

- DM approaches to Korean negative imperatives make a strong prediction that plain negation *an(i)* and *mal* are in complementary distribution. I show that this is not the case; they are in fact **interchangeable** in several contexts.
- I propose that *mal* is a lexical item in its own right; specifically, an **auxiliary** verb with the semantics of subjunctive negation.
- The (un)grammaticality of *an(i)* and *mal* in Korean negative imperatives follow straightforwardly from independently motivated assumptions about the **syntax of imperatives**.

On the Distribution of *mal*

Negative imperatives

(2) a. *Hakkyo-ey *an* ka-la!
         school-to NEG go-IMP

   b. *Hakkyo-ey ka-ci *ani* ha-yela!
         school-to go-NMLZ NEG do-IMP

   c. Hakkyo-ey ka-ci *mal*-ala!
         school-to go-NMLZ MAL-IMP
         'Don't go to school!'

Obligation

(3) a. Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey *an* ka-aya ha-n-ta.
         Siwu-TOP school-to NEG go-COMP should-PRES-DECL
     b. Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey ka-ci *ani* ha-yeya ha-n-ta.
         Siwu-TOP school-to go-NMLZ NEG do-COMP should-PRES-DECL
     c. Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey ka-ci *mal*-aya ha-n-ta.
         Siwu-TOP school-to go-NMLZ MAL-COMP should-PRES-DECL
         'Siwu should not go to school.'

Embedded clauses of volitional verbs[2]

(4)　a.　Siwu-nun Mina-ka *an* ttena-ki-lul　 pala-n-ta.
　　　　Siwu-TOP Mina-NOM NEG leave-NMLZ-ACC want-PRES-DECL

　　b.　Siwu-nun Mina-ka　ttena-ci　*ani* ha-ki-lul　 pala-n-ta.
　　　　Siwu-TOP Mina-NOM leave-NMLZ NEG do-NMLZ-ACC want-PRES-DECL

　　c.　Siwu-nun Mina-ka　ttena-ci　*mal*-ki-lul　 pala-n-ta.
　　　　Siwu-TOP Mina-NOM leave-NMLZ MAL-NMLZ-ACC want-PRES-DECL
　　　　'Siwu wants Mina to not leave.'

---

[2]To account for these data, C.-h. Han and C. Lee (2007) assume that some volitional verbs and complementizers may have double selectional properties. However, this raises the question of why such an optionality in selection exists.

(5) a. *Siwu-ka   Mina-eykey *an* ttena-la-ko   tangpwuha-yess-ta.
Siwu-NOM Mina-to   NEG leave-IMP-COMP ask-PST-DECL

b. *Siwu-ka   Mina-eykey ttena-ci   *ani* ha-la-ko
Siwu-NOM Mina-to   leave-NMLZ NEG do-IMP-COMP
tangpwuha-yess-ta.
ask-PST-DECL

c. Siwu-ka   Mina-eykey ttena-ci   *mal*-la-ko   tangpwuha-yess-ta.
Siwu-NOM Mina-to   leave-NMLZ MAL-IMP-COMP ask-PST-DECL
'Siwu asked Mina to not leave.'

(6)   *Context:* The speaker had been looking forward to a family vacation planned
      for tomorrow. However, it has been raining non-stop for the past three days.
      Hoping that the rain will stop by tomorrow, the speaker says the following:

   a.   Nayil-un   pi-ka   *an*   wa-ass-umyen.
        tomorrow-TOP rain-NOM NEG come-PST-COND

   b.   Nayil-un   pi-ka   o-ci   *ani*   ha-yess-umyen.
        tomorrow-TOP rain-NOM come-NMLZ NEG do-PST-COND

   c.   Nayil-un   pi-ka   o-ci   *mal*-ass-umyen.
        tomorrow-TOP rain-NOM come-NMLZ MAL-PST-COND
        '*(Lit.)* If it didn't rain tomorrow…'

(7) a. Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey ka-lci *an* ka-lci kominha-n-ta.
Siwu-TOP school-to go-COMP NEG go-COMP contemplate-PRES-DECL

b. Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey ka-lci ka-ci *ani* ha-lci
Siwu-TOP school-to go-COMP go-NMLZ NEG do-COMP
kominha-n-ta.
contemplate-PRES-DECL

c. Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey ka-lci *mal*-lci kominha-n-ta.
Siwu-TOP school-to go-COMP MAL-COMP contemplate-PRES-DECL
'Siwu is contemplating whether he should go to school or not.

Polar disjunctives with *mal* in the second disjunct are highly productive in Korean. C.-h. Han and C. Lee (2007) acknowledge their existence but treat them as idiomatic; I argue against this view, citing their overwhelming productivity.

Examples of this sort appear not to require deontic modality:

(8) a. Na-nun ne-ka   ka-kena *mal*-kena sangkwan an   ha-n-ta.
       I-TOP   you-NOM go-or   MAL-or   concern   NEG do-PRES-DECL
       'I don't care if you go or not.'

    b. Siwu-ka   hakkyo-ey ka-lci   *mal*-lci   nay-ka ettehkey al-a?
       Siwu-NOM school-to   go-COMP MAL-COMP I-NOM   how   know-Q
       'How would I know if Siwu will go to school or not?'

Exhortatives

(9) a. *Hakkyo-ey *an* ka-ca.
   school-to NEG go-EXH

  b. *Hakkyo-ey ka-ci *ani* ha-ca.
   school-to go-NMLZ NEG do-EXH

  c. Hakkyo-ey ka-ci *mal*-ca.
   school-to go-NMLZ MAL-EXH
   'Let's not go to school.'

Promissives[3]

(10)   a.   Hakkyo-ey *an* ka-ma.
             school-to NEG go-PROM

       b.   Hakkyo-ey ka-ci *ani* ha-ma.
             school-to go-NMLZ NEG do-PROM

       c.   *Hakkyo-ey ka-ci *mal*-uma.
             school-to go-NMLZ MAL-PROM
             'I won't go to school.'

---

[3]Choi (2024) concludes from this set of data that what characterizes the occurrence of *mal* is not deontic modality, but a person feature [+2] (cf. Zanuttini et al. 2012). However, his analysis also builds on DM assumptions and therefore predicts plain negation and *mal* to be in complementary distribution.

Interim summary

Environment	plain negation *an(i)*	*mal*
Imperatives	✗	✓
Exhortatives	✗	✓
Embedded clauses of directive verbs	✗	✓
Embedded clauses of volitional verbs	✓	✓
Obligation contexts	✓	✓
Conditional wishes	✓	✓
Polar disjunctives	✓	✓
Promissives	✓	✗

Analysis

There are good reasons to believe that exhortatives and embedded clauses of directive verbs are **basically imperatives**.

(11)   a.   Exhortatives: '**Let's** not go to school.'
       b.   Promissives: 'I won't go to school.'

(5c)   Siwu-ka   Mina-eykey ttena-ci   mal-**la**-ko   tangpwuha-yess-ta.
       Siwu-NOM Mina-to   leave-NMLZ MAL-IMP-COMP ask-PST-DECL
       'Siwu asked Mina not to leave.'

A brief comment on *mal*

The fact that <u>*mal* does not require *do*-support</u> supports its status as an **auxiliary**. I argue that *mal* is restricted to use in subjunctive contexts, whereas *an(i)* is insensitive to the mood distinction.

(1) a. Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey *an* ka-ss-ta.
       Siwu-TOP school-to NEG go-PST-DECL

b. Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey ka-ci *ani* ha-yess-ta.
   Siwu-TOP school-to go-NMLZ NEG do-PST-DECL

c. *Siwu-nun hakkyo-ey ka-ci *mal*-ass-ta.
   Siwu-TOP school-to go-NMLZ MAL-PST-DECL
   'Siwu didn't go to school.'

The syntax of imperatives

Many languages (e.g., Italian, Modern Greek, and Spanish) are known to lack negative imperatives. C.-h. Han (2001) argues that the lack of negative imperatives in these languages can be accounted for if we assume the following syntactic requirements to hold of a **directive force operator** *Op* in C:

1. *Op* attracts the verb to C.   (the verb movement requirement)
2. *Op* must not be c-commanded by Neg.   (the anti c-command requirement)

*¡*No lee!* 'Don't read!'

```
         CP
        /  \
       C    IP
       |    △
       Iᵢ   tᵢ
      /  \
    Neg   I
    no    |
         V[imp]
          lee
```
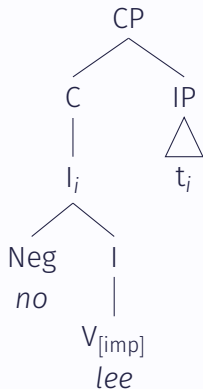
verb movement ✓
"When the imperative verb moves to C,
the [imp] feature on the verb
is unified with *Op*." (C.-h. Han 2001)

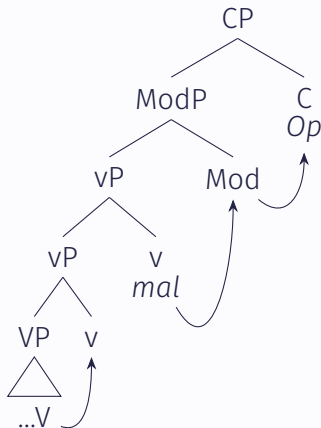anti c-command ✗
Cliticization of *no* results in
a Neg ≫ *Op* configuration

(2) a. *Hakkyo-ey *an* ka-la!
         school-to NEG go-IMP

     b. *Hakkyo-ey ka-ci   *ani* ha-yela!
         school-to go-NMLZ NEG do-IMP

     c. Hakkyo-ey ka-ci   *mal*-ala!
         school-to go-NMLZ MAL-IMP
         'Don't go to school!'

I demonstrate that <u>*mal* is ruled in and plain negation *an(i)* is ruled out in Korean negative imperatives</u> for the same reasons.

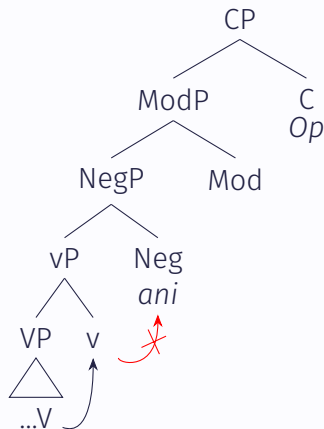### Negative imperatives with *mal*

verb movement ✓
Mal itself bears a [v] feature

anti c-command ✓
vacuously satisfied

Negative imperatives with *ani*

CP
- ModP
  - NegP
    - vP
      - VP
        - …V
      - v
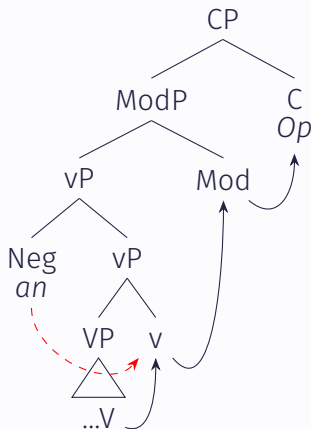   - Neg
      - *ani*
  - Mod
- C
  - *Op*

verb movement ✗
Neg head blocks V-to-C movement

anti c-command ✓
Op asymmetrically c-commands Neg

Negative imperatives with *an*

verb movement ✓
satisfied by the main (lexical) verb

anti c-command ✗
Cliticization of *an* results in
a Neg ≫ *Op* structure

Negative imperatives for children

As noted by C. Lee (1993) and discussed in C.-h. Han and C. Lee (2007), <u>young Korean children (2 years of age) sometimes produce negative imperatives with short negation</u>.

(12)   a.   (To the child's father, leaving for school)
                Appa, hakkyo *an* ka!
                daddy school NEG go
                'Daddy, don't go to school!'

        b.   *An* pwul kkeyo!
                NEG light turn.off
   'Don't turn off the light!'   (C. Lee 1993)

Child grammar and the clitic status of *an*

This acquisition pattern is straightforwardly explained under the present analysis. Children at this stage are known to <u>occasionally fail to cliticize *an* to the verb</u> (H. Han and M.-K. Park 1994).

(13) a. Na *an* pap mek-e.
          I   NEG rice eat-DECL
          'I do not eat rice.'

     b. *An* mak uwl-e.
          NEG much cry-DECL
          '(I) do not cry much.'   (Cho and Hong 1988)

Negative imperatives with *an* (for children)
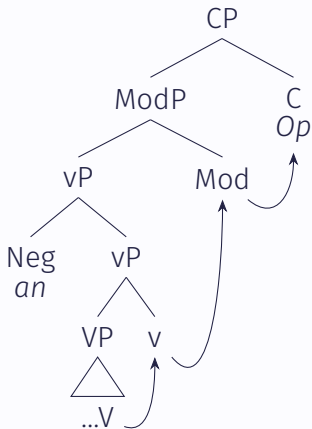
verb movement ✓
satisfied by the main (lexical) verb

anti c-command ✓
Op asymmetrically c-commands Neg

Summary

Summary

- C.-h. Han and C. Lee's (2007) DM approach to Korean negative imperatives is too strong, as it wrongly predicts that plain negation *an(i)* and *mal-* are in complementary distribution.

- I showed that the grammaticality pattern of Korean negative imperatives as well as the acquisition pattern follow straightforwardly from the syntactic requirements of a directive force operator *Op* in C.

- Korean fits neatly into the broader typology developed by C.-h. Han (2001) and Zeijlstra (2006), with the patterns above deriving from general syntactic constraints rather than language-specific morphological operations.

Summary

- C.-h. Han and C. Lee's (2007) DM approach to Korean negative imperatives is too strong, as it wrongly predicts that plain negation *an(i)* and *mal-* are in complementary distribution.

- I showed that the grammaticality pattern of Korean negative imperatives as well as the acquisition pattern follow straightforwardly from the syntactic requirements of a directive force operator *Op* in C.

- Korean fits neatly into the broader typology developed by C.-h. Han (2001) and Zeijlstra (2006), with the patterns above deriving from general syntactic constraints rather than language-specific morphological operations.

- C.-h. Han and C. Lee's (2007) DM approach to Korean negative imperatives is too strong, as it wrongly predicts that plain negation *an(i)* and *mal-* are in complementary distribution.

- I showed that the grammaticality pattern of Korean negative imperatives as well as the acquisition pattern follow straightforwardly from the syntactic requirements of a directive force operator *Op* in C.

- Korean fits neatly into the broader typology developed by C.-h. Han (2001) and Zeijlstra (2006), with the patterns above deriving from general syntactic constraints rather than language-specific morphological operations.

Acknowledgments

References

van der Auwera, Johan (2006). "Why languages prefer prohibitives." In: *Journal of Foreign Languages* 1, pp. 2–25.

Cho, Young-mee Yu and Ki-Sun Hong (1988). "Evidence for the VP Constituent from Child Korean." In: *Papers and Reports on Child Language Development* 27, p. 31.

Choi, Jaehoon (2024). "On the Incompatibility between Short Negation and Imperatives." In: *Studies in Linguistics* 73, pp. 95–116.

Han, Chung-hye (1998). "The Structure and Interpretation of Imperatives: Mood and Force in Universal Grammar." PhD thesis. University of Pennsylvania.

— (2001). "Force, negation and imperatives." In: *The Linguistic Review* 18.4, pp. 289–325.

Han, Chung-hye and Chung-min Lee (2002). "On negative imperatives in Korean." In: *Proceedings of the 16th Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation*. Seoul: The Korean Society for Language and Information, pp. 59–68.

Han, Chung-hye and Chungmin Lee (2007). "On negative imperatives in Korean." In: *Linguistic Inquiry* 38.2, pp. 373–395.

References

Han, Chung-hye, Jeffrey Lidz, et al. (2007). "V-raising and grammar competition in Korean: Evidence from negation and quantifier scope." In: *Linguistic Inquiry* 38.1, pp. 1–47.

Han, Ho and Myung-Kwan Park (1994). "The syntax of negation in Korean and its development in child language." In: *Proceedings of ESCOL 94*, pp. 152–162.

Lee, Chungmin (1993). "The acquisition of mood indicators in Korean." In: *Harvard studies in Korean linguistics 5.* Harvard University, pp. 41–61.

Park, Ji Yeon (2010). "A diachronic study on the grammatical status of "malda"." In: *Eo Mun Lon Chong (Korean Language and Literature)* 53, pp. 107–144.

Park, Soyoung (2023). "-Ulkel and -malta suppletion." In: *Morphology* 25.2, pp. 98–116.

Zanuttini, Raffaella et al. (2012). "A syntactic analysis of interpretive restrictions on imperative, promissive, and exhortative subjects." In: *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 30.4, pp. 1231–1274.

Zeijlstra, Hedde (2006). "The ban on true negative imperatives." In: *Empirical issues in syntax and semantics* 6.1, pp. 405–424.