

Construction families in Korean greetings and feel-good talk

— Understanding Korean through the lense of the construction grammar approach

Stefan Knoob, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

Introduction

Linguistic theory is full of reductionalism and compartmentalisation. In part, this is simply because language is a messy and boundless mass of facts that is hard to make sense of and even harder to talk about in a comprehensive and wholistic fashion. We will see very concrete examples of this difficulty, namely when we will try to represent the bundle of possible sentences that instantiate the schematic constructions that make up language according to the approach pursued in this essay.

Anyway, theories of language usually operate by postulating different levels or modules of organisation and representation: phonological, morphological and syntactic; lexical and grammatical; lexical, syntactic and semantic; linguistic/semantic and pragmatic; linguistic and cognitive; language and culture. And in most of our mainstream linguistic theories only some of these levels are properly regarded as the object of theoretical enquiry. Others belong somewhere else.

The modular approach has been particularly vigorous when drawing the line between grammar and meaning, semantics and pragmatics, language and culture. While this approach directly emerged from notions of the human brain as a kind of computer-like system, one of its other motivations would seem to lie in an understandable rejection of cultural essentialism and its colonial racist and orientalist origins. Recently, however, the pendulum has begun to swing back towards older ideas that see language as closely embedded in general cognition, as well as the culture in whose perpetuation it is strongly involved (see cognitive-linguistic approaches as represented, for example, by Lakoff 1987, Langacker 1987 and 1991, Croft 2002; anthropological-linguistic approaches as in Gumperz & Levinson 1996).

Another form of reductionism and compartmentalisation, this time going all the way back to grammarian theories of the 19th and earlier centuries, is the idea that linguistic structures can be broken up into its constituent parts (morphemes, words, phrases) and that these building blocks are the primitives of the language system. In particular, this view holds that these building blocks exist independently of the structures that they are part of and that most of them carry meaning that has a reality outside of this context. Again, however, recent usage-based approaches, particularly those under the banner of Construction Grammar, have demonstrated numerous cases in which constructions on the clause or sentence level carry a particular meaning as a whole that cannot be easily located in any specific part of the construction (see among others Goldberg 1995, Croft 2000 and 2002, Tomasello 2003 and the usage-based approaches collected in Barlow and Kemmer 2000).

Applying the theoretical instrumentarium of cognitive-linguistic theories, particularly as developed by William Croft (2000 and 2002), this essay explores the grammar of HELLO and GOOD-BYE greetings in Korean as well as an area of socio-cultural semantics subsumed under the label FEEL-GOOD TALK. It will, albeit in a sketchy manner, outline a number of interrelated construction families that are employed in a highly regular, systematic and conventionalised fashion. While theoretical in approach, it is hoped that the investigation remains sufficiently grounded in actual language material to be of use to the practitioner – teacher and learner – of Korean as a foreign language

Expressing meaning and function through a construction family: GOOD-BYE and HELLO

Let us begin with one of the most annoying claims of Korean Beginners textbooks: the proposition that Korean has two ways of saying "Good Bye", one used to the person who stays and one used to the person who goes:

- (1) a. 안녕히 계세요! b. 안녕히 가세요!
peacefully stay.COMMAND peacefully go.COMMAND
'Stay in peace' 'Go in peace!'

Set aside the fact that these greetings have formal variants:

- (2) a. 안녕히 계십시오! b. 안녕히 가십시오!
peacefully stay.COMMAND peacefully go.COMMAND
'Stay in peace' 'Go in peace!'

No, for the learner, the most annoying thing about these greetings is that she assiduously tries to use these greetings only to discover that Koreans don't really use them all that often. Instead, one hears all kinds of other expressions, beginning with the following non-honorific variants in which **안녕히** is replaced with **잘**:

- (3) a. 잘 있어(요)! b. 잘 가(요)!
well stay well go
'Stay well!' 'Go well!'

But then again, to be fair, many textbooks teach these at some more advanced stage. There are, however, many more expressions used at the moment of parting:

- (4) a. 잘 갔다오세요! b. 빨리 갔다오세요!
well go.and.come.HONORIFIC quickly go.and.come-HONORIFIC
- (5) a. 안녕히 들어가세요! b. 안녕히 주무세요! c. 편히 쉬세요!
peacefully go.in=go.home.HONORIFIC peacefully sleep.HON comfortably rest.HON
- (6) a. 조심해서 가세요! b. 조심해서 들어가세요!
carefully go.HONORIFIC peacefully sleep.HONORIFIC
- (7) a. 재미있게 노세요! b. 재미있게 놀다 오세요! c. 재미있게 놀다 가세요!
enjoyably play.HONORIFIC enjoyably play-AND come.HON enjoyably play-AND go.HON

One notable fact about these expressions is that they are to some degree situationally and lexically specific, more so than the textbook greetings in (1). For example, the expressions in (4) and (7b) with **오다** *comes* as the final verb are good-byes to a person who is going out for a while and will return, those in (5a, 6b) are good-byes to people going home, those in (5b-5c) to people who will be retiring for the day and those in (7) to someone who are or will be enjoying themselves, usually in a group event.

However, they are at the same time not only highly conventional but also schematic variations on the same construction families. Indeed, this also goes for the following, even more specific expressions all of which nevertheless serve as GOOD-BYE greetings:

- (8) a. 오늘 잘 해! b. 잘 쉬어! c. 운동 열심히 하고 와! d. 크리스마스 잘 보내!
today well do well rest exercise ardently do-AND com Xmas well spend

- (9) a. 영화 잘 보고 와(요)! b. 오늘 잘 먹고 와(요)! c. 정리 잘 하다 가!
 movie well watch-AND come today well eat.AND come tidying well do-AND go
- (10) a. 영화 재미있게 보세요! b. 맛있게 드시고 오세요! c. 열심히 정리하다 가세요!
 enjoyably play.HONORIFIC tastily eat.AND come.HON ardently tidy-AND go.HON

Here, the experiential contexts could hardly be more specific: (9a/10a) are said to somebody going to watch a movie, (9b/10b) to somebody going out of the house for a meal and (9c/10c) to somebody who one leaves early during a massive tidying-operation that will need to be continued at a following time. And their lexical specificity is equally high. Again, though, they are instantiations of conventionalised and schematic construction families that are sometimes difficult to capture but could be characterised as follows:

잘 VSt-ㅏ/ㅑ(요)!	재미 있게 VSt-ㅏ/ㅑ(요)	열심히 Verb-ㅏ/ㅑ(요)
안녕히 VSt-(으)세요!	재미 있게 VSt-(으)세요!	열심히 VSt-다 가(요)
Object 잘 VSt-고 오세요!	재미 있게 VSt-다 오세요!	열심히 VSt-다 가세요
ADV VSt-(으)세요!	ADV VSt-고 오세요!	

Common features:

- Exhorting Command Form of Verb that refers to *Motion* or *Current/Planned Action*
- Emphasis with adverbs that express wish for successful or satisfactory performance of *Motion/Action* such as the general 잘, mor specific 안녕히, 열심히, 재미있게 or other contextually determined adverbs

One of the most standard ways in which instantiations of this construction family can be responded to by the person receiving the greeting is to simply acknowledge the exhortation with the answer 네, 그렇게요 or 네, 그러겠습니다 *Yes, thankyou, I will do so.*

While considerably broader than the two GO IN PEACE / COME IN PEACE phrases of our starting point, the construction family described above is still based on what we could term the EXHORTATION AS GOOD WISH trope "do XYZ well / peacefully / enjoyably". There is, however, an entirely different but complementary alternative in what we could call the "I am off to do XYZ" ANNOUNCEMENT OF DEPARTURE trope, as in the following examples:

- (11) a. 갔다올게요! / 갔다오겠습니다 b. 다녀올게요 // 다녀오겠습니다!
 go.and.come.ACTION.ANNOUNCEMENT go.around.and.come-ACTION.ANNOUNCEMENT
- c. 들어갈게요! / 들어가겠습니다 d. 저/우리 먼저 갈게요 // ... 가겠습니다
 goes.in/goes.home.-ACTION.ANNOUNCEMENT I/we first go-ACTION.ANNOUNCEMENT
- (12) a. 잘게요!
 sleep.ACTION.ANNOUNCEMENT
- b. 들어가서 좀 쉬겠습니다.
 go.in-AND a.bit rest.ACTION.ANNOUNCEMENT
- c. 먼저 퇴근할게요! / ..퇴근하겠습니다 d. 먼저 호텔에 들어갈게요
 first leave.workplace-ACTION.ANNOUNCEMENT first to.the.hotel go.in/go.home-ACTION.ANNOUNCEMENT

As before, this comes in more general variants (11) and more specific variants (12) but the fact that all these expressions belong to one construction family is obvious. We could try and capture this as follows:

<i>VSt</i> -(으)르게요!	<i>VSt</i> -겠습니다
(나/우리) 먼저 <i>VSt</i> -(으)르게요!	(저) 먼저 <i>VSt</i> -겠습니다

Common features:

- Used when leaving others who are staying
- Announcement of intention to *go, go home, turn in for rest, sleep* etc
- Optimal addition of *저/나/우리* (I/we) and *먼저* *first* in order to emphasise contrast with the remaining persons

When this pattern is used by the leaving person to initiate the good-bye greetings, then the person remaining can choose any appropriate instantiation of the previously described EXHORTATION AS GOOD WISH construction family. Alternatively, she can also simply acknowledge the greeting by responding with a simple WELL DO THAT THEN trope. For example:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (13) A: 갔다올게요! / 갔다오겠습니다
<i>'I'm popping out. Will be back!'</i> | B: 네, 갔다오세요! / 네, 갔다오십시오!
<i>OK, pop out and come back!</i> |
| (14) A: 들어갈게요! / 들어가겠습니다
<i>'I'm off home!'</i> | B: 네, 들어가세요! / 들어가십시오
<i>OK, go back home!</i> |

In its most extreme form, this simple exchange schema produces casual exchanges such as the following that come as a surprise the unsuspecting learner at the first encounter:

- (15) A: 간다! B: 응, 가!
Going! Mmh, go!

On a final note, we should not fail to mention that the above construction families give rise to yet another closely related family that is involved in expressing the HELLO greeting function. This makes use of the same collocational patterns as the above constructions, except now with the verb in the PERFECT tense:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (16) a. 잘 갔다왔어?
well go.and.come.PERFECT | b. 빨리 갔다왔네요!
quickly go.and.come-PERFECT-SURPRISE |
| (17) a. 잘 갔다오셨어요?
well go.and.come.HONORIFIC.PERFECT | b. 안녕히 다녀오셨습니까?
peacefully go.around.and.come-PERFECT |
| (18) a. 재미있게 놀다 오셨어요?
enjoyably play.AND come.HON.PFCT | b. 편히 쉬셨어요?
comfortably rest.HON.PERFECT |
| (19) a. 맛있게 잘 먹었어요?
tastily well eat.PERFECT | b. 공부 열심히 했어?
studies fervently do.PERFECT |

As a quick comparison with the sentences (4) through to (11) shows, these sentences employ exactly the same adverbs and verbs as the GOOD-BYE greetings, thereby incidentally reinforcing the point that for all apparent variation and plasticity these constructions are highly fixed.

The examples so far will have to suffice as an illustration of how the seemingly simple meaning or function of a GOOD-BYE or HELLO greeting is given expression in the form of a schematic construction that is plastic but at the same time characterised by highly conventionalised and fixed parts. Most importantly, this meaning (function) of the GOOD-BYE greeting cannot be derived from the parts of the construction but can only be seen as carried by the construction as a whole.

Tropes and construction families in FEEL-GOOD TALK

Let us now turn to another area in which social-communicative functions play a major role in Korean: the area of what one could call FEEL-GOOD TALK or, in a fittingly precise manner, 기분 좋으라 하는 말, literally translatable as '*Words that say BE IN A GOOD MOOD*'. While such talk exists in all societies and languages it takes on a particularly ritualised form in Korean.

To begin, let us consider the following dialogue from a Korean Beginners textbook (SNU LEI 2013, the first part slightly abridged). The important part are the last 2-3 lines.

정우: 켈리 씨, 한국 생활이 어때요?
 켈리: 한국어 공부는 재미있지만 주말에는 조금 심심해요.
 정우: 그래요? 그럼 주말에 같이 한강공원에서 자전거 탈까요?
 켈리: 좋아요. 그렇게 하지요.

... ..

정우: 여기가 한강공원이에요.
 켈리: 와! 정말 시원하네요. 정우 씨는 이 공원에 자주 와요?
 정우: 네, 자주 와요. 우리 자전거를 탈까요?

... ..

Here, Kelly's remark in the second-last line arguably does not serve to provide Jeong-U with the information that Kelly thinks the air feels really cool at the Hangang River Park. Instead, particular in combination with the Exclamatory "Surprise" ending -네요 its purpose is to make Jeong-U feel good about having made the decision to invite Kelly on a date to the park. Exclamations such as this can be frequently found in Feel-Good talk, as in the following:

(20) Upon being shown a photo of somebody's sister or mother:

- a. 미인이시네요! b. 사진으로 봤을 때보다 더 예쁘시네요!
 'She is a beauty!' Compared to what I've seen on the photo she is even prettier!

(21) Upon tasting food somebody made:

- a. 요리를 아주 잘 하시네요! b. 요리 솜씨가 참 대단하시네요!
 'You cook really well!' Your cooking skills are truly outstanding !

(22) Looking at a note somebody has written / observing somebody tidying up:

- a. 글씨를 참 예쁘게 쓰시네요! b. 정리를 정말 열심히 하시네요!
 'You write truly nice handwriting!' You do the tidying up really full-on!

We can try to capture this particular construction as follows:

... (참¹) 잘² ACTION.VSt-(으)시네요!

¹참, 정말, 아주, 너무 ²잘, 예쁘게, 맛있게, 멋있게, 열심히 ...

ACTION is something the person is doing or has done to produce an effect that the Speaker

Several variations exist on this construction, as illustrated in the following examples:

(23) **To somebody who obviously enjoy being funny or telling funny stories:**

교수님이 휴머가 많으신 것 같네요

'Professor, you seem to have a lot of humour!

... *Honorific.VSt + Modifier* 것 같네요

Common features:

- Picking up on a positive character trait that makes the person attractive to others
- Stating this in the form of a tentative impression/opinion

And these two:

(24) **To a teacher/professor who one has seen doing class**

아이들을 참 잘 가르치는 것 같네요

'You really seem to teach those kids really well!

... (참¹) 잘² ACTION.VSt-(으)시네요!

¹참, 정말, 아주, 너무 ²잘, 예쁘게, 맛있게, 멋있게, 열심히 ...

Common features:

- Picking up on a socially attractive skill of the person, esp. a skill that brings the person a lot popularity
- Stating this in the form of a tentative impression/opinion

(25) **To somebody who has displayed some cooking skills**

요리하는 게 좋아하시나 봐요

'I get the impression you really like cooking!

(26) **To somebody who one has seen interacting with small children**

아이들과 너무 잘 노시나 봐요

'I get the impression you are really good at playing with small children!

... (참¹) 잘² ACTION.VSt-(으)시나 봐요!

¹참, 정말, 아주, 너무 ²잘, 예쁘게, 맛있게, 멋있게, 열심히 ...

All these constructions employed the same principle: Picking up on a particular skill or action whose performance or result the Speaker observed and showing surprise at how well the person managed to do this. The following employs the same principle, this time, however, showing incredulity at how well the person performed the action:

(27)a. 노래를 어떻게 그렇게 잘 부르세요?

'How on earth can you sing so well!

b. 김치를 어떻게 그렇게 맛있게 담그세요?

'How on earth do you make such good Kimchi?

c. 이렇게 어려운 일을 어떻게 그렇게 빨리 끝내셨어요?

'Such a difficult task, how on earth did you manage to finish it so quickly?

... 어떻게 그렇게 잘 ¹ ACTION.VSt-(으)세요?

¹참, 정말, 아주, 너무 ²잘, 예쁘게, 맛있게, 멋있게, 열심히 ...

Just commenting on positive attributes or skills is, however, often not enough. Instead, this comment is reinforced by using questions that purport to check assumptions as to how this amazing state of affairs may have come about

(28) a. 김치를 참 맛있게 담그시네요! 혹시 어머님께 배우셨어요?

'You really make good Kimchi! Did you perhaps learn that from your mother?

b. 요리 참 잘하시네요! 혹시 요리 학원을 다니셨어요?

'How on earth do you make such good Kimchi?

c. 어떻게 그림을 그렇게 잘 그리세요? 혹시나 미술대학교를 나오셨어요?

How come you paint so well? Did you perhaps graduate from Art School?

... 어떻게 그렇게 잘 ¹ ACTION.VSt-(으)세요? 혹시나

¹참, 정말, 아주, 너무 ²잘, 예쁘게, 맛있게, 멋있게, 열심히 ...

Or one asks about the secret to the person's success:

(29) a. 아주 날씬해지셨네요. 무슨 비결이 있으세요?

'You are so much slimmer. Is there any secret to this?

b. 어머님 눈가에 주름이 하나도 안 보이네요. 어떻게 관리를 하세요?

'You don't have a single wrinkle around your eyes? What do you do for that?

To top it off, the Korean Speaker can also avail herself of a trope that one could term "YOU MUST BE SO POPULAR", as in the following:

(30) a. 요리 하는 게 너무 좋아하시나 봐요. 사모님이 행복하시겠어요!

'I get the impression you really like cooking. Your wife must be a very happy person!

b. 사모님이 애교가 넘치셔서 남편께 사람이 많이 받으시겠어요!

'You are brimming with charm, you must be getting a lot of affection from your husband!'

To conclude, this essay has investigated some cases in which social-communicative functions – HELLO and GOOD-BYE greeting as well as FEEL-GOOD TALK are performed and carried by conventionalised construction families that exist as whole primitive units of Korean. It is hoped that further understanding of these phenomena will contribute both to a new understanding of the way that language functions as well as providing new insights and materials for practitioners of Korean as a Foreign language.

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