

On Intensifiers in Thai and Korean: Grammaticalization and Contrastive Perspectives

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Abstract—Intensification is a language universal (Rainer, 2015, p. 1340) since adding emphasis to the meaning of a particular linguistic form is among language users' basic needs in discourse. Intensification is frequently realized by means of an intensifier, a degree-modifying adverb in many languages. Despite the universal presence of intensifiers across world languages, their morpho-syntactic makeup and lexical strengths may vary (Hendriks et al., 2024). This paper utilizes a comparative perspective to analyze intensifiers in two languages that are typologically distinct and genealogically unrelated, i.e., Korean and Thai, and reveals that Thai has fewer items with a much higher level of specialization as compared to Korean, reinforcing the claim that Thai uses the polysemy strategy whereas Korean uses the monosemy strategy (Khammee & Rhee, 2022). It further reveals that, unlike Korean, in which diverse source lexemes are involved, Thai intensifiers are built on a more restrictive number of lexemes, utilizing the primary marker complemented with particles, lexical items, or even reduplication. Korean intensifiers are sometimes used in repetitive forms but univerbation of such forms is rather rare. The present paper also presents a number of intriguing aspects of grammaticalization and lexicalization that may be attributed to typological and idiosyncratic differences between the two languages.

Index Terms—intensifier, grammaticalization, contrastive analysis, monosemy strategy, polysemy strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

Intensification is a linguistic universal and is realized by morphological means in many languages (Rainer, 2015, p. 1340). Rhee (2021a, p. 461) observes that among the universal needs and desires of speakers engaged in interaction is the desire to emphasize the message they intend to convey or otherwise modify the semantic force of a word (note that some researchers use the term 'intensification' as encompassing both upward and downward semantic modification; Biber, 1998; see below for discussion of terminology). The human propensity for emphasis vis-à-vis down-toning has been observed by Mustanoja (1960, p. 316), who notes that intensifiers are far more numerous than attenuators.

Since intensification is closely related to a speaker's subjective perception of the world and the expression thereof, it is also intimately connected to stance-taking with respect to either an object (subjective stance) or an interlocutor (intersubjective stance); therefore, intensification is generally regarded as ubiquitous (Englebretson, 2007, pp. 69-71) and possibly inevitable in most instances of language use (Rhee, 2016a, 2016b). Intensifiers constitute an interesting class of words by virtue of being at the border of lexical and grammatical categories. Thus, their development is often equivocal between lexicalization, i.e., creation of a relatively open class item, and grammaticalization, i.e., creation of a discourse-organizing exponent carrying metatextual functions (cf. Núñez-Pertejo, 2013). Linguistically, intensifiers present interesting aspects of language change in that they are susceptible to replacement because the novelty of the form wears out quickly and its lexical strength weakens, as has been observed as early as Stoffel (1901, p. 2), who claims that emphasis quickly grows stale and "new words are in constant requisition, because the old ones are felt to be inadequate to the expression ... of a quality to the very highest degree of which it is capable..." (see also Bolinger, 1972; Hopper & Traugott, 2003; and literature review below). Thus, a multiplicity of intensifiers has been observed across languages, including Thai and Korean.

This paper addresses intensifiers in Thai and Korean, two genealogically unrelated, geographically distant, and typologically distinct languages, from grammaticalization and contrastive perspectives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Intensifiers in Thai and Korean are an extremely understudied area. Therefore, most extant literature has focused on intensifiers in the English language, although we have included the few existing studies on Thai and Korean.

Intensification may be realized in a number of ways at various levels of grammar (Bolinger, 1972; Kwon, 1987; Quirk et al., 1985), and the means used for intensification are diverse (Bylinina & Sudo, 2015; Lee, 2013). Intensifiers have received attention from both grammarians and linguists, and among the more notable studies is by Stoffel (1901), who used the term 'intensives' instead of intensifiers. His work is among the first monograph-length treatments of English

intensifiers ('intensives'; e.g., *full, pure, very, right, quite, so, and as*) along with 'down-toners' (e.g., *rather* and *pretty*). Providing extensive historical data, he observes that the intensifiers originally expressed 'completeness', which later came to mean 'merely a high degree of a quality' (p. 1). This type of semantic weakening was later observed by various researchers, such as Bolinger (1972), Hopper and Traugott (2003), Peters (1994), Rhee (2016b), among others.

Bolinger (1972) provides a comprehensive analysis of 'degree words', including intensifiers. Notably, he distinguishes intensifying adverbs into grammaticalized intensifiers (e.g., *full, pure, awful(ly), terribly*, etc.) and 'ungrammaticalized' intensifiers (*extreme, sure, awful*, etc.) depending on their ability to modify adjectives, and asserts that historically some of the former grammaticalized from the latter. Similarly, he includes both monolexical and periphrastic expressions that can intensify verbal meanings (*talk much, dance all the time*, etc.) in his inventory of intensifiers, and further presents a list of verbal intensifiers according to focused aspects, such as size, strength, impact, abandonment, tangibility, consistency, evaluation, irremediability, singularity, and purity/veracity.

Quirk et al. (1985), in their comprehensive description of English adverbs (pp. 399-474), address modifying adverbs in two major categories: 'amplifiers' (*very, awfully*, etc.) and 'downtoners' (*almost, fairly*, etc.), and include intensifiers that modify pronouns (*nearly everybody*), predeterminers (*about double the amount*), and numerals (*fully ten weeks*). Their study provides an in-depth exposition of intensifiers in terms of their semantic and syntactic behavior.

More recently, Ito and Tagliamonte (2003) explored the use of the adjective-modifying intensifiers *really* and *very* in the city of York with age and gender variables, and concluded that intensifiers continually change due to frequency of use and lexical preference. They report that *really* and *very* are the most frequently used intensifiers in contemporary Canadian English, and that, incidentally, gender has no clear influence. A similar study of *very, really*, and *so* was conducted by Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005), which contrasts the previous study by finding that *so* is the most frequently used intensifier. More recently, Rhee (2016b) analyzed seventy-two intensifiers in English with a special focus on their stance-marking function and their conceptual sources, specifically, MARKEDNESS, COMPLETENESS, EMOTION, and TABOO.

In Thai, intensifiers have been reported by Haas (1946) and Yuttapongtada (2017). Haas's short note introduces two special 'techniques' of intensifying the degree of quality denoted by the word being modified. She mentions a few intensifiers that can be used with only certain words and a special type of reduplication. Since they are lexically-controlled, idiosyncratic forms, they cannot be generally applied to other lexemes. More recently, Yuttapongtada (2017) discusses a few intensifiers that developed from impolite words in Thai, such as 'bomb', 'disaster', 'monitor lizard', etc., which, despite their negative word origin, can be used in certain contexts to denote 'very'.

Intensifiers in Korean have been explored by several researchers. Kwon (1987) discusses diverse manifestations of emphasis in Korean: phonological, inflectional, derivational, lexical, and syntactic. Intensifying adverbs were not given detailed treatment due to their wide scope. Additionally, Lee (2013) has discussed the diverse ways that intensification manifests at various levels of grammar. Kim (2008) analyzes the common intensifier *nemwu* 'too much' and its more recent variants in spoken Korean, focusing on their grammaticalization processes, and in a later study (Kim, 2016), focuses on the collocation patterns of *nemwu*. Park (2007) addresses the intensifying adverbs *acwu, maywu, and nemwu*, all of which denote 'very', focusing on their semantic functions, distributional frequency, and degree of emphasis. Rhee (2022) analyzes a larger set of intensifiers in which degree markers in the categories of superlatives, inferiors, superlatives, relatives, and excessives are discussed in the context of comparative constructions in Korean.

The research background described above clarifies that intensifiers in Thai and Korean are underrepresented. The limited extant research has addressed only a few or a subset of intensifiers in each language. Neither a macroscopic study analyzing intensifiers as a whole grammatical paradigm in each language, nor a contrastive study of the paradigms in the two languages has been conducted to date. The present study intends to fill the research gap.

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The present study is based on two theoretical frameworks: the theory of grammaticalization and the theory of intensifiers, especially that of amplifiers. Grammaticalization theory was pioneered by Meillet (1912), and further elaborated and refined by Kuryłowicz (1975, 1965), Heine et al. (1991), Hopper and Traugott (2003), Narrog and Heine (2021), among others. Kuryłowicz (1975, 1965) views grammaticalization as gradient and acknowledges grammatical forms that have undergone grammaticalization processes to lesser or greater degrees, a view accepted by most grammaticalization researchers. Heine et al. (1991, p. 167) consider adverbs to be weakly grammaticalized forms, located between the primary category (nouns and verbs) and adpositional category (prepositions and postpositions). Following these authors, the present study regards intensifying adverbials as grammaticalized forms. At the same time, since intensifying adverbials belong to an open-class by virtue of easy creation, morphosyntactic operations of creating such forms are considered lexicalization strategies.

Regarding the theory of intensifiers, it is to be noted that the terminology is not uniform among scholars, as Ito and Tagliamonte (2003, p. 258) have pointed out. Quirk et al. (1985, pp. 445-446) use a two-way classification of 'amplifiers' (upward scale) and 'downtoners' (downward scale) for intensifiers, with amplifiers further divided into 'maximizers' (extreme scale), e.g., *absolutely great, completely independent*, etc., and 'boosters' (higher degree), e.g., *so funny, very dangerous*, etc. (see also Tagliamonte, 2008, pp. 361-362). Although intensifiers include both upward and downward modifiers, it is implicit in a large number of the studies that amplifiers are the primary category of intensifiers. The present

study will focus on amplifiers (labelled ‘intensifiers’) in Thai and Korean, exploring their source meanings and target functions and conceptual motivations involved in their grammaticalization processes.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As indicated above, the languages chosen for comparison are Thai and Korean. The motivation for these selections is to contrast two languages that are distant in a number of parameters. The distinctive features of the two languages, in terms of geography, genealogy, and typology, are summarily presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
KOREAN AND THAI IN CONTRAST

| | Thai | Korean |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Geography | Southeast Asia | Northeast Asia |
| Genealogy | Kra-Dai | Transeurasian/Altaic |
| Morphological Cohesion | Isolating | Agglutinating |
| Morphological Complexity | Analytic | Synthetic |
| Head-Directionality | Head-initial | Head-final |
| Word Order | SVO | SOV |
| Tone | Tonal | Non-Tonal |

The present study uses a conceptual, qualitative research method supplemented by descriptive frequency analysis, and involved no experimentation. The data have been collected from diverse sources, including lexica, historical and contemporary corpora, and online resources. In particular, the researchers consulted the 33.4-million-word Thai National Corpus (TNC), an online searchable contemporary corpus (mostly 1988-2017), for data and frequency information for Thai. This corpus has been constructed with written data compiled from various sources such as newspapers, speeches, news reports, academic articles, fiction, and short stories. Korean data and frequency information have been drawn from the Drama & Movies Corpus (KDMC), a 24-million-word, contemporary corpus compiled by Min Li. It is to be noted that the data sources for the two subject languages lack complete alignment insofar as the Thai data are largely written and ‘writing-based’, whereas the Korean data are written and ‘speech-purposed’ (Culpeper & Kytö, 2010, p. 17). Using these corpora is a forced choice since there exist no comparable corpora in the two languages with complete alignment in terms of genres, size, time, etc. However, we believe that any discrepancy resulting from the differences of the corpora is insignificant.

The frequency information is based on the number of tokens attested in the corpus, and the figures represent the frequency of the occurrence per million words (pmw). For the ‘heterosemous’ intensifiers (i.e., those that carry historically-related but contemporarily-different functions; Lichtenberk, 1991), only the intensifier uses are counted. When the total hits exceeded 1,000, frequency was projected from random sampling.

V. RESULTS: FORMS AND FUNCTIONS

A. Thai Intensifiers

(a). Lexical Sources and Strengths

A data search from the diverse Thai data sources yielded 23 terms that may be classified as (amplifying) intensifiers. They are functionally equivalent to the English intensifiers *very* and *very much*, i.e., they are adjectival and verbal modifiers, exemplified with *maak* and *maak-mai*, which are among the most frequently used intensifiers in contemporary Thai. Note that Thai is a head-initial language and the modifier follows the modified.

- (1) a. *Chan chop najsue lem ni maak*
 I like book CLS this INTS
 ‘I like this book very much.’ (modified: like this book)
- b. *Khao mi njan maak-mai*
 he has money INTS
 ‘He has a lot of money.’ (modified: money)

The 23 intensifiers have developed from diverse sources and their lexical strengths are widely variable, as shown in Table 2. While Thai does not practice inter-lexical spacing, complex forms are hyphenated for visual clarity.

TABLE 2
SOURCES AND TOKEN FREQUENCIES OF THAI INTENSIFIERS (N=23)

| Intensifier | Frequency (pmw; %) | Lexical meaning | Intensifier | Frequency (pmw) | Lexical meaning |
|------------------------------|--------------------|---|------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| a. <i>maak</i> | 111,327 (78.0%) | (ad) a lot, very much | m. <i>maak-luaʔ-kəən</i> | 0 | (ad) so much, so many <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>luaʔ</i> : surplus <i>kəən</i> : exceed |
| b. <i>kəən</i> | 10,866 (7.6%) | (ad) too much (v) exceed | n. <i>maak-mai-luaʔ-kəən</i> | 0 | (ad) so much, so many <i>maak</i> : very much <i>mai</i> : [euphonious suffix] <i>luaʔ</i> : surplus <i>kəən</i> : exceed |
| c. <i>maak-mai</i> | 8,758 (6.1%) | (ad) a lot, very much, <i>mai</i> : [euphonious suffix] | o. <i>maak-sæən-maak</i> | 0 | (ad) very, very much <i>maak</i> : very much <i>sæən</i> : hundred thousand |
| d. <i>khən-khaaŋ</i> | 5,752 (4.0%) | (ad) quite, rather <i>khən</i> : almost, nearly <i>khaaŋ</i> : side, flank, toward | p. <i>maak-yaaŋ-yiŋ</i> | 0 | (ad) very much <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>yaan</i> : like <i>yiŋ</i> : more |
| e. <i>yəʔ</i> | 5,288 (3.7%) | (ad) a lot (a/ad) many, plenty, much | q. <i>maak-maak-lai</i> | 0 | (ad) very much <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>lai</i> : [particle] |
| f. <i>yəʔ-yəʔ</i> | 712 (0.5%) | (ad) many, much <i>yəʔ</i> : a lot, many, plenty <i>yəʔ</i> : abundantly, amply | r. <i>yəʔ-muan-kan</i> | 0 | (ad) a lot, too <i>yəʔ</i> : a lot, many, plenty <i>muan</i> : like, as <i>kan</i> : together |
| g. <i>maak-mai-kai-kəən</i> | 49 (0%) | (ad) massively <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>mai</i> : [euphonious suffix] <i>kai</i> : stack, pile up <i>kəən</i> : heap, pile | s. <i>yəʔ-yəʔ</i> | 0 | (ad) a lot <i>yəʔ</i> : a lot |
| h. <i>maak-kəən-pai</i> | 0 | (ad) too much <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>kəən</i> : exceed <i>pai</i> : go | t. <i>yaan-maak</i> | 0 | (ad) greatly <i>yaan</i> : at <i>maak</i> : much, many, very |
| i. <i>maak-dʒon-kəən-pai</i> | 0 | (ad) too much <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>dʒon</i> : until <i>kəən</i> : exceed <i>pai</i> : go | u. <i>yaan-suun</i> | 0 | (ad) highly <i>yaan</i> : at <i>suun</i> : high |
| j. <i>maak-pai</i> | 0 | (ad) too much <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>pai</i> : go | v. <i>dʒiŋ-dʒiŋ</i> | 0 | (ad) really <i>dʒiŋ</i> : true, truly |
| k. <i>maak-thii-sut</i> | 0 | (ad) the most <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>thii</i> : at <i>sut</i> : end | w. <i>sut-dʒa</i> | 0 | (ad) too <i>sut</i> : end <i>dʒa</i> : [modal] |
| l. <i>maak-mai-mahasaan</i> | 0 | (ad) immensely <i>maak</i> : much, many, very <i>mai</i> : [euphonious suffix] <i>mahasaan</i> : great | Total | 142,752 | |

As the frequency information in Table 2 shows, only five intensifiers, i.e., from (a) through (e), occur at the token frequency of 1,000 pmw or higher in the 33-million-word corpus. (A frequency of ‘0’ indicates an attestation of lower than 33 total tokens; it does not necessarily indicate ‘no attestation’.) The highest frequency occurred with *maak* at 111,327 pmw, followed by *kəən* at 10,966 pmw, *maak-mai* at 8,758 pmw, and *khən-khaaŋ* at 5,752 pmw. Among the more notable aspects of use frequency is the absolute primacy of *maak* as an intensifier in contemporary Thai, accounting for 78 percent of all intensifier uses. Its frequency is ten times the second most frequent intensifier *kəən* (with frequency of 7.6%), and is a prominent example of ‘specialization’ (Hopper & Traugott, 2003; see also Discussion below).

The conceptual sources of Thai intensifiers are PLENTIFULNESS, COMPLETENESS, MARKEDNESS, and SEMBLANCE, all of which converge into AMPLIFICATION, the core concept of intensifiers, diagrammed below in Figure 1.

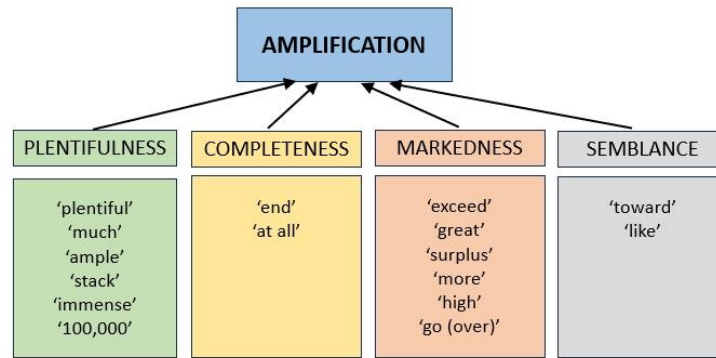


Figure 1. Source Concept and Conceptual Network of Thai Intensifiers

(b). Structural Patterns

A common desire of speakers observed crosslinguistically is to increase the force of an already intensified expression, and among the commonly found means for achieving this is to repeat the intensifier. Spoken data shows numerous instances of such repeated intensifiers, e.g., *kroot maak maak* 'very very angry' to intensify *kroot maak* 'very angry'. Although cases of simple repetition were not separately counted in the inventory, if an expression involves additional elements behaving and perceived as a single unit, it is listed as a separate intensifier. For example, *maak-maak* is not considered a separate intensifier but (o) *maak-sæen-maak* and (q) *maak-maak-lai* are. There are instances, however, where a single form and a complex form created by repetition of the form have differences in meaning and/or morpho-syntactic distribution, e.g., (e) *γəʔ* and (s) *γəʔ-γəʔ*, which are regarded as separate forms.

Even a cursory look at the formal composition of Thai intensifiers in Table 2 clearly shows that there is, in addition to repetition, another recurring pattern in forming complex forms: reinforcement. Reinforcement may utilize an additional intensifier or other lexemes to add intensifying meanings. In principle, these specially-constructed, complex intensifiers may express higher intensity, but they are often considered by Thai speakers to be a slightly modified 'emphatic' variant of an intensifier, and their English translation may not reflect different, fine-grained degrees of intensity. This is exemplified in the following with the verb *chəp* 'like':

- (2) a. *chəp maak-mai* 'really like it'
 b. *chəp maak-mai-thii-sut* 'really like it' (lit. 'really like it to the end')
 c. *chəp maak-mai-luaʔ-kəən* 'really like it' (lit. 'really like it so much')
 d. *chəp maak-mai-kai-kəən* 'really like it' (lit. 'really like it to pile up')
 e. *chəp maak-mai-mahasaan* 'really like it' (lit. 'really like it greatly')
 f. *chəp maak-pai* 'really like it' (lit. 'really like it too much (go over)')
 g. *chəp maak-kəən-pai* 'really like it' (lit. 'really like it going too much')
 h. *chəp maak-dʒon-kəən-pai* 'really like it' (lit. 'really like it until going exceedingly')

Still another strategy of intensifier formation is adverbial derivation. For this, the lexeme *yaŋ* 'style, mode' is used. The lexeme *yaŋ* is a Sino-Thai word (Khammee et al., 2025) with diverse meanings such as 'style' as a noun, 'like' as an adjective, a classifier for types, and a manner-adverbializing prefix, the last being analogous to the English suffix *-ly* (e.g., *yaŋ-maak* ('in a manner of being a lot'), *yaŋ-suŋ* ('in a manner of being high'), etc.).

(c). Functions

The main function of Thai intensifiers is to strengthen the meaning of an adjective (as in 'very interesting'), adverb (as in 'very loudly'), or predicate (as in 'run very fast') to emphasize the degree of the property. Although intensifiers typically add the meaning of increased intensity (as in 'very tasty', 'very smart', etc.), some intensifiers may imply that the intensity is excessive (as in 'work too much'). Such intensifiers tend to involve the lexeme *kəən* 'exceed', *pai* 'go', or both. However, due to semantic weakening, the excessiveness meaning in modern usage is less prominent than in earlier times.

Intensifiers across languages tend to carry a discourse marking function, such as *absolutely*, *exactly*, etc. in English, *lingrenjingya* 'amazingly', *zhende* 'really', etc. in Chinese, *be emet* 'really', *be etsem* 'actually' in Hebrew, *efectivamente* 'truly' in Spanish, *vraiment* 'really' in French, etc. (see Rhee, 2021a; and references therein). The Thai intensifiers, however, have not developed into discourse markers. One exceptional intensifier that carries the function of discourse marker is *dʒiŋ-dʒiŋ* 'really (lit. truly truly)', but as shown in Table 2 its frequency is extremely low (0 pmw). This discourse marker has been analyzed intensively by Khammee (2024).

B. Korean Intensifiers

(a). Lexical Sources and Strengths

An investigation of Korean intensifiers yields a large number of intensifiers. In the official dictionary *Phyocwun Kwuke Taysacen*, approximately 200 headwords signal 'emphasis' (Lee, 2013), although many of these are lexemes that are

inherently marked with the [+emphasis] feature. For instance, the reduplicative *mayil-mayil* [every.day - every.day] is an ‘emphatic’ form of *mayil* ‘every day’, and thus denotes ‘every single day without exception’. Similarly, many emphatic forms in the dictionary fall outside the category of intensifiers, which are adverbial by word class. 60 forms meet this definition and have a reasonable level of circulation. However, intensifiers have different degrees of both intensified force (Park, 2007) and pragmatic salience, i.e., use frequency. It is to be noted that many of these are sensitive to genres and registers. More importantly, from a grammaticalization perspective, most intensifiers in Korean have clear etymology, whereby their conceptual sources and developmental paths can be determined. These 60 intensifiers are listed in Table 3 (for intensifiers with frequency of 100 pmw or higher) and Table 4 (for those with lower than 100 pmw) with their pmw frequency derived from the referenced KDMC corpus and lexical source meanings. Korean has a large number of Sino-Korean (SK) words (i.e., borrowings from Chinese), which, either alone or in combination with native Korean morphemes, constitute complex forms. Also to be noted is that the uninflected verbal roots are indicated with a hyphen, following the convention in Korean linguistics.

TABLE 3
SOURCES AND TOKEN FREQUENCIES OF KOREAN INTENSIFIERS (100 PMW OR HIGHER; N=22)

| | Intensifier (%) | Frequency (pmw) | Lexical meaning | | Intensifier | Frequency (pmw) | Lexical meaning |
|----|-----------------|------------------|--|----|---------------------|-----------------|--|
| a. | <i>cengmal</i> | 2,228 (16.1%) | (ad) truly (n) truthful saying <i>ceng</i> : SK correct <i>mal</i> : word | l. | <i>canttuk</i> | 242 (1.7%) | (ad) very, fully <i>canttuk</i> : to extreme |
| b. | <i>nemwu</i> | 2,018 (14.6%) | (ad) excessively, very <i>nem</i> :- go over | m. | <i>toykey</i> | 239 (1.7%) | (ad) very <i>toy</i> :- not moist, harsh |
| c. | <i>manhi</i> | 1,244 (9.0%) | (ad) very, much <i>manh</i> :- be numerous | n. | <i>ssek</i> | 208 (1.5%) | (ad) very <i>ssek</i> : [ideophone, sweepingly] |
| d. | <i>kkok</i> | 1,010 (7.3%) | (ad) exactly, very <i>kkok</i> : [ideophone, tight fit] | o. | <i>wancen</i> | 202 (1.5%) | (ad) very (n) completeness <i>wancen</i> : completeness |
| e. | <i>cincca</i> | 953 (6.9%) | (ad) truly (n) genuine article <i>cin</i> : SK genuine <i>cca</i> : thing | p. | <i>tewuk</i> | 154 (1.1%) | (ad) even more <i>teu</i> :- add |
| f. | <i>palo</i> | 819 (5.9%) | (ad) straightforwardly <i>pala</i> :- be straight | q. | <i>kacang</i> | 143 (1.0%) | (ad) the most <i>kacang</i> : edge |
| g. | <i>acwu</i> | 802 (5.8%) | (ad) very <i>aco</i> : differently, specially | r. | <i>kkway</i> | 142 (1.0%) | (ad) very <i>kkway</i> : more than average |
| h. | <i>mak</i> | 680 (4.9%) | (ad) very (a) coarse <i>mak</i> :- block, seal up | s. | <i>emcheng</i> | 137 (1.0%) | (ad) very <i>emcheng</i> : extreme degree |
| i. | <i>ttak</i> | 604 (4.4%) | (ad) exactly, very <i>ttak</i> : [ideophone, collision] | t. | <i>wenak</i> | 126 (0.9%) | (ad) very <i>wen</i> : SK origin |
| j. | <i>cham</i> | 558 (4.0%) | (ad) very (n) truth <i>cham</i> : true, truth | u. | <i>mwuci(hakey)</i> | 108 (0.8%) | (ad) very much <i>mwuci</i> : SK no knowledge |
| k. | <i>ceyil</i> | 390 (2.8%) | (ad) the most, the best <i>ceyil</i> : SK first | v. | <i>hwelssin</i> | 100 (0.7%) | (ad) much more <i>hwelssin</i> : [ideophone, excessively open wide] |

TABLE 4
SOURCES AND TOKEN FREQUENCIES OF KOREAN INTENSIFIERS (BELOW 100 PMW; N=38)

| Intensifier (%) | Frequency (pmw) | Lexical meaning | Intensifier | Frequency (pmw) | Lexical meaning |
|-----------------------|-----------------|--|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| a. <i>SSIP(h)al</i> | 80 (0.6%) | (ad) very (intj) [expletive] <i>SSIPha-</i> : have sex | u. <i>mwucincang</i> | 5 (0%) | (ad) very <i>mwucincang</i> : SK unending |
| b. <i>mopsi</i> | 65 (0.5%) | (ad) very <i>mos.ssu.i</i> : unusably | v. <i>simhi</i> | 5 (0%) | (ad) very, severely <i>sim</i> : SK extreme, severe |
| c. <i>ceypep</i> | 65 (0.5%) | (ad) very, fairly <i>ceypep</i> : recognizably | w. <i>hanchung</i> | 4 (0%) | (ad) much more <i>han</i> : one <i>chung</i> : level |
| d. <i>chammal(lo)</i> | 56 (0.4%) | (ad) truly, really <i>cham</i> : true <i>mal</i> : word | x. <i>wenchey</i> | 4 (0%) | (ad) particularly <i>wenchey</i> : SK origin |
| e. <i>thukpyelhi</i> | 49 (0.4%) | (ad) particularly, specially <i>thukpyel</i> : SK special | y. <i>cikukhi</i> | 4 (0%) | (ad) extremely <i>cikuk</i> : SK extreme |
| f. <i>koyngcanghi</i> | 48 (0.3%) | (ad) tremendously <i>koyngcang</i> : tremendous | z. <i>camos</i> | 3 (0%) | (ad) very <i>camos</i> : more than expected |
| g. <i>hato</i> | 44 (0.3%) | (ad) very, too much <i>ha-</i> : be much | aa. <i>kwahakey</i> | 3 (0%) | (ad) excessively <i>kwa</i> : SK go beyond |
| h. <i>mwuchek</i> | 42 (0.3%) | (ad) very <i>mwuchek</i> : incomparable | ab. <i>kukhi</i> | 2 (0%) | (ad) extremely <i>kuk</i> : SK extreme |
| i. <i>phek</i> | 34 (0.2%) | (ad) very, very much <i>phek</i> : above average | ac. <i>yutalli</i> | 1 (0%) | (ad) particularly, specially <i>yu</i> : SK kind, type <i>talu-</i> : be different |
| j. <i>maywu</i> | 33 (0.2%) | (ad) very, severely <i>mayp-</i> : be pungent | ad. <i>kwahi</i> | 1 (0%) | (ad) too much <i>kwa</i> : SK go beyond |
| k. <i>hankyel</i> | 32 (0.2%) | (ad) much more <i>han</i> : one <i>kyel</i> : grain, layer | ae. <i>yupyelnakey</i> | 1 (0%) | (ad) particularly, specially <i>yupyel</i> : different kind <i>na-</i> : exit |
| l. <i>conna</i> | 30 (0.2%) | (ad) very (intj) [expletive] <i>cos</i> : penis <i>na-</i> : come out | af. <i>namtalli</i> | 1 (0%) | (ad) particularly, specially <i>nam</i> : other persons <i>talu-</i> : be different |
| m. <i>sangtanghi</i> | 28 (0.2%) | (ad) considerably <i>sangtang</i> : SK equivalent | ag. <i>kwatohi</i> | 0 | (ad) excessively <i>kwato</i> : SK pass in degree |
| n. <i>yunanhi</i> | 18 (0.1%) | (ad) specially <i>yunanha-</i> : be uncommon | ah. <i>kay</i> | 0 | (ad) very <i>kay</i> : dog |
| o. <i>chamulo</i> | 17 (0.1%) | (ad) truly <i>cham</i> : true | ai. <i>taypak</i> | 0 | (ad) very (intj) excellent! <i>taypak</i> : big gourd |
| p. <i>taytanhi</i> | 13 (0.1%) | (ad) very <i>taytanha-</i> : be great | aj. <i>che</i> | 0 | (ad) very, roughly <i>chi-</i> : hit |
| q. <i>kuyamallo</i> | 11 (0.1%) | (ad) truly <i>ku</i> : that <i>mal</i> : word | ak. <i>khay</i> | 0 | (ad) very <i>kay</i> : dog |
| r. <i>samus</i> | 10 (0.08%) | (ad) truly, fairly <i>samus</i> : unreservedly | al. <i>hel</i> | 0 | (ad) very (intj) surprising! <i>he</i> : [ideophone, exhaling] |
| s. <i>cinachikey</i> | 10 (0.08%) | (ad) too much <i>cinachi-</i> : go past | | | |
| t. <i>ccang</i> | 9 (0.07%) | (ad) very (n) excellent person <i>cang</i> : SK head, chief | Total Intensifiers | 13,835 | |

Tables 3 and 4 show the numerosity of the intensifiers and the diversity of source concepts. Even the word classes of the sources vary widely, e.g., nouns and noun phrases ('correct word', 'truth', etc.), verbs ('go over', 'add', etc.), and adverbs ('differently', 'unhesitatingly', etc.). Some cases developed from syntactic constructions, such as *yupyelnakey* 'particularly' ((ae) in Table 4) that originated from the syntactic construction *yupyel-i na-key* [different.kind-NOMINATIVE exit-ADVERBIALIZER] 'in order that a different kind will emerge'. Similarly, *namtalli* 'particularly' ((af) in Table 4) originated from *nam-kwa talu-i* [other.persons-COMITATIVE be.different-ADVERBIALIZER] 'in order that x will be different from others'. Despite their complex origin, these expressions are fully univerbated (i.e., lexicalized) as single units and are listed as independent lexemes in dictionaries.

In addition to the structural diversity, the conceptual sources are diverse as well. Some forms, by virtue of being polylexemic constructions, cannot be clearly analyzed regarding their conceptual sources, but if only the core concepts are considered, their sources can be summarized as shown in Figure 2.

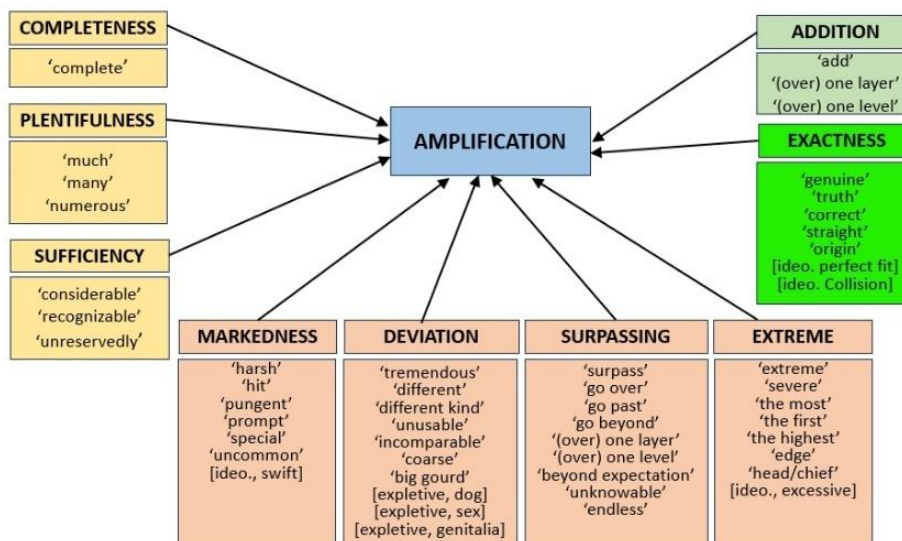


Figure 2. Source Concept and Conceptual Network of Korean Intensifiers

(b). Structural Patterns

Several structurally different patterns of intensifiers exist in Korean. Unlike Thai, in which transcategorial usage is a norm, Korean word classes are rigidly compartmentalized. Therefore, in order to become adverbials, source lexemes in the verbal category must undergo adverbial derivation by way of suffixation, as shown in *nem-* ‘go over’ (Table 3, (b)), which became *nem-wu* with the adverbializing suffix *-wu*, now denoting ‘in a manner of going over’ and consequently ‘excessively, very’. Similar operations are found with *manhi* (Table 3, (c)) from *manha-* ‘be much’ suffixed with the adverbializer *-i*, *palo* (Table 3, (f)) from *pala-* ‘be straight’ suffixed with the adverbializer *-o*, and *toykey* (m) from *toy-* ‘be harsh’ suffixed with the manner adverbializer *-key*, among others.

Despite the rigid word classes and strict morphological rules, in the development of intensifiers, some morphological operations that are rare elsewhere are observed in Korean. For instance, nouns are often used as adverbs, a case called ‘conversion’, as in *ceng-mal* [correct-word] ‘correct saying’ (Table 3, (a)), and *cin-cca* [genuine-thing] ‘genuine article’ (Table 3, (e)), both of which are used adverbially as ‘truly, very’. Other examples include *cham* [truth] (Table 3, (j)), *wancen* [completeness] (Table 3, (o)), *mwuci* [no knowledge] (Table 3, (u)), *han-chung* [one level] (Table 4, (w)), among many others.

Another common morphological operation found in the course of intensifier formation is clipping. For instance, *emcheng*, a nominal with the ‘extreme degree’ meaning, is first verbalized with a light verb *na-* ‘come out’ (now *emcheng-na-* ‘be of extreme degree’), which is adverbialized through suffixation of the manner adverbializer *-key* (now *emcheng-na-key* ‘in an extreme manner, extremely’), which in a drastic turn undergoes clipping to *emcheng* ‘extremely’, resulting in the identical form with its source noun (Table 3, (s)). Similar operations are found with *cham* (Table 3, (j)), and others.

Yet another structural characteristic is the use of ideophones. Used as intensifiers, ideophones have not been extensively reported (but see Muazu, 2009, for the Khoisan language Kilba; McPherson, 2020, for the Western Mande language Seenku; Newman, 1968, for the Chadic languages Hausa and Tera). Korean has four ideophone-based intensifiers: *hwelssin* (an image-mimetic describing doors and windows excessively and swiftly wide open), *ssek* (a sound- and image-mimetic describing the sound and motion of fast movement across air or another non-dense medium), *ttak* (a sound-mimetic describing the sound of two solid objects colliding), and *kkok* (an image-mimetic describing the tight fit of an object into a larger object).

We have observed in Thai that one of the intensification strategies is to repeat an intensifier or combine multiple intensifiers. A similar strategy is observed in Korean when an intensifier is repeated. In these cases, the native-speaker intuition is that the repeated forms do not create a new intensifier, but, rather, are regarded as instances of mere repetition for increased emphasis. From the corpus, only three repetitive forms are found to occur at the frequency of 10 pmw or higher: *nemwu-nemwu* (51 pmw, cf. Table 3, (b)), a partially reduplicated *te-tewuk* (16 pmw, cf. Table 3, (p)), and *acwu-acwu* (10 pmw, cf. Table 3, (g)).

(c). Functions

Intensifiers in Korean have various levels of functional scopes, specifically, the word level (adjectives or adverbs), phrase level (predicates), or proposition level (clauses or sentences). From the proposition-level function, some intensifiers are further grammaticalized into discourse markers. Since these are notable functions, their usage is presented in more detail below.

The intensifier *cengmal* (lit. ‘true word’) carries various discursive functions, such as Sudden Remembrance (the ‘That reminds me’ function), Emphatic (the ‘I am serious’ function), Frustration (the ‘I am annoyed/frustrated’ function),

Mirative (the ‘I am surprised’ function), and Filler (the ‘I’m not yet finished’ function) (Rhee, 2021a). Of these, the Sudden Remembrance function is exemplified in the following:

- (3) *a cengmal nic-epeli-lpenha-ys-kwun*
 oh DM forget-CMPL-AVERT-PST-EXCL
 ‘Oh, DM (right), I almost forgot (it)!’ (1912 *Twukyenseng*)

Similarly, the intensifier *cincca* (lit. ‘genuine thing’) carries Emphatic, Mirative, Filler, and Challenge functions (the ‘I am challenging you’ function) (Rhee, 2021a). The Filler function is illustrated in the following:

- (4) (A learns that his girlfriend’s (B’s) father remarried. Now in reference to B’s younger sister he met the other day:)
 B: [So I live with my stepmother’s daughter, and the girl you met the other day is...]
 A: [Aha, I got it. She is the collaborative production of my would-be father-in-law and his new wife!]
 B: (smiles)... *aa... cincca...*
 INTJ DM

‘Oh, DM (come on...)’ (Drama *Chenmanpen salanghay* Episode #22, 2009)

Other discourse marker functions of Korean intensifiers include *acwu* for the Sarcasm function and *cham* for Sudden Remembrance and Filler functions. Some of these intensifiers, especially those developed from exactness (and truthfulness), have been discussed in Rhee (2021a).

VI. DISCUSSION: KOREAN AND THAI IN COMPARISON

Based on the observations described in the foregoing section, we now turn to a discussion of notable aspects of intensifiers in both Korean and Thai, as these display notable differences. We will focus on four select issues: word-class status, lexicalization-grammaticalization strategies, stance-marking, and conceptual motivation.

A. Word-Class Status

As alluded to previously, Thai is a language of high ‘transcategoriality’ (Robert, 2020), and a word’s syntactic status is specified by the discourse. Therefore, while Thai lexemes in general tend to belong to multiple word classes, which is a common characteristic of isolating languages, Thai intensifiers constitute a noteworthy exception in that they nearly always belong to the adverbial word class. One notable exception to this characterization is the intensifier *kəən*, which originated from the verb *kəən* ‘exceed’, and still has strong usage as a verb (about 15% of all tokens).

In this regard, Korean also presents a peculiarity. Since Korean is an agglutinating language with productive and rich morphological rules for word derivation, Korean lexemes in general belong to a single, unique word class. Derived words are clearly marked with category-changing affixes or light-verbs for compounding. However, many Korean intensifiers, in addition to being adverbs, are also classifiable as nouns and adjectives. This idiosyncrasy is largely due to the clipping process in the course of intensifier grammaticalization whereby the category-defining affixes are lost, thus making the form appear in the source word class when in fact it is adverbial because the functional reinterpretation occurred before the clipping (see V-B-(b) above).

B. Lexicalization-Grammaticalization Strategies

The foregoing exposition also shows a clear contrast in intensifier developmental patterns: Thai has a smaller inventory of intensifiers, numbering 23, that are used at a remarkably high frequency, a clear sign of a high level of ‘specialization’ (Hopper & Traugott, 2023), whereas Korean has a large number of intensifiers, numbering 60, that differentiate diverse and subtle nuances in the qualities being intensified. Furthermore, unlike Korean where diverse source lexemes are involved (see Tables 3 and 4 and Figure 2), intensifiers in Thai are built on a more restrictive number of lexemes (see Table 2 and Figure 1), utilizing the primary marker (notably *maak* ‘a lot, much, very’) complemented with suffixes, lexical items, or even reduplication. In this respect, Korean intensifiers reveal a contrast: although they sometimes occur in repeated forms, they do not generally form a new intensifier by way of combining or reduplicating (see V-B-(b) above).

This seemingly isolated case of contrast in fact reflects at a much more global level the different strategies favored by Thai and Korean in lexicalization and grammaticalization, which have been reported in comparative research (Khammee & Rhee, 2022 for lexicalization; Khammee & Rhee, 2025 and Rhee & Khammee, 2024, for grammaticalization). It has been observed in literature that the two languages favor different lexicalization-grammaticalization strategies, and that Thai favors the polysemy strategy (i.e., using one form for various, related meanings, focusing on similarities), while Korean favors the monosemy strategy (i.e., coining new forms for new meanings, focusing on differences) (Khammee & Rhee, 2022). The overall effect of this general tendency is evident in the size of the lexicon: Thai has a smaller vocabulary with a high degree of polysemy, while Korean has a large vocabulary with a lower degree of polysemy (cf. approximately 40,000 headwords in the *Royal Institute’s Dictionary* of Thai and 420,000 headwords of the *Phyocwunkwuke Taysacen* of Korean). In short, when the need for a new form to express a new concept arises, Korean ‘stretches’ the lexicon by coining an entirely new word (resulting in a constantly growing lexicon, e.g., the open dictionary *Wulimalsaym* contains 1.18 million words as of October 2025 and the inventory continues growing), whereas Thai ‘stretches’ the existing word to accommodate the new expression (resulting in the lexicon being a relatively stable size).

This observed contrast adds to the general typological characterization of the two languages. Korean is a language of structural high-specificity (agglutinating with a large number of grammatical morphemes; Rhee, 2020), over-

lexicalization (as a result of extensive monosemy strategy; Khammee & Rhee, 2022), affect-orientation (with a large emotive lexicon; Rhee, 2025), preference for a high-level of granularity in lexicon and grammar (Khammee & Rhee, 2022, 2025), and a (extremely) large vocabulary (see above). Thai contrasts Korean in nearly every typological aspect, being a language of structural low-specificity (thus highly pragmatically-oriented; Rhee, 2021b), under-lexicalization (as a result of extensive polysemy strategy and maximal lexical-recycling; Khammee & Rhee, 2022, 2025), and a (considerably) smaller vocabulary (see above).

C. Stance-Marking Function

The stance-marking function of linguistic forms has received much attention (Gardner, 2001; Mushin, 2001; White, 2003; Englebretson, 2007; Iwasaki & Yap, 2015). Stance is fundamentally interactional (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992, 2004; Du Bois & Kärkkäinen, 2012) and is often conceptualized as inseparable from intersubjectivity, i.e., it expresses awareness of the addressee's attitude and beliefs (see also Locher, 2015; Locher & Larina, 2019). For instance, Rhee (2016a, p. 51) notes that intersubjectification is prominent with stance-marking functions, since employment of stance presupposes the presence of discourse partners, be they real or imagined. In the unified framework of Du Bois's (2007, pp. 140-141) stance triangle, the relation (alignment) between the subjectivity of one actor (Subject₁) and that of another (Subject₂) is intersubjectivity, and the relation (positioning) between an actor (Subject) and object (Object) is subjectification; hence, intertwined relations among subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and stance.

In this regard, Thai and Korean intensifiers exhibit notable commonalities and differences. First of all, Korean and Thai intensifiers are largely markers of the stance involving Subject₁ (Speaker) and Object (Text, Information), i.e., markers of subjectivity. For instance, the expression 'drive very fast' involves the speaker's (Subject₁) evaluation of the speed of a vehicle (Object). When intensifiers function as a modifier of an expression describing a particular property, they are invariably subjective stance markers, which feature is shared by Thai and Korean intensifiers. However, a notable difference exists: as discussed above, Thai intensifiers did not grammaticalize into discourse markers, with the exception of *đ̣iŋ-đ̣iŋ* (lit. 'true-true') (see Khammee, 2024, for detailed description). On the other hand, a number of Korean discourse markers have been grammaticalized from intensifiers (see V-B-(c) above). Such discourse markers are exemplars of stance markers involving Subject₁ (Speaker) and Subject₂ (Addressee) (cf. 'I am annoyed/frustrated', 'I am challenging you', 'I am serious', 'I'm not yet finished – please wait', etc.).

D. Conceptual Motivation

We have seen in the preceding exposition that the development of Thai intensifiers has been conceptually motivated by such key notions as PLENTIFULNESS, COMPLETENESS, MARKEDNESS, and SEMBLANCE (see Figure 1), and Korean intensifiers by COMPLETENESS, EXACTNESS, PLENTIFULNESS, SUFFICIENCY, MARKEDNESS, DEVIATION, SURPASSING, EXTREME, and ADDITION. Admittedly, this categorization could be constructed differently depending on the granularity of analysis and delineation of categorial boundaries. Such flexibility notwithstanding, overall conceptual sources present interesting commonalities and differences. For instance, PLENTIFULNESS, COMPLETENESS, and MARKEDNESS are common sources in both languages. Recruiting these seems to be well-motivated, considering that intensifiers inherently amplify qualities that either can be literally or metaphorically projected onto the size or degree, or claimed to stand out among entities being compared, whether real or imagined.

SEMBLANCE in Thai is based on the concept that the qualities being focused match or are close to the (implicit) high standard. This is close to EXACTNESS in Korean that refers to a standard. The only difference between them is that SEMBLANCE highlights similarity whereas EXACTNESS highlights identity. DEVIATION, SURPASSING, EXTREME, and ADDITION in Korean are similarly well-motivated since DEVIATION and SURPASSING are closely related to MARKEDNESS; EXTREME is closely related to SUFFICIENCY; and ADDITION is closely related to SURPASSING (note that, therefore, '(over) one layer' and '(over) one level' are cross-classified).

Among the strengths of grammaticalization theory is that it highlights a great level of commonalities in terms of motivation, processes, and directionality. The state of affairs elaborated above, however, points to the fact that grammaticalization scenarios may exhibit commonalities across languages at a macro-level while involving significant variability and differences at a micro-level. Thus, efforts to identify sets of source concepts commonly found across languages (cf. the 'source determination hypothesis', Bybee et al., 1994) and to identify the extent of variabilities and preferences within individual languages must supplement each other.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed intensifiers in Thai and Korean with respect to their lexical sources, relative strengths, structural patterns, and functions. The developmental patterns in the two languages reveal both commonalities and differences. Intensifiers, being a language universal, are found in both Thai and Korean, despite differences in the size of the inventory and the frequency of actual uses. More significantly, Korean and Thai intensifiers exhibit significantly different lexicalization strategies, i.e., the polysemy strategy in Thai and the monosemy strategy in Korean. This analysis also found that Thai and Korean intensifiers carry stance-marking functions that are notably different in their extent, as Thai intensifiers tend to be largely subjective stance markers for amplifying qualities and illocutionary forces, whereas Korean intensifiers, while also marking subjective stance, carry intersubjective functions, especially in cases where they

are used as discourse markers. Conceptual motivations also show variability at a micro-level in that, in addition to a few commonly-shared conceptual sources, Thai exhibits more concentration while Korean exhibits more diffusion in recruiting source concepts.

APPENDIX

Part-of-speech and glossing abbreviations. a: adjective; ad: adverb; AVERT: avertive; CMPL: completive; DM: discourse marker; CLS: classifier; EXCL: exclamative; IDEO: Ideophone; intj/INTJ: interjection; INTS: intensifier; n: noun; PST: past; SK: Sino-Korean

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