

A construction-based approach to negative *wh*-construction in Korean

Okgi Kim & Jong-Bok Kim

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee & Kyung Hee University
okgikim@uwm.edu & jongbok@khu.ac.kr

As with other languages (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, English), Korean employs the so-called Negative WH-Construction (NWHC) in which a *wh*-expression is used to express the speaker's negative attitude toward some previous utterance (Cheung 2008, 2009; Yang 2015; a.o.):¹

- (1) A: Mimi-ka yeypp-e.
Mimi-NOM pretty-DECL
'Mimi is pretty.'
- B: Mimi-ka **mwe-ka**/*l yeyppu-ni?!
Mimi-NOM what-NOM/ACC pretty-QUE
'No way is Mimi pretty.' (⇒ Mimi is not pretty.)

In the NWHC (1B), the nominative-marked *wh*-phrase *mwe-ka* (henceforth, the NWH-phrase) has no *wh*-meaning as in information-seeking questions but contributes to asserting the negation of the sentential proposition.

There are several distributional constraints of the NWH phrase. Both the NWH-phrase and the associated NP need to be nominative-marked:

- (2) kulssuki-{ka/*nun/*man/*to} **mwe-ka** elyep-ni?!
writing-NOM/TOP/only/also what-NOM difficult-QUE
'No way is writing difficult.'

This case agreement constraint is further observed in object-nominative constructions or multiple nominative constructions:

- (3) a. Mimi-ka **mwe-ka** ton-i manh-ni?!
Mimi-NOM what-NOM money-NOM many-QUE
'No way does Mimi have a lot of money.'
- b. Mim-ka ton-i **mwe-ka** manh-ni?!
Mimi-NOM money-NOM what-NOM many-QUE
'No way does Mimi have a lot of money.'
- (4) a. Mimi-ka **mwe-ka** son-i khu-ni?!
Mimi-NOM what-NOM hand-NOM big-QUE
'No way is Mimi's hand big.'
- b. Mimi-ka son-i **mwe-ka** khu-ni?!
Mimi-NOM hand-NOM what-NOM big-QUE
'No way is Mimi's hand big.'

The data imply that the NWH-phrase can occur immediately after a nominative NP. As seen from English glosses, all these question-form sentences have the function of asserting the negation of the evoked propositions, while placing emphasis on the associated NP.

The NWH-phrase and its associate NP must also be adjacent. No element can intervene between the two:

- (5) a. pesu-ka **mwe-ka** ilccik tochakha-yss-ni?!
bus-NOM what-NOM early arrive-PST-QUE
'No way did the bus arrive early.'
- b. *pesu-ka ilccik **mwe-ka** tochakha-yss-ni?!
bus-NOM early what-NOM arrive-PST-QUE
'No way did the bus arrive early.'

¹NWHCs are introduced by a limited set of *wh*-words, *mwe-ka* 'what-NOM', *ettehkey* 'how', *encey* 'when', and *eti* 'where', but not *nwu-ka* 'who-NOM'. In this study, we focus on NWHCs involving *mwe-ka* that have received relatively less attention in the literature.

The distribution of NWH-phrase is not limited to a copular clause like (1B) or an intransitive clause like (5a). It can also occur in a transitive clause:

- (6) ku salam-i **mwe-ka** nonmwun-ul cal ssu-ni?!
the person-NOM what-NOM paper-ACC well write-QUE
‘No way does the person write a paper well.’

Even though the final meaning of the sentence with the NWH-phrase is a statement, the phrase occurs only in the polar question:

- (7) a. *cangmi-ka **mwe-ka** alumtap-ta?! (declarative)
rose-NOM what-NOM beautiful-DECL
‘(int.) No way are roses beautiful.’
b. *cangmi-ka **mwe-ka** alumtap-kwuna?! (exclamative)
rose-NOM what-NOM beautiful-EXC
‘(int.) No way are roses beautiful.’

NWHCs also show unique discourse properties. Although both NWHCs and rhetorical questions convey assertions, the two constructions behave differently in several aspects. Unlike rhetorical questions, NWHCs must be uttered after the addressee’s words to express disapproval toward the addressee (Cheung 2009; Yang 2015): this is why they are ruled out when used discourse-initially or out of the blue. Further, while a rhetorical question is uttered in a context in which both the speaker and the addressee have the same bias towards the answer to it (Caponigro and Sprouse 2007), an NWHC must be uttered in a context where the speaker and the addressee have opposing beliefs about the proposition in question (Cheung 2009; Kiss 2019):

- (8) A: John-un kyoswu-ka ani-ya.
John-TOP professor-NOM not-DECL
‘John is not a professor.’
B: #John-i **mwe-ka** kyoswu-ni?!
John-NOM what-NOM professor-QUE
‘No way is John a professor’ (\Rightarrow John is not a professor.)

This is infelicitous since the interlocutors assert the same proposition, violating the pragmatic constraint of NWHCs.

Observing the idiosyncrasies as well as regularities of the construction, we sketch a Construction Grammar approach that can account for the syntactic and semantic/pragmatic properties of the construction. In particular, we suggest that the NWH-phrase *mwe-ka* combines with an associated nominative NP, assigning it an emphatic focus, and then modifies a verb projection (VP or S) headed by an interrogative verb. These combinational constraints can account for its idiosyncratic distributions. In terms of semantics, the NWH-expression negates the proposition of this VP as an at-issue meaning. It also accompanies a pragmatic constraint such that the discourse already evoked this proposition as salient information. This construction-based approach appears to be a feasible one in accounting for the peculiarities of the construction.

Selected References

- Caponigro, Ivano and Jon Sprouse. 2007. Rhetorical questions as questions. In *Proceedings of Sinn and Bedeutung* 11, 121-133.
Cheung, Lawrence Yam-Leung. 2008. *The negative wh-construction*. PhD dissertation, UCLA.
Cheung, Lawrence Yam-Leung. 2009. Negative *wh*-construction and its semantic properties. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics*, 18:297-321. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10831-009-9051-2>
Kiss, Angelika. 2019. On the role of the Speaker’s beliefs in some biased questions. In Gyuris, Beáta, Katalin Mády, and Gábor Recski (eds.), *K + K = 120: Papers dedicated to L. Kélmán & A. Kornai on the occasion of their 60th birthdays*, 293–314.
Yang, Barry Chung-Yu. 2015. Locating *wh*-intervention effects at CP. In Wei-Tien Dylan Tsai (ed.), *The cartography of Chinese syntax*, 153-186. Oxford: Oxford University Press.