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The Comparison-based Analysis of *-ki* Directive in Korean*

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1 Introduction

This paper investigates the sentence-final *-ki* in Korean, focusing on its distribution and interpretation in the root context. Although *-ki* is standardly treated as a nominalizer, its behavior in both embedded and root clauses—where it yields priority-oriented or directive readings—calls for a deeper analysis beyond its role as a nominalizer. I argue that when *-ki* appears in fully clausal environments, it functions not merely as a nominalizer but also as a mood marker, encoding comparison-based modal meaning. In particular, *-ki* directives, the main empirical focus of this paper, provide key evidence for this proposal.

Regarding what I call *mood* in this paper, I use the term to refer to a grammatical category that encodes a modal perspective—that is, a viewpoint reflecting the speaker’s or subject’s preferences, beliefs, etc (Portner 2018). In many cases, such as Romance languages, mood is expressed morphologically, e.g., indicative vs. subjunctive. A separate notion in the literature is sentence mood, which distinguishes speech-act types such as assertion, command, and question. Korean has a rich and well-documented system of sentence-type markers—*-ta* (DECL), *-la* (IMP), and *-kka*

* I am grateful to Paul Portner for advising me throughout the development of this study, and to the syntax seminar at Seoul National University for sparking my initial interest in this topic a few years ago.

(INT)—which instantiate this latter type of mood. What remains less explored, however, is whether Korean has dedicated devices that encode a modal perspective in the grammatical sense.

Recent work has begun to lay the groundwork for a more systematic study of mood in Korean. Kang and Yoon (Kang and Yoon 2016; 2022; 2018) argue that interrogative particle *-kka*, unlike the standard question marker *-ci*, exhibits a subjunctive-like meaning. Specifically, *-kka* conveys the subject's epistemic uncertainty or non-commitment to the truth of the proposition. Correspondingly, *-kka* clauses can appear under inquisitive verbs like 'wonder' or emotive doxastics, such as 'hope/fear,' which require non-commitment, but not under belief, assertion, or factive verbs, which presuppose commitment.

The element *-ki*—which I argue is another subjunctive-like mood marker—has received far less attention. Under the traditional syntactic view, *-ki* is analyzed as a category-changing morpheme that derives nominals. Its two nominalization patterns are: (i) non-clausal-level nominalizations, which yield gerundive-like forms and disallow nominative subject or tense (1), and (ii) clausal-level nominalizations, which permit tense and nominative subjects (1).

- (1) a. (Mina-uy) pomwul-chass-ki
 (M-GEN) treasure-find-KI
 '(Mina's) treasure-hunting'
- b. Inho-ka [Mina-ka phati-ey o-ki]-lul pala/wenha/*mit-ta
 I-NOM [M-NOM party-LOC come-KI]-ACC hope/want/*believe-DECL
 'Inho hopes/wants Mina to come to the party.'

Several empirical facts, however, challenge a purely nominalizing analysis—particularly for clausal *-ki*, whose distribution shows systematic constraints not expected under a simple category-changing view. Most crucially, clausal *-ki* is not distributionally free: it is licensed only in a sharply circumscribed set of environments. It appears with priority predicates such as 'hope' and 'want', as well as in purposive adverbials, all of which involve comparison-based modality (Section 2). These patterns motivate a comparison-based modal analysis of *-ki*.

Moreover, *-ki* in root clauses yields directive interpretations that are semantically distinct from those of canonical imperatives (Section 3). Such *-ki* directives arise only when a contextually salient ordering source—such as a set of goals or ideals—is available. This sensitivity to ordering sources provides further evidence that *-ki* contributes a form of modal meaning rather than functioning merely as a nominalizer (Section 4).

2 Embedded Context

The first empirical domain concerns the distribution of *-ki* in embedded clauses. The key observation is straightforward: *-ki* appears with priority-meaning predicates such as 'hope' or 'want', but resists embedding under epistemic, assertive, or factive verbs. Notably, these attitude verbs that license *-ki* correspond to strong subjunctive selectors cross-linguistically. In contrast, epistemics, assertive, or factive verbs are strong indicative selectors cross-linguistically and select the complementizer *-tako* (DECL-QUOT). This pattern is illustrated in (2).

- (2) a. Inho-ka Mina-ka phati-ey {o-ki-lul /*o-n-tako} pala/wenha-ta

Inho-NOM Mina-NOM party-LOC {come-KI-ACC/*come-IND} hope/want-DECL
 ‘Inho hopes/wants for Mina to come to the party.’

- b. Inho-ka Mina-ka phati-ey {*o-ki-lul/o-n-tako} malha/mit/al-ta
 Inho-NOM Mina-NOM party-LOC {*come-KI-ACC/come-IND} say/believe/know-DECL
 ‘Inho says/believes/knows that Mina comes to the party.’

Additionally, *-ki* does not co-occur with attitude verbs that select *-kka*, as shown in (3). The licensors of *-kka* encode the attitude holder’s epistemic uncertainty (a non-veridical epistemic state; Kang and Yoon 2016; 2022; 2018) rather than priority meanings.¹

- (3) Inho-ka Mina-ka phati-ey {*o-ki-lul/o-lkka} kwungkumha/mwusep-ta
 Inho-NOM Mina-NOM party-LOC {*come-KI-ACC/come-KKA} wonder/fear-DECL
 ‘Inho wonders/fears if Mina might come to the party’

Importantly, this distribution is not predicted under a purely syntactic nominalizer analysis of *-ki*. If *-ki* were simply a clausal nominalizer, its occurrence should not be so tightly constrained by the lexical semantics of the selecting predicate.

Given this empirical pattern—reminiscent of Romance subjunctive in embedded contexts—I follow Shim (1995) in analyzing *-ki* as a mood marker in Korean. Under this analysis, the strong association between *-ki* and priority predicates follows from a specific modal interpretation contributed by *-ki*. The question, then, is: what modal meaning produces this distribution?

A defining characteristic of the subjunctive across languages that makes it compatible with desire and related verbs is its comparison-based semantics (Giorgi and Pianesi 1997; Villalta 2008; Portner and Rubinstein 2020). Prior studies observe that Romance subjunctive is characteristically licensed in attitude contexts where the matrix predicate establishes a comparison among alternatives. Consider three influential analyses of desire predicates. Heim (1992) models ‘want’ by comparing the relative desirability of *p*-worlds and $\neg p$ -worlds within the agent’s belief state. von Stechow (1999) analyzes ‘want’ as a form of modal necessity: it is true just in case all the best-ranked worlds—ordered by the subject’s preference-based ordering source—are *p*-worlds. Villalta (2008), instead, locates the comparison among propositions, the complement of ‘want’ and its contextual alternatives.

Despite their technical differences, these accounts converge on a single insight: desire or priority-meaning predicates inherently invoke comparison, either across worlds or across propositions. The subjunctive signals that the interpretation of the embedded clause is dependent on this ordering structure.

The idea pursued in this paper is that Korean *-ki* patterns similarly. Its distribution shows that it is licensed precisely in environments where such comparison is required—namely, under priority predicates (e.g., ‘want/hope’). In the next section, I further show that this licensing condition extends to root contexts.

¹ Some overlap cases exist, for instance, *pala-ko iss-ta* (‘be hoping that’), but this does not undermine the general pattern.

3 Root Context

In root contexts, *-ki* appears sentence-finally and gives rise to a directive force, similar to the imperative marker *-la*, as shown in (4). Although the properties of *-la* imperatives have been well documented (Zanuttini et al., 2012 among others), there has been little discussion of the function of root *-ki*.

- (4) keyim-eyse ci-n salam-i selkeci-ha-{ki-la}!
 game-LOC lose.REL person-NOM dishwashing-do-{KI-IMP}
 ‘The person who loses the game does the dishes!’

The directive reading of *-ki* cannot be explained under a purely nominalizer view: not all nominalizers create a directive force in sentence-final position. For example, the nominalizer *-um* yields context-dependent interpretations in root contexts, including assertion readings, as shown in the interpretation ‘the person who lost at the game washed dishes’, in (5). In contrast to *-um*, sentence-final *-ki* final never has an assertion force; its interpretation is exclusively directive.

- (5) keyim-eyse ci-n salam-i selkeci-ha-m!
 game-LOC lose.REL person-NOM dishwashing-do-UM
 ‘The person who loses the game does the dishes!’ (Directive)
 ‘The person who loses the game did the dishes!’ (Assertion)

Importantly, unlike *-la*, *-ki* is felicitous only in contexts where there exist contextually salient modal backgrounds—ideals/goals based on which directives are made. Consider an utterance ‘Come to my house!’ with either sentence ending *-ki* or *-la*. Their distributions show that *-ki* is sensitive to context, while *-la* is not. The *-ki* directive is felicitous only when there is a contextually salient goal/ideal shared among interlocutors, e.g., the addressee participates in the speaker’s party, in (7). In an out-of-blue context, where no such shared goal is available, *-ki* is infelicitous, as shown in (6).

- (6) Out-of-Blue Context
 onul mwe-hay? ittaka wuli cip-ey o-{#ki/-la}!
 today what-do later my home-to come-{#KI/-IMP}
 ‘What are you doing today? Come to my house!’
- (7) Contextual Goal/Ideal
 phathi-ey o-lke-ci? ittaka wuli cip-ey o-{ki/-la}!
 party come-will-INT later my home-to come-{KI/-IMP}
 ‘You’re coming to my party, right? Come to my house!’

By contrast, *-la* shows no such contextual restriction: it is felicitous both in goal/ideal contexts and out-of-blue contexts.

The data above demonstrate that root *-ki* is licensed only in the presence of contextually salient goals/ideals—modal backgrounds that impose an ordering over possible worlds according to what is desirable. Thus, the root pattern mirrors the embedded distribution: in both domains, *-ki* appears

only when an ordering source supporting comparison is available. This parallel strongly supports the claim that *-ki* is a comparison-based mood marker.

In contrast to *-ki*, the pattern of canonical imperative *-la* suggests that it is not a mood marker. Rather, it is the second-person jussive head: it denotes a property whose individual argument is restricted to the addressee (Zanuttini et al. 2012). The property is mapped to an entity in the addressee's To-Do List, via a standard discourse update rule, with no modal meaning encoded in *-la* itself. While *-la* may receive modal interpretations (e.g., being relevant to a goal or preference), such meanings arise pragmatically, rather than being inherent to semantics. Section 5 will further elaborate on this contrast between *-ki* and *-la*.

4 Comparison-Based Analysis

The empirical patterns discussed so far suggest that the distribution of *-ki*—its occurrence under priority predicates and in directive contexts with a contextually salient ideal/goal—reflects a comparison-based semantics. I adopt the Kratzerian modal framework (Kratzer 1991), in which a pair of modal backgrounds, the modal base (*f*) and the ordering source (*g*), determines the evaluation worlds for a given proposition. Consistent with previous work that attributes modal force to the complement of attitude verbs rather than to the verbs themselves (Kratzer 2006; Moulton 2009; Portner and Rubinstein 2020), I analyze *-ki* as introducing modal quantification. *-ki* combines with a propositional argument and an event argument, and is true iff the proposition is true in all the best worlds determined by the modal backgrounds of that event:

$$(8) \llbracket ki \rrbracket^{w,c}(p)(e) = 1 \text{ iff } BEST(f, g, e) \subseteq p \\ \text{(where } BEST(f, g, e) = \{ w \in \cap f(e) \mid \nexists v \in \cap f(e) [v <_{g(e)} w] \} \text{)}$$

Following Hacquard's account of event sensitivity of modal backgrounds (Hacquard 2010), the modal backgrounds for *-ki* are keyed to its event argument, as indicated by *f*(*e*) and *g*(*e*).

This proposed semantics applies uniformly across embedded and root contexts. In embedded contexts, the *-ki* clause takes as its event argument the event denoted by the matrix predicate. While all attitude predicates supply a modal base *f*, only priority-meaning or related predicates supply an ordering source *g*. For instance, 'want' and 'hope' provide the attitude holder's belief and preference as the modal base and bouletic ordering source. The *-ki* complement of these verbs is true iff in the best worlds given the attitude holder's belief and desire, the prejacent *p* is true. In comparison, predicates like 'believe' do not provide an ordering source—but only the attitude holder's belief as a modal base—which leaves *-ki* semantically undefined in their complements.

Turning to the root context, a *-ki* clause is the matrix clause itself and is not embedded under an attitude verb. In such cases, the event argument for *-ki* is the utterance event, which is at the topmost level of every sentence by default. Every utterance event makes available the common ground (Stalnaker 1984) as a modal base; however, only some utterance events provide an ordering source. I assume that when there is a contextually salient goal/ideal, the utterance event can encode it as an ordering source. Consequently, *-ki* in the root context is well defined only when such a contextually salient goal/ideal exists, and it asserts that the prejacent is true in all the best worlds relative to that contextual goal/ideal.

- (9) $\llbracket (\text{come. my. house})\mathbf{ki} \rrbracket$ is defined if $g(e_0)$ is non-empty.
 If defined, it is true iff $\text{BEST}(f, g, e_0) \subseteq \{w' | \text{The ad comes to the sp's house in } w'\}$
 (where e_0 is the utterance event)

The two empirical domains—embedded and root contexts—can thus be uniformly explained under this comparison-based semantics of *-ki*. In both cases, *-ki* requires the presence of an ordering source g : in embedded contexts, the ordering source is contributed by the selecting predicate, and in root contexts, it is supplied by the utterance event.

5 Sentence-Final Combinations and Speech Act

5.1 The Combination of *-ki* and Sentence-Type Marker

The immediate question that arises from the analysis so far is how *-ki* in root contexts creates directive force despite not being an imperative sentence. See (10):

- (10) a. ittake wuli cip-ey o-ki(-ta)
 later my home-to come-KI-DECL
 ‘Come to my house./ You have to come to my house.’
 b. ilehkey cip-ey neckey o-ki-nya?
 like.this home-to late come-KI-INT
 ‘Do you have to come home this late?’

As (10) shows, *-ki* may co-occur with sentence-type markers such as *-ta* and *-nya*, occupying a structurally lower position than these sentence-type markers. This confirms that *ki* itself is not a sentence-type marker. By contrast, the imperative marker *-la* directly instantiates a sentence-type. *-la* cannot combine with declarative or interrogative endings: **-la-ta/*-la-nya*, reflecting the general prohibition against stacking multiple sentence-type markers.

This raises the question of which sentence type the *-ki* directive instantiates morphosyntactically. The form *-ki-ta* (10), ending in the overt declarative marker, gives us a clue. *-ki-ta* and bare *-ki* both give rise to directive readings indistinguishable in meaning. I reason this is because bare sentence-final *-ki* is underlyingly declarative, with the declarative marker dropped. Under this assumption—that *-ki* directives are all declaratives—the next puzzle is, then, how declaratives give rise to directive force.

5.2 Necessity-Directive Update

To address this question, the present analysis adopts a dynamic discourse model grounded in prior studies (Hamblin 1971; Roberts 1996; Ginzburg 1996; Gunlogson 2004; Farkas and Bruce 2010; Malamud and Stephenson 2015), in which utterances update a structured discourse context, namely, the conversational scoreboard. The scoreboard comprises components such as the Common Ground (CG), Discourse Commitments (DC), and the Table, which stores questions under discussion (QUD). Imperatives update another distinct component—the addressee’s To-Do List (TDL) (Portner 2004)—which encodes the actions the addressee is expected to realize.

A general principle for mapping sentences to the scoreboard is that declaratives update CG/DC, whereas imperatives update TDLs. Since *p-ki(-ta)* is morphologically declarative, it updates the speaker’s DC and the Table with its propositional content, *p-ki*, which conveys that *p* is a necessity

relative to the salient goal or ideal associated with the utterance event (as argued in section 4). Updating DC, Table, or CG, however, does not yet yield directive force.

To derive the directive effect, I propose a discourse rule, whereby a proposition asserted/accepted as a necessity (grounded in contextual goals/ideals), with the addressee as its agent, must be placed on the addressee's TDL (11).

(11) Necessity-Directive update

If an utterance S produces a context change of type (a), it also produces a context change of (b), and vice versa

a. $\Box^{f_c, g_c} p \in CG$

b. $p \in TDL(a_c)$

(where the agent of p is the addressee, f_c is CG, g_c is the contextually salient goals/ideals, and a_c is the addressee of context c .)

Under this rule, $p\text{-}ki(-ta)$, though declarative, acquires directive force because its assertion of necessity must target the addressee's TDL, as in Table 1. (Several components here are *projected* components. A^* is called the projected A , a set of possible future A states; Farkas and Bruce 2010)

	(i) After A's utterance $p\text{-}ki!$	(ii) After B accepts A's utterance
DC_A	$\{\Box^{f_c, g_c} p\}$	
DC_B		
Table	$\langle \{\Box^{f_c, g_c} p\} \rangle$	
CG		$\{\Box^{f_c, g_c} p\}$
CG*	$\{\{\Box^{f_c, g_c} p\}\}$	
TDL_B		$\{p\}$
TDL^*_B	$\{\{p\}\}$	

Table 1 Context change of $-ki!$

It is reasonable to assume that only such things that are controllable by the addressee, at least partially, can enter the addressee's TDL. This explains why certain propositions are infelicitous as the complement of directives. In context (12), 'it rains' is indeed necessary for achieving the interlocutors' goals, i.e., producing crops, which would, in principle, satisfy the modal semantics of $-ki$. Nevertheless, 'it rains' is infelicitous as the content of $-ki$. Under the current analysis, this follows from the requirement that $-ki$ not only asserts the necessity of its prejacent, but also places the prejacent on the addressee's TDL; since 'it rains' cannot appropriately enter the TDL, the utterance is ruled out.

- (12) Context: The salient goal of both the speaker and addressee is to grow crops, and to achieve that goal, rain is necessary.

#pi-ka o-ki

rain-NOM come-KI
 Intended: ‘Rain comes!’ (as a command)

5.3 Comparison with Canonical Imperatives

Because the necessity–directive update rule (11) is bidirectional, we predict that *-la*, like *-ki*, should also trigger dual discourse component updates. In other words, we expect *-la* to do more than what is standardly assumed—namely, simply adding a property to the addressee’s To-Do List (Zanuttini et al. 2012); it must also trigger the speaker’s commitment to the necessity of *p*.

Consider the discourse effect of imperatives in (7). The primary function of *-la* is to impose a requirement on the addressee, i.e., to come to the speaker’s house. At the same time, however, *-la* plausibly carries the speaker’s commitment that the addressee’s coming is necessary, given their shared salient goal, namely, the addressee’s participation in the party. This commitment parallels the interpretation *-ki* receives in the same scenario. This is exactly predicted by the bidirectional update in (11), particularly the direction from (b) to (a) in this case. Accordingly, *-la* has the same discourse update as *-ki*, as illustrated in Table 1.

Despite this shared update pattern, we find a central asymmetry between *-ki* and *-la*, with respect to the available kinds of modal interpretations each supports. While *-ki* directives draw exclusively on a contextually salient goal/ideal associated with the utterance event, *-la* supports two distinct modal interpretations: one grounded in shared goals (parallel to *-ki*), and the other grounded in the speaker’s private preferences. The latter reading employs a bouletic ordering source, which *-ki* cannot access in its directive use.² This distinction is reflected in the previous scenarios. When a shared contextual goal is salient, *-la* and *-ki* are both possible, expressing goal-based necessity, as in (7). But when *no shared goal is present*—as in the casual invitations in (6)—*-la* can still express the speaker’s personal preference, whereas *-ki* cannot take this interpretation in its directive use.³

To capture this flexibility, I propose a second update pattern, the Preference-Directive Update. Unlike the goal-based update, which involves a bidirectional mapping between CG and TDL, the

² It appears that *-ki* final in root contexts can be based on a bouletic ordering source, but only in its optative use.

pi-ka o-ki-lul!
 rain-NOM come-KI-ACC
 ‘I hope it rains!’ (Wish) (*Command)

The optative *-ki* is obligatorily followed by the accusative marker *-ul*. One possible underlying structure that accounts for this accusative marking is that there is a covert desire predicate, licensing the accusative case on the *-ki* clause. Alternatively, this optative structure may be analyzed as a genuine root construction, assuming historical insubordination in which *-ki* clauses became independent from matrix verbs (Yae 2022).

³ The empirical pattern observed for *-la* closely parallels Kaufmann’s two-way ordering-source flexibility of English imperatives. In her analysis, the imperative operator is a modal operator that contributes necessity relative to an ordering source that either (i) resolves a salient decision problem, or (ii) the speaker’s bouletic ordering source. The first one (i) is conceptually very close to what I have called the contextually salient ideals/goals. In contrast to Kaufmann’s modal treatment of the imperative operator, however, the current analysis treats *-la* not as a modal operator but as a jussive head. The modal necessity reading associated with *-la* is not lexically encoded but derived through the two discourse update mechanisms proposed in (11) and (13).

preference-based update is one-directional: from the property in the addressee's TDL to a speaker's preference claim in the CG, as illustrated in (13).

(13) Preference-Directive update

If an utterance S produces a context change of type (b), and it is not based on the contextually salient goal/ideal, it triggers a context change of (a).

a. $\Box^{f_s, g_s} p \in CG$

b. $p \in TDL^*(a_c)$

(where f_s is the speaker's belief, g_s is the speaker preference, and a_c is the addressee of the context c .)

	(i) After A's utterance	(ii) After B accepts A's utterance
DC _A	$\{\Box^{f_s, g_s} p\}$	
DC _B		
Table		
CG	$\{\Box^{f_s, g_s} p\}$	
CG*		
TDL _A		
TDL _B		$\{p\}$
TDL* _B	$\{\{p\}\}$	

Table 2 Context change of -la! (updating the speaker preference)

Crucially, unlike the bidirectional rule in (11), the update in (13) runs only from (b) to (a): placing p on the addressee's TDL is what licenses the speaker's commitment, not the reverse. Under this rule, once *-la* places p on the addressee's TDL, it correspondingly commits the speaker to the necessity of p relative to her own preference. Speakers can directly commit the discourse to their own preferences without requiring addressee uptake, given the first-person authority one has over one's own preferences. In other words, *-la* based on the speaker preference can update the CG with the speaker preference as soon as it is uttered, regardless of the addressee's acceptance.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that *-ki* in Korean is a comparison-based mood marker. Its distribution under desire predicates and in directive contexts shows that *-ki* is licensed only when its event anchor provides an ordering source.

Although the empirical scope of this paper has been limited, the distribution of *-ki* extends far beyond desire predicates and directives. *-ki* also appears in purposive and causal adverbials, aspectual verb complements, optative constructions, and contrastive topic (*-ki-nun ha-ta*) or additive environments (*-ki-to ha-ta*). Extending the proposed analysis to these additional environments—and clarifying how different contexts supply ordering sources or alternative sets—is work to be taken up in the future.

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