Korean what-exclamatives and their implications

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While what-exclamatives have been extensively studied in other languages, it has been traditionally believed that Korean may not employ what-exclamatives. The present study, however, challenges the traditional view by proposing to treat mwe(-l) [ku/i]lekey ‘what so’ clauses like (1B), (1B’), and (1B’’) as variants of Korean what-exclamatives.

    John-NOM Lamborghini-ACC buy-PST-DECL
    ‘(I heard that) John bought a Lamborghini.’

    B: wa, mwe(-l) kulehkey pissan cha-lul sa-ss-e!
    wow what-ACC so expensive car-ACC buy-PST-DECL
    ‘Wow, what an expensive car he bought!’

    B’ wa, mwe(-l) kulehkey pissa!
    wow what-ACC so expensive
    ‘Wow, how very expensive it is!’

    B’’ wa, mwe(-l) kulehkey pissakey sa-ss-e!
    wow what-ACC so expensively buy-PST-DECL
    ‘Wow, how very expensive it is!’

    A: kulekey!
    yeah
    ‘Yeah!’

Close investigation of Korean what-exclamatives provides an unusually rich set of linguistic diagnostics that we can use to investigate cross-linguistic variation in what-exclamatives. For example, there is an ongoing debate in the literature about whether what-exclamatives denote sets of propositions (Zanuttini & Portner 2003) or degree properties (Rett 2011, Castroviejo 2021) and whether they count as assertions (Trotzke & Giannakidou 2021) or expressives (Rett 2011, Castroviejo 2021). This study presents fresh insights into the aforementioned issues by arguing that Korean what-exclamatives denote maximal degrees derived via a maximality operator [ku/i]lekey ‘so’ and that they have assertive speech acts toward which the speaker expresses their evaluative stance. This view allows us to account for regular as well as idiosyncratic properties of Korean what-exclamatives.
References


