

Same and different ways of seeing faces: The cases of Korean and Thai

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Khammee, Kultida, & Rhee, Seongha (2022). Same and different ways of seeing faces: The cases of Korean and Thai. *The Journal of Linguistic Science*, 103, 361-381. This paper analyzes the lexemes denoting ‘face’ in Korean and Thai and identifies commonalities and differences in lexicalization patterns. It shows that the semantic designations of the Korean lexeme(s) are largely restricted, whereas those of Thai are versatile, and even carry grammatical functions in a number of conceptual domains. The Korean situation is complex because ‘face’ lexicalization is in division of labor by a few lexemes, including those of Chinese origin. A contrastive analysis presents a number of noteworthy findings including differential ‘face’ conceptualizations of physical configurations, effects of typological features such as agglutination and isolation, and influences of language contact, among others. (University of Phayao-Thailand and Liberal Arts, Mahidol University-Thailand & Hankuk Univ. of Foreign Studies-Seoul)

Keywords

face, Korean *elkwul*, Thai *naa*, metaphor, metonymy

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1. Introduction

Human body is a ready and convenient reference point for conceptualization of non-human objects and events, as has been widely observed in the patterns of lexicalization via metaphor and metonymy across languages. Because of commonalities of physical features and functions, such patterns are often found to be universal, but differences, often significant, have also been reported (Kövecses, 2005; Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987; Sharifian et al., 2008 and works therein, among others). Doubtlessly, ‘face’ is among the most important body parts for humans (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Yu, 2001). Thus, comparative analyses of semantic designations based on body-part terms, especially those of ‘face’, warrant to shed light on the extent of commonalities and differences manifest in human conceptualization of body, which is reflected in individual languages. This paper addresses ‘face’ in Korean and Thai from a comparative perspective, which has not been attempted to date.

The objectives of this paper are threefold: (i) to describe lexical extension patterns of ‘face’ in Korean and Thai (see 2.3 for rationale of selection of the two languages), (ii) to describe grammaticalization of ‘face’, and (iii) to identify commonalities and differences and analyze them. Pursuing these objectives, this paper is organized in the following manner. In section 2, we present a few preliminary issues to perspectivize the discussion through theoretical frameworks, e.g., lexicalization strategies, core and extended meanings, and typological characterizations of the two target languages; in section 3, we present the data in the two sampled languages; in section 4, we compare and contrast the states of affairs of the two languages, analyze extension mechanisms, and lexicalization strategies; and in section 5 we summarize the findings and conclude the paper. The data sources are dictionaries, lexica and corpora, i.e., including Wulimalsaym, an online dictionary by the National Institute of the Korean Language and a 24 million-word Drama and Movies Corpus, a collection of 7,454 scenarios of dramas, sitcoms, and movies dating from 1992 through 2015, developed by Min Li while at Seoul National University (currently at Tsinghua University), for Korean; and The Thai Royal Academy Dictionary, an online searchable dictionary by the Royal Society of Thailand and a 33 million-word Thai National Corpus,

developed by Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, for Thai.

2. Preliminaries

Before we proceed, we will briefly consider a few notions that bear significance in the current study, i.e., lexicalization strategies, core and extended meanings, and typological characteristics of Korean and Thai, in turn.

2.1 Lexicalization Strategies

When a need for a name for an object or concept arises, languages may resort to certain strategies within their means and resources. For instance, it may coin an entirely new word, which we label as a ‘monosemy’ strategy; or use an existing word of a similar meaning, which we label as a ‘polysemy’ strategy. A similar thread of discussion has been made, with reference to ‘hypersynonymy language’ (Dirven, 2010; Libert, 2018; Thorne, 2010) and ‘hyperpolysemy language’. Still another strategy may involve modifying existing forms by means of derivation, compounding, idiomatization, among others (for discussion on the role of idioms in semantic enrichment, see Eom, 2020 and Rhee, 2022a).

Evidently, no languages will consistently resort to the extreme version of the two polar strategies, for various reasons. For instance, utilizing extreme monosemy strategies extensively may be cognitively burdensome for memorization, whereas utilizing extreme polysemy strategies extensively may be burdensome for disambiguation. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that languages will settle around somewhere in the middle of the continuum, though they may likely exhibit propensities toward one over the other extreme. In this context, it is noteworthy that lexicalization strategies may be influenced by linguistic typological characteristics of languages, as suggested by Čermak (2002) and Robert (2020), among others.

2.2 Core and extended meanings

For reasons described above, presence of polysemy is a norm in language. Multiple meanings of a polysemous lexeme form a ‘semantic map’ (Cysouw, 2010; Georgakopoulos & Polis, 2021; Haspelmath, 2003; Narrog, 2010; Narrog & van der Auwera, 2011; Vicente & Falkum, 2015, 2017), in which the core meaning is extended to others that are connected by various conceptual linking. Core meanings of a lexeme may be determined by perceptual and cognitive salience synchronically or by the precedence diachronically (for discussion of difficulties in determining core and peripheral meanings of polysemy, see Rhee, 2004, p. 402 and references therein, notably Geeraerts, 1993; Sandra & Rice, 1995; and Tyler & Evans, 2003).

Crosslinguistically ubiquitous polysemization may be the result of the human’s innate cognitive operation of categorization (Evans & Green, 2006; Janda, 2015; Labov, 1972, p. 226, 1973, pp. 341-342; Lakoff, 1987, pp. 5-6; Taylor, 2003). Labov (1973, p. 342) observes, “[M]an is a categorizing animal [...] language is a categorizing activity.” These polysemous meanings form a radial category and may be mapped unto concentric circles with prototypical (canonical) and peripheral (non-canonical) meanings, exhibiting gradience (cf. Heine & Andrason, *forthc.*; Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1978).

The semantic extension is enabled typically by metaphor and metonymy, since these mechanisms operate across domains based on similarity for the former or inter- or intra-categorially based solely on contiguity at physical, textual, conceptual, or even cultural levels for the latter. However, languages may differ in recruiting actual mechanisms for semantic extension and the extent of the extensional operation.

2.3 Target languages

The two target languages, Korean and Thai, are not only geographically distant but also distinct in many meaningful ways. They are genealogically unrelated, i.e., Korean is a Transeurasian/Altaic language, whereas Thai is a Kra-Dai language. They are typologically different, i.e., Korean is an agglutinating, head-final, SOV, synthetic and

non-tonal language, whereas Thai is an isolating, head-initial, SVO, analytic and tonal language, as conveniently tabulated in <Table 1> for visual clarity. For these reasons of differences, a comparative-contrastive analysis between the two languages can reveal the variational patterns and the potential factors responsible for the variation.

Table 1

Korean and Thai in Contrast

	Korean	Thai
Genealogy	Transeurasian/Altaic	Kra-Dai
Morphology	Agglutinating	Isolating
Morphological Complexity	Synthetic	Analytic
Head-Directionality	Head-final	Head-initial
Word Order	SOV	SVO
Tone	Non-Tonal	Tonal

3. Data: Korean and Thai

The two languages have large inventories of semantic designations for the ‘face’ lexemes. We will explore them briefly qualitatively based on dictionaries and lexica and quantitatively based on the token frequencies in corpora.

3.1 Korean ‘face’

Unlike Thai, Korean has multiple lexemes that denote ‘face’. Frequency counts are based on a contemporary corpus, the Drama & Movies Corpus of 24 million words, and they are given in the normalized frequency per million words (PMW).

The primary term for ‘face’ in contemporary Korean is *elkwul*. Historically, the lexeme denoted ‘appearance, form, body’, which is obsolete in contemporary Korean. Since its earlier designation was of a wider extent (‘body’), the semantic change to ‘face’ constitutes an instance of semantic narrowing. The second most frequent ‘face’ word is *nach*. Historically, its predecessor nAch denoted the human face, but over the course of time, its meaning deteriorated and the lexeme has become a pejorative term,

often in the form of *nachccak* (*nach* ‘face’, *ccak* ‘flat surface’). The third most frequent term is Sino-Korean *annmyen* (*an* ‘face’, *myen* ‘side’], which largely specializes in formal registers. In addition, two homophones *myensang₁* (lit. ‘side top’) and *myensang₂* (lit. ‘side feature’) are also Sino-Korean (面上 and 面相/面像, respectively), but are of very low frequency in use.

Incidentally, it is notable that the order of dictionary entries does not go in tandem with the use frequency in corpus. In other words, the primary meanings, as indicated by the first semantic designations in dictionary, are not always used at the highest frequency. This is clear from <Table 2>, in which the frequency figures of the ordered dictionary semantic designations do not surface in a descending order. For instance, the extended meaning ‘facial expression of emotion’ (in (d)) outnumbers the original meaning ‘face’ (in (a)).

Table 2

Semantic Designations of Korean ‘face’ Lexemes and Use Frequency

Word (Freq)	Meaning	PMW Freq
<i>elkwul</i> (4,079)	a. face (front-side of head)	1,611
	b. facial appearance and feature	151
	c. social reputation, dignity, honor	41
	d. facial expression of emotion	2,276
	e. notable person active in particular field	0
	f. representative	0
	g. individual, person archaic)	0
<i>nach</i> (117)	h. surface of face	2
	i. social reputation, dignity, honor	16
	j. familiarity	90
	k. facial expression of emotion	9
<i>annmyen</i> (18)	l. surface of face	5
	m. acquaintance (ability to recognize a person)	13
<i>myensang₁</i> (6)	n. face, surface of face	6
<i>myensang₂</i> (1)	o. facial appearance	1
	p. luck by facial feature (in fortune-telling)	0

3.2 Thai ‘face’

The Thai ‘face’ word is *naa* (in simplified transliteration). The Thai *naa* is used across diverse parts of speech (‘heterosemy’ Lichtenberk, 1991; ‘homomorph’ Quirk et al., 1985; ‘transcategorical morpheme’ Robert, 2020). Even though its primary (and default) semantic designation is the part-part ‘face’ (see (a) in <Table 3>), the Thai *naa* is most frequently discussed in the context of politeness (Persons, 2008; Ukosakul, 1999). The semantic designations by their parts-of-speech (POSs), based on the Thai Royal Dictionary with minor modification reflecting information from other sources (for (t) through (x)), and their normalized PMW token frequencies are as shown in <Table 3>.

Table 3

Semantic Designations of the Thai naa and Use Frequency

POS	Meaning	PMW Freq
n.	a. face (from forehead to chin)	693
n.	b. front part (opposite to back)	106
p.	c. in front of	103
n.	d. surface (top/surface of something)	8
n.	e. ingredient sprinkled on top of food	11
n.	f. sheet	161
n.	g. one side of a flat object	24
n.	h. drum-head	0
n.	i. one side of a dice	11
n.	j. width of a rectangle	0
n.	k. one side of cloth having patterns	3
n.	l. time, period	32
n.	m. season	26
n.	n. a person	29
n.	o. dignity	0
clsf.	p. classifier of paper	5
a/ad.	q. next/front (of time)	42

a./ad.	r. opposite of the back	34
a./ad.	s. next/beyond	11
n.	t. duty	13
n.	u. middleman	3
n.	v. top/high rank (person, business)	3
v.	w. make progress	3
p.n.	x. (sub-district name)	3

As is the case with Korean, the dictionary listing of semantic designations does not coincide with the use frequency. It is noteworthy that the meaning in the physical domain of body parts (in (a)) is the one most frequently used. Also notable is that though naa is often discussed with reference to politeness (see above), the usage is minimally attested in the corpus as shown in (o) (note that PMW 0 denotes fewer than 33 tokens in the referenced corpus and does not necessarily mean ‘no-attestation’). The most prominent feature of the Thai naa is that unlike its counterparts in Korean, it has cross-categorical uses (see 4.1 below for more discussion).

4. Discussion

Based on the data of the ‘face’ semantics presented in the preceding section, we now turn to a comparative discussion of the two languages, focusing on typological characteristics, semantic extension mechanisms, and lexicalization strategies.

4.1 Typological characteristics

In accordance with the typological characteristics of isolating languages, the Thai naa, unlike its Korean counterparts, can function in various word classes without formal change. It is evident in the POS listing in <Table 3> that the Thai extension patterns across word classes are extensive leading to grammaticalization. For instance, naa functions as a classifier for ‘pages, sheets’ (in (p)) by virtue of a sheet of paper

being an object having a flat surface resembling a face. Obviously, this development is based on the lexical usage of denoting ‘sheet’ (in (f)). Furthermore, *naa* can also function as a preposition designating the frontal location ‘in front of’ (in (b)). The development of ‘face’ into an anterior spatial preposition is a noteworthy instance of grammaticalization (see 4.2 for more discussion on conceptual motivation).

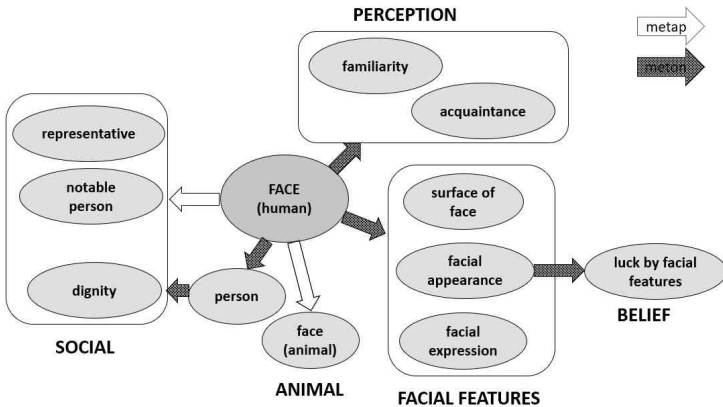
On the other hand, Korean ‘face’ lexemes are strictly lexical and have not (yet) grammaticalized. They designate diverse lexical notions but since Korean tends to be conservative in conversion across word classes (see, however, Rhee, 2022b, pp. 578-579 for instances of conversion), all semantic designations are in the category of nouns. Incidentally, the classifier for objects having a ‘face’-like flat surface, for which the Thai *naa* is used, is *myen* in Korean, which, historically originated from the Sino-Korean lexeme denoting ‘face’ but in contemporary Korean denoting ‘side’. The postpositions denoting spatial anteriority, for which the Thai *naa* is used, are the complex postpositions involving the native Korean relational noun *aph* ‘front’ and the Sino-Korean relational noun *cen* ‘front’. When designating the frontal location which a referenced entity is conceived of as facing, another complex postposition -(ul) *myenha(ye)*, involving the Sino-Korean nominal *myen* (historically ‘face’ and contemporaneously ‘side’) is used. From these observations, the versatility of the Thai ‘face’ lexeme can be said to be the result of its typological characteristics of isolating languages (see 4.3 for more discussion).

4.2 Extension mechanisms

When the semantic designations are reviewed, two prominent cognitive mechanisms, i.e., metaphor, similarity-based inter-domain extension, and metonymy, contiguity-based extension, are clearly visible, as diagrammatically shown in <Figure 1>.

Figure 1

Semantic Extension of ‘face’ in Korean

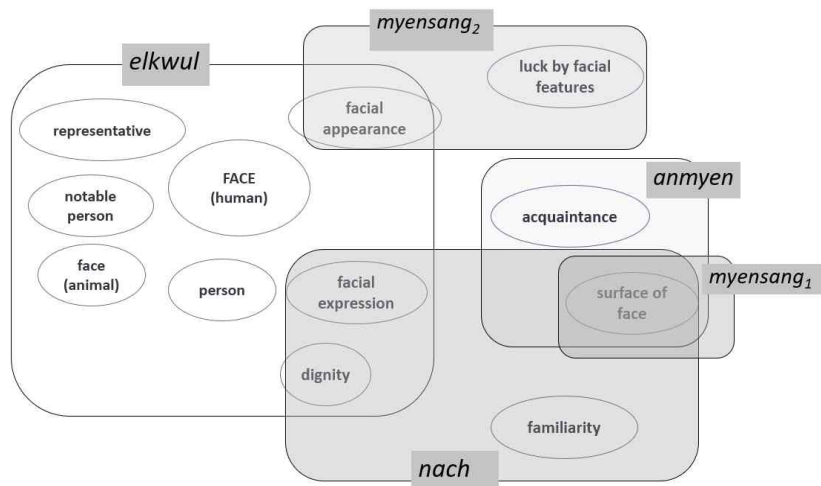


<Figure 1> shows that the semantics of ‘face’ for humans is extended to various conceptual domains, such as Perception, Social, Animal, Facial Feature, and Belief. The extensions to a ‘representative’ and ‘notable person’ and to an ‘animal face’ are instances of metaphorization, and all others are instances of metonymization.

It is noteworthy that, in the Social domain in <Figure 1>, the extensions to the domain of Social are enabled by the metaphor SOCIAL INSTITUTION IS (A) PERSON, thus, from a human face representing the individual to a salient person representing the institution; and by the ‘chained metonymy’ (cf. Hilpert, 2007, 2010) FACE TO PERSON TO DIGNITY, whereby a person is construed as having dignity as an integral element in the Social domain.

There are multiple lexemes denoting ‘face’ in Korean, but their semantic spaces are not identical, i.e., each of them has differential semantic specialization, as shown in <Figure 2>.

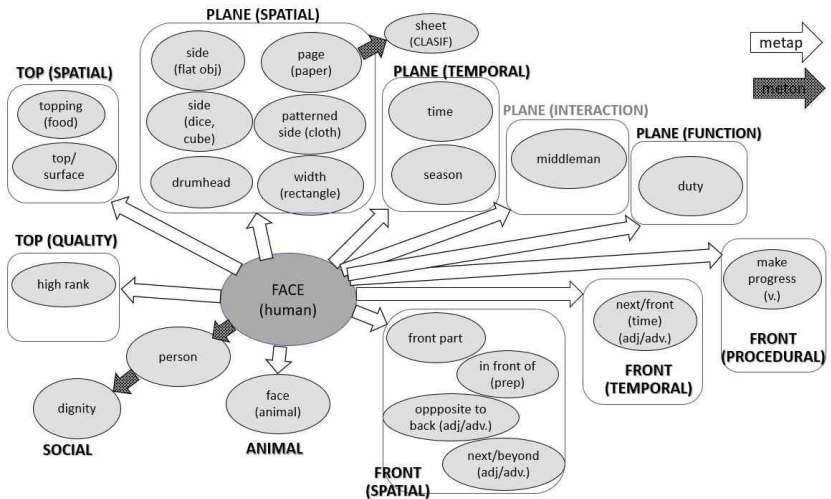
Figure 2

Semantic Space of 'face' Lexemes in Korean

The diagrammatic representation in <Figure 2> glosses over minute subtleties and nuanced meanings, but is a reasonably generalized picture of semantic domains of the 'face' lexemes. As is evident from the figure, there are unique semantic designations and shared semantic designations. For instance, 'facial appearance' is denoted by *elkwul* and *myensang₂*, and 'facial expression' and 'dignity' by *elkwul* and *nach*. The lexeme occupying the largest conceptual space is *elkwul*, an expected state of affairs considering its being of the native Korean origin and the primary lexeme in contemporary Korean in terms of its lexical strength.

On the other hand, the extension mechanisms of the Thai *naa* are substantially complex, as shown in <Figure 3>.

Figure 3
Semantic Extension of ‘face’ in Thai



<Figure 3> shows the wide expanse of the semantic space of ‘face’ in Thai, across diverse conceptual spaces, e.g., Animal, Social, Top (Quality and Spatial), Plane (Spatial, Temporal, and Function), and Front (Spatial, Temporal, and Procedural). This indicates that *naa*, denoting ‘face’, has extended to various domains transferring the ‘frontedness’ concept to various configurational dimensions. For instance, ‘frontedness’ on Spatial domain may mean ‘top, surface’ or ‘topping’ on food, and ‘frontedness’ on Quality domain may mean ‘high rank’.

When Korean and Thai are compared, it becomes immediately noticeable that Thai extensively uses metaphor (indicated by the light arrows in <Figure 3>), whereas Korean extensively uses metonymy (indicated by the shaded arrows in <Figure 1>). Since metaphorical extension in Korean is relatively limited, the semantic richness across domains is much weaker than in Thai. For instance, as noted above, the Thai ‘face’ metaphorically transferred along the TOP-DOWN axis for ‘face’-relationship (‘frontedness’), in which ‘face’ is the TOP (e.g., food topping, object’s top (part or surface)). Similarly, when the ‘frontedness’ concept is applied to Function domain, ‘face’ denotes ‘duty’ (e.g., *naa-thi* [face-place]), something of primary importance at a

location or capacity, and when it is applied to Interaction domain, 'face' denotes a 'middleman' (e.g., *nai-naa* 'man-face'), someone at the 'front' of interaction representing others.

A close look at the extensional patterns of 'face' in Thai shows that 'face' is viewed along a number of relational schemata via metaphorization. This is shown in (1):

- (1) a. TOP-BOTTOM for space and quality (TOP is 'face')
- b. FOREGROUNDED-BACKGROUNDED for spatial plane, time, interaction, and function (FOREGROUND is 'face')
- c. HERE-FRONT for spatial location (FRONT is 'face')
- d. PRESENT-FUTURE for temporal location (FUTURE is 'face')
- e. CURRENT-ADVANCED for procedure (ADVANCED is 'face')

The Thai lexicalization patterns also involve metaphorization to animals (but limited to four-legged land animals, not applicable to aquatic animals or birds) for shape-function similarity, which is one of the primary metaphorical extensions proposed by Heine et al. (1991). Thai also exhibits metaphorization of spatial relationship, in which 'face' is the frontal area, and of temporal relationship, in which 'face' is the temporal anteriority. The temporal meanings 'next' 'future' from *naa* 'face' are based on the series of metaphors and metonymies of FACE IS FRONT, FRONT IS FUTURE (via the 'ego-moving' model), FACE INDICATES DIRECTION (via vision, motion), DIRECTION IS MOVEMENT, LATER LOCATION IS FRONT, LATER LOCATION IS FACE, LATER LOCATION IS LATER TIME, etc. Intertwined and often inseparable relation between metaphor and metonymy is well captured in the notion of 'metaphonymy' (Goossens, 1990).

In this context, the notion of conceptual models bears significance. Heine (1997, p. 42) notes the strong relationship between 'face' and 'front', representing 52.8% of African and 72.1% of Oceanic languages. Heine (1997, p. 41) also notes that 'face' is the second most productive source of the spatial gram for 'up', following 'head', in African and Oceanic languages. Such spatial grams develop from the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic models (Heine, 1997), as shown in <Figure 4> and <Figure 5>, respectively.

Figure 4

The Zoomorphic Model

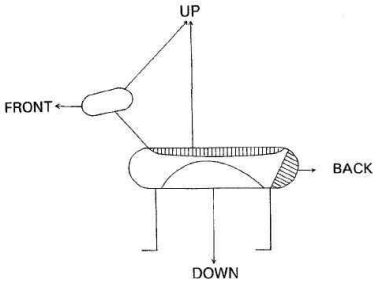
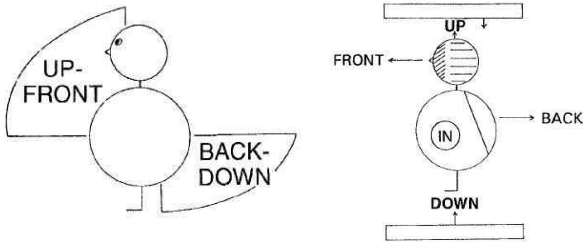


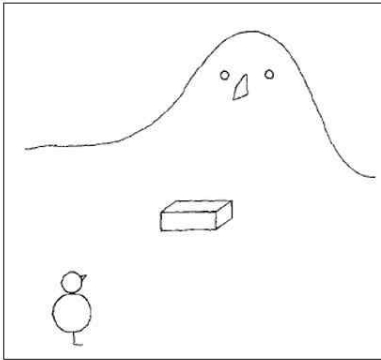
Figure 5

The Anthropomorphic Models



It is worth noting that Thai metaphORIZATION from human face to the ‘faces’ of inanimate objects (dice, drum, cloth, etc.) involves the mapping based on shape similarity, in which ‘face’ is the planar surface resembling relatively flat contour of human faces. This resembles ‘the face-to-face model’ (Heine, 1997), in that the part most prominently observable by the human viewer is construed as the face of the object, i.e., the object is facing the viewer. This type of construal is widespread across all ontological domains.

Figure 6

The Face-to-Face Model

There are a few other notable aspects of Korean 'face' lexicalization patterns. Metaphorization in Korean 'face' lexicalization is limited from human to animal (four-legged land animals) and the representability relation from the face representing the person to the person representing a field (e.g., 'face of badminton' for a star badminton player). On the other hand, metonymization in Korean 'face' lexicalization involves part-whole meronymy (e.g., 'person'), human to human quality (e.g., 'dignity'), containment metonymy (e.g., 'facial expression'), and perception-recognition metonymy (e.g. 'familiarity'), etc. The lexicalization pattern also involves the [facial features > luck by facial features], often in fortune-telling and common beliefs on face-personality-destiny relationship, a type of metonymic association.

4.3 Lexicalization strategies

As we noted from the outset, Thai has a single lexeme for 'face', while it has diverse semantic designations, whereas Korean has multiple lexemes denoting 'face' and 'face'-related meanings, at variable degrees of semantic versatility and of use frequency. Hence, it can be said that Thai uses the polysemy strategy, whereas Korean uses the poly-lexemic strategy. In other words, Thai 'face' word shows extensive semantic extension based on a single lexeme, whereas Korean 'face' words

are more semantically compartmentalized, inventing multiple (near-)synonyms (even borrowing from Chinese) (cf. ‘overlexicalization’ Fowler et al., 1979).

Isolating languages have light morphology. In this context, the observation by Robert (2020) bears particular significance. Robert (2020), in her exposition on ‘transcategoriality’, notes that in languages with light morphology (e.g. isolating languages, Banda-Linda, Gbaya, Sango, Tupuri, Dagara, Ikwere and Nelemwa in her study), the language units appear as generic notions which are either not categorized at all or are only weakly pre-categorized and can be instantiated in various categories; their syntactic status is specified by the discourse (these are known as “type-token” languages); most of the time, one use can hardly be derived from another. Transcategoriality is then massive, polydirectional (weakly oriented from a source category to a target).

Also noteworthy in this context is the study of Čermak (2002). According to his study, the extent of polysemy is smallest for inflectional languages, being largest for isolating languages. Agglutinating language is in the middle. Čermak’s (2002) study involves English (an isolating language), Finnish (an agglutinative language), and Czech (in inflectional language). His quantitative study shows the polysemy ratio of Isolating (English) vs. Agglutinative (Finnish) vs. Inflectional (Czech) as 34.9 : 13.6 : 5.1 (Čermak, 2002, p. 241).

A crosslinguistic comparison of the size of lexicon involves a fundamental difficulty that dictionaries and lexica come in all different sizes and hence direct size comparison is often impossible. However, some comparison may yield a reasonable generalization. Korean dictionaries have a large number of entries (e.g., Wulimalsaym 1.14 million; Phycowunkwuke Taysacen 423,170 head-words). On the other hand, the inventory of head-words in Thai dictionaries is much smaller (e.g., The Royal Institute’s Dictionary about 40,000 words).¹⁾ Even though the point must be corroborated through more rigorous methods, it is safe to hypothesize, at the current

1) An online source (wikipedia) on the numbers of words in online dictionaries across languages shows that the Korean language has the largest inventory (though the number of head-words is slightly different), and the Thai language ranks 48th (cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dictionaries_by_number_of_words).

level of understanding, that Thai has a smaller inventory of words, which tend to have a high level of polysemy, whereas Korean has a much larger inventory of words, which tend to have a low level of polysemy.

5. Summary and conclusion

In this paper we have looked at the lexical extension patterns in Korean and Thai, based on the lexeme(s) denoting 'face'. A body-part term of primary significance for human being, 'face' shows diverse extension patterns via metaphor and metonymy in the two languages. Our investigation reveals that the semantic designation of the Korean lexemes are largely restricted, whereas those of Thai are versatile, and even carry grammatical functions as a classifier and preposition. We also noted that whereas Korean resorts extensively to metonymic extension, Thai resorts to metaphoric extension. The lexicalization strategies are quite dissimilar in this respect that Korean uses poly-lexemic strategy, compartmentalizing diverse 'face'-related meanings denoted by separate lexemes, whereas Thai uses polysemy strategy, whereby 'face' notion undergoes extensive semantic extension, based on a single lexeme, via diverse metaphors. It is suggested that the polysemy strategy may be responsible for a relatively smaller lexicon in Thai and the poly-lexemic strategy may be responsible for a relatively larger lexicon in Korean, a point warranting further rigorous crosslinguistic research.

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