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Emergence of Discourse Markers of Uncertainty in English and Korean and their Functional Extension: Grammaticalization and Discourse-Cognitive Strategic Perspectives*

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Seongha Rhee (2023), Emergence of Discourse Markers of Uncertainty in English and Korean and their Functional Extension: Grammaticalization and Discourse-Cognitive Strategic Perspectives. *Studies in Linguistics* 67, 129-167. Korean and English have a number of discourse markers (DMs) that signal the speaker's epistemic attitude of uncertainty (Uncertainty DMs; UDMs). English UDMs develop from three major conceptual categories, i.e., mental predicates, sortal modifiers, and lexemes denoting certainty. Korean UDMs develop from five major conceptual categories, i.e., questions, interrogatives, minimizers, sortal modifiers, and contingency connectives. Even though the two languages have only one conceptual category, i.e., sortal predicates, as a common conceptual source, each source category member in the two languages undergoes change that contributes to the 'uncertainty' semantics through selective focus on diverse aspects of the meaning of the source lexemes and expressions. This paper

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shows that the members in the source categories form a complex network due to their conceptual affinity to each other.

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1. Introduction

Discourse markers (DMs) constitute a language universal (Fraser 2006). English and Korean have large inventories of DMs, which developed from various source lexemes and constructions, and carry diverse and often multiple functions, largely depending on the contexts in which they occur (Fischer 2006, Koo 2012, 2018, Heine et al. 2021, Rhee and Koo 2021, Rhee 2023, among many others). Fluidity of function and dependency on context are closely related to the propensity of DMs to occur in informal, spoken register (cf. Östman 1982, Fraser 1990, Watts 1989).

Along with multiplicity in form, there is a plethora of DM research since the pioneering works by Schourup (1985) and Schiffrin (1987). Among the notable works addressing English DMs are Yngve (1970), Smith (1985), Aijmer (1985, 1997, 2009, 2016), Fraser (1990, 2006, 2015), Jucker (1993, 2015), Östman (1995), Brinton (1997, 2008), Simon-Vandenberg (2000), Erman (2001), Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg (2006), Dehé and Kavalova (2007), Maschler (2009), Miskovic-Lukovic (2009), Bolden (2009), Tagliamonte and Denis (2010), Kaltenböck et al. (2010), Pichler and Levey (2011), Heine (2013), Hancil et al. (2015), Beeching (2016), Pichler (2016), Kuteva et al. (2018), and Heine et al. (2021), among others.

Similarly, a large number of studies on Korean DMs have appeared and provided insights into the diverse nature of DMs since the pioneering works by Shin (1988) and Kang (1989). The line of research was actively pursued

by discourse analysts, cognitive linguists, and grammaticalizationists. Among the noteworthy works are Lee (1991), Ahn (1992), Lee (1995), Koo (1997), Park (1998), Kang (2000), Kim (2000), Mok (2001), Suh (2004), Jeon (2002), Kim (2004), Kim (2005), Ahn (2008), Koo (2008, 2011, 2018), Kim and Suh (2010), Kim (2013), Song (2013), Song and Shin (2014), Sohn (2016), Rhee (2016, 2023), Rhee and Koo (2021), and Kim et al. (2021).

With a few exceptions, however, most studies address DM functions focusing on one or two DMs in individual languages. Furthermore, a vast majority of the works analyze the state of affairs purely from a synchronic perspective. Given this background, the present study intends to extend the scope by addressing (i) multiple DMs under the functional category of ‘uncertainty’ (i.e., uncertainty discourse markers; UDMs), (ii) typologically distinct and genealogically unrelated languages, i.e., English and Korean, and (iii) grammaticalization paths and conceptual networks.

The objectives of this paper are twofold: (i) to exemplify the UDMs marking in English and Korean and (ii) to discuss a number of issues from grammaticalization and discourse-strategic perspectives. Examples are taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for English and the Korean Drama & Movies Corpus (KDMC) and the Korean Broadcasting Corpus (KBC) for Korean.¹

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 provides a brief description of English and Korean focusing on the typological characteristics relevant to the present discussion, as well as of DMs in general in order to expedite the discussion. Section 3 provides an account of English UDMs divided by the three conceptual source categories, i.e., mental predicates, sortal modifiers, and certainty. Section 4 provides an account of Korean DMs

¹ COCA is a websearchable, 520 million-word corpus containing the data from 1990s to 2015; KDMC is a non-websearchable, 24 million-word corpus containing 7,454 scenarios of drama and movies dating from 1992 through 2015, compiled by Min Li; and KBC is a non-websearchable, 8 million-word corpus containing 5,315 scenarios of radio and TV dramas dating from 1950 through 2007, compiled by the author. The search engine was UNICONC, developed by Jinho Park. Thanks go to Min Li and Jinho Park for kindly granting permission to use their research tools.

divided by five conceptual source categories, i.e., questions, interrogatives, sortal modifiers, minimizers, and contingency connectives.

2. Preliminaries

2.1. Typological characteristics of English and Korean

Typologically, English is a head-initial language, having the SVO word order, articles, and prepositions. Even though it is classified as a Germanic language as it shares some characteristics such as division of strong verbs and weak verbs in their inflection, it has lost much of inflectional complexity and has become a weakly inflecting language classifiable as an analytic language. It has articles, the use of which is mandatory, which function as a nominal modifier. In grammaticalization scenarios, these articles are often eroded, reflecting the degree of cohesiveness (Quirk and Mulholland 1964, Quirk et al. 1985, Rhee 2021).

On the other hand, Korean is an agglutinating, head-final, SOV language. In line with the SOV word order characteristics in morphology, it is suffixal and postpositional (see Robbeets 2020). Argument NPs are often omitted and NPs may occur without their postpositional particles, especially in speech, and the interpretive flexibility thus created often affects grammaticalization. NPs are strictly head-final, thus all nominal modifiers occur before the modified noun. Further, there is no article among the nominal modifiers. Syntactic and thematic functions of NPs are marked with case markers and postpositions. With these role markers NPs may occur rather freely without functional confusion, even though there is a canonical and preferred word order. Another significant feature is the presence of the speech levels (*hwakyeŋ*), which prominently occurs as a sentence-final particles. The speech levels are modulated by the degree of honorification and politeness as well as the sentence-types. The number of levels varies by individual researchers from four to seven and the membership of each level also lacks consensus (see Rhee 2020b).

The typological characteristics that are particularly important in the present analysis are structural incompleteness related to the (non-)omissibility of arguments and articles. In other words, UDMs, and more generally DMs, tend to become structurally incomplete violating morphosyntactic rules by the absence of phrasal or clausal complements or of external arguments like the sentential subjects (cf. ‘elliptical discourse markers’, Rhee 2023).

2.2. Discourse Markers

The notion of ‘discourse marker’ is not monolithic and the label has been used with different definitions and characterizations. Schifffrin (1987: 31), for instance, defined DMs as “sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk”, i.e., non-obligatory utterance-initial items that function in relation to ongoing talk and text. The definition does not provide a straightforward means to sharply differentiate DMs and non-DMs, and many researchers have tried to list defining properties of DMs. Heine (2013: 1209) and Heine et al. (2021) list a number of properties of a DM as: (i) its meaning is not part of the sentential meaning; (ii) its function is metatextual; (iii) it is not a syntactic constituent; (iv) it is likely to be set off prosodically; (v) its semantic-pragmatic scope is beyond the sentence; and (v) it favors the left-periphery (LP) but also occurs, though less commonly, at the right-periphery (RP) or medially. Even though these properties are prototypical rather than rigidly definitional, they are useful as diagnostics.

With respect to functions, which are large in number and diverse in kind, Brinton (1996: 37-38) presents a comprehensive list, i.e., (i) initiating discourse, (ii) aiding speaker’s floor-acquisition/ relinquishment, (iii) filling or delaying, (iv) marking discourse boundary, (v) denoting old/new information, (vi) marking sequential dependence, (vii) repairing, (viii) expressing response/reaction (subjective), and (ix) effecting cooperation/ sharing/ intimacy (interpersonal). As Rhee (2020a: 295) notes, however, there are no established criteria for DM’s functional classification, because it greatly varies depending on the granularity of the analysis. It is not intended

to provide a functional classification in this research, but as it shall be made apparent in the analysis to follow, the UDMs carry the functions of mitigation, avoidance of accountability, reluctance, politeness, etc.

3. English Discourse Markers of Uncertainty

UDMs in English develop from three major sources, i.e., mental predicates, sortal modifier, and certainty.

3.1. Mental Predicates

Mental predicates serving as the source category of UDMs may be divided into two subcategories, i.e., absence of knowledge and lack of confidence.

3.1.1 Absence of Knowledge

The most prominent source category of UDMs is epistemic uncertainty, i.e., absence of knowledge, e.g., *I don't know* (and its variants *I dunno* and *dunno*), a straightforward category for uncertainty marking (note that the forms under focus are italicized hereafter).

(1) UDM *I don't know*

yeah... *I don't I don't know I don't think* I particularly preferred either
(LOCNEC, recited from Aijmer 2009: 163)

(2) UDM *dunno*

I wish I could tell you exactly what it was that cured the swelling and pain but I honestly don't know. I believe it was the fish/omega oils but again- *dunno*. what I do know is that when all of our genius, super advanced and scientific methods fail- consider going back to basics. (2012, Blog, The terrible tragedy..., retrieved from COCA)

In (1), the speaker expresses tentativeness with the UDM *I don't know* in a lexical bundle with *I don't think*. It is widely known that UDM *I don't know* tends to be reduced as *I dunno* (Scheibman 2000, Grant 2010, Weatherall 2011: 320), and even the pronoun in it does not carry phonological salience, resulting in *dunno* (Aijmer 2009) as in (2). In addition to signaling tentativeness as in (1), and epistemic hedging in (2), its common functions include declaration of insufficient knowledge, avoiding explicit disagreement in responding to assessments, declining to assess, attenuating the force of the speech act, self-deprecation, alert to an approximation, politeness, unwillingness to answer, floor-yielding, prefatory epistemic disclaimer, gaining time for planning ahead, topic closing, etc. (Tsui 1991, Schegloff 1996, Aijmer 2009, Grant 2010, Weatherall 2011). All these functions are conceptually related to 'uncertainty' at varying degrees.

3.1.2 Lack of Confidence

There are UDMs that originate from the mental predicates indicating lack of confidence, e.g., *I think*, *I guess*, *I believe*, *I suppose*, *I imagine*, among a few others.

(3) UDM *I think*

A: You said you had a son?

B: Yeah.

A: What's his name?

B: Stephen.

A: How old is he?

→ B: He's 7, *I think*. No. Wait. He's... He's 9. He's 9.

(2007, Movie, *Already Dead*, retrieved from COCA)

(4) UDM *I guess*

A: Tell me more about what you think about tests.

B: Being able to think is more important than a test. Being able to

think and answer the right questions in real life is more important than a test. But then they kind of go hand in hand, *I guess*.

(2012, Blog, Los Angelista, retrieved from COCA)

In the excerpt (3), the UDM *I think* marks the speaker's uncertainty as to the statement he made, i.e., his son's being 7 years old. The inaccuracy of the guess is confirmed by his following remedial statement that his son is in fact 9 years old. Similarly, in the excerpt (4), the speaker uses the UDM *I guess* to present his idea in a more non-assertive and polite way, conceding to A's potential stance that tests are important.

In their study of *I think*, Baumgarten and House (2010: 1992) list a number of functions including providing an answer to a question, corroborating other's utterance, introducing new or related topic, repeating own or other's contribution, expressing agreement, drawing conclusions, contradicting, expressing contradicting views, displaying knowledge, elaborating previous (own) utterance, sharing personal experience, rejecting other's contribution, reinforcing own preceding claim, giving explanations, and conceding. UDMs in this category tend to have structural similarities as Van Bogaert (2011) terms them as 'complement-taking mental predicates' (CTMPs), including *I think*, *I guess*, *I suppose*, etc.

It is interesting to note that even though one's assertions are the product of one's own cogitation, an explicit mention of the mental activities of cogitation by means of such verbs as *think*, *guess*, *believe*, *suppose*, etc. has the effect of weakening the forces of speech act, as contrasted in *She is home* vs. *I think/guess she is home* (Rhee 2001: 116-117).

3.2. Sortal Modifiers

Another major source category of English UDMs is the sortal modifiers, 'sortal' in the sense that the modifier does not specific individual but a category of similar members (Rhee 2023, *forthc.*). Rhee (2023) argues that the use of sortal delimiters creates reduced specificity and some degree of

vagueness, thus of high pragmatic relevance. There are a few sortal modifiers that serve as UDMs in English, e.g., *kind cf. kinda*, *sort cf. sorta*, *in a way*, *like*, *perhaps*, and *maybe*, among others (James 1983, Kay 1984, Salager-Meyer 1997, Denison 2002, 2005, Suzuki 2016, Sandholtet 2018, Mulder et al. 2019), as exemplified in part in the following:

(5) UDM *kind cf*

Dana White said this is a ‘fun fight’. There may not be any belts on the line, but heck, we’re *kind cf* enjoying the prospect of this fight. (2012, Blog, Let’s all celebrate the fact..., retrieved from COCA)

(6) UDM *sorta*

OK. Answer me? Who are you? You’re just another unsatisfied with your life critic who can’t act, write or direct movies. Or was it an attempt to *sorta* distinguish yourself and get famous?

(2012, Blog, The Dark Knight Rises..., retrieved from COCA)

(7) UDM *like*

And so - but yeah, at the core of it, it really is - yeah - getting at, *like*, you know, that life is a grassroots campaign, you know, where success is about, you know, starting with yourself and then starting with the people that are closest to you and building out from there, you know. *Like*, and that if - you know, it’s *like* - and that trying to find success from some kind of top-down campaign where it’s *like*, oh, I won an Oscar so that means I’m a success.

(2017, Spoken, Director Mike White..., retrieved from COCA)

As is evident in the excerpts above, the UDMs *kind cf*, *sorta*, and *like* mark non-definite attitude of the speaker, i.e., downtoning the meaning, mitigating the assertion, or even hesitance of the diction. Contrary to the common misconception that vagueness should be avoided in interaction, vagueness is more effective in conversation (Jucker et al. 2002). Rhee

(forthc.) also asserts that vagueness leads to creation of diverse vagueness-related concepts in discourse, e.g., pause-filling, mirativity, feigned surprise, etc. (see 5.1 for more discussion). These sortal modifiers are approximators in the sense that they lack specificity (cf. ‘compromisers’, Dehé and Stathi 2016: 918).

3.3. Certainty

One peculiar, seemingly contradictory, source category for UDMs is certainty. There are a number of UDMs in this category, e.g., *really*, *in fact*, *actually*, *truly*, *basically*, *doubtless(ly)*, *no doubt*, *surely*, *indeed*, *I mean*, *well*, etc., all of which refer to reality, fact, absence of doubt, or some similar concepts that are connected to certainty in a way or other. The UDM usage is exemplified in the following:

(8) UDM *actually*

[...] Yeah, I think they’re about four sizes too big *actually*.

(BNC KSV 5234, as cited in Sandholtet 2018: 18)

(9) UDM *no doubt*

And no doubt there may infinit examples be brought.

(PPCEME 1570-1640, Davidse et al. 2015: 14, as cited in Heine et al. 2021: 15)

In (8) the speaker expresses his own opinion about the size of someone’s glasses in a politer, softer, and even non-serious, jocular way. This politeness strategy is necessitated by the fact that the opinion slightly departs from the common ground (cf. ‘repairs to the common ground’, Smith and Jucker 2000: 208), i.e., the speaker says the glasses are ‘four sizes’ too big in response to the addressee, who says that the glasses ‘a size’ too big (not shown in the excerpt). Čapkova (2015: 23) also notes the softener function of *actually* and observes that it carries “an almost appeasing effect on the whole

utterance” or an “apologetic” overtone, among other things. Similarly, Aijmer (1986) lists the discourse function of actually as a situation exists/ happened; emphasize unexpected to be true/ correct; mitigate correction/ rephrasing/ contradiction; introducing new (sub)topic; filler; introduce/mitigate a point of view; imply sense of solidarity, friendliness, intimacy, among others. The most closely relevant function in our present focus is mitigation and filler. Similarly, in (9) the UDM *no doubt* is used in “contexts that suggest the meaning ‘less than full certainty’ [...] where the modal *may* hints at a possibility” (Heine et al. 2021: 125). Furthermore, as Heine et al. (2021: 125) note, it became extended to concessive discourse contexts, where its use “preempts” a possible objection. The core meaning of these source lexemes have bleached from certainty to weakened certainty (see 5.4 for more discussion).

4. Korean Discourse Markers of Uncertainty

Korean UDMs originate from five major source categories, i.e., questions, interrogatives, minimizers, sortal modifiers, and contingency connectives.

4.1. Questions

Korean has a number of DMs that have developed from full-fledged interrogative sentences or clauses, e.g., *ku mwenya* (lit. ‘what is it?’), *mwe* (lit. ‘what?’; note that this can qualify to be a one-word sentence; see 2.1), *mwenya* (lit. ‘what is (it)?’), *mwelalkka* (lit. ‘what should (I) say?’), *eccenci* (lit. ‘why (it) is (so)’), *waynci* (lit. ‘why (it) is (so)’), etc. (Rhee 2004a,b, 2008, 2018). The sentence-ender *-nya*, as in *ku mwenya* and *mwenya*, is the ‘plain’ speech-level marker (Sohn 1999: 236, Song 2005: 125), i.e., one not marked for [+honorific] or [+polite]. The other sentence-enders, i.e., *-lkka* and *-nci*, are those used in monologual questions, i.e., non-directed questions, the level named as ‘audience-blind forms’ in Koo and Rhee (2013) and Rhee

and Koo (2017). When these are in sentence forms, they are directed to the speakers themselves, and when they are in clausal forms, they are typically used in embedded clauses, thus without independent illocutionary forces of imposing a question to a discourse participant.²

(10) UDM *mwelalkka*

eyipi-hyeng-tul-un *mwelalkka* ssulteyepsi com
 AB-type-PL-TOP UDM unnecessarily a.little
 yeyminha-n.ke.kath-a-yo
 be.sensitive-seem-END-POL

‘(The people) with the AB blood type are, UDM (what shall I say?),
 kind of unnecessarily too sensitive.’

(2004, Drama *Kkochpota alumtawe* Episode #7)

(11) UDM *ku mwenya*

[It seems that he cannot be released so easily,]
 kath-un pemcoy-ka yele-pen-i-myen *ku.mwenya*
 be.same-ADN crime-NOM multiple-time-be-COND UDM
 kacwungchepel-i-nka kule-n ke-lwutaka te olay
 aggravated.punishment-be-Q be.so-ADN thing-with more long
 sa-nun.moyang-i-ya
 remain-seem-be-END

‘(because) it seems that if (one) commits the same crime for multiple
 times, then because of UDM (what is it?) the aggravated punishment
 act or something like that, (he) should serve a longer prison term.’

(1997, Drama *Tal’phayngi* Episode #4)

² In the gloss of Korean data the following abbreviations are used: ACC: accusative; ADN: adnominal; ATTM: attemptive; COMP: complementizer; COND: conditional; CONN: connective; CONV: converb; CSL: causal; DEC: declarative; DM: discourse marker; END: sentence-ender; FUT: future; HON: honorific; HUM: humilific; INTN: intentional; MIR: mirative; MOD: mode converb; NOMZ: nominalizer; NOMZ: nominalizer; PERF: perfective; PL: plural; POL: polite; PST: past; Q: question; SEQ: sequential; TOP: topic; UDM: uncertainty discourse marker.

The speaker in (10) is evidently experiencing difficulties with conflicting thoughts because of negative nature of her personality assessment about AB blood-type individuals, and employs the UDM to signal her hesitance and to fill the pause while in lexical search. Similarly, the speaker in (11) is looking for an appropriate legal term, which he is not familiar with.

4.2. Interrogatives

Another source category of Korean UDMs is interrogatives, one similar to the previous category, questions. The major difference is that the present category consists of single interrogative pronoun or modifier, unlike the questions being a sentential or clausal structure. There are a few UDMs belonging to this category, e.g., *mwusun* (< lit. ‘what kind of’) and *mwe* (< lit. ‘what’). It is notable that *mwe* belongs to both categories due to the Korean idiosyncrasy that arguments may be omitted and may occur without case or postpositional particles, whereby *mwe*, being an interrogative pronoun ‘what’, can also be a sentence denoting ‘what (is it)?’ The UDM usage of *mwusun* and *mwe* is exemplified in the following:

(12) UDM *mwusun*

(A high-school homeroom teacher coming out of a police station with his students who had been under police custody because they had a brawl with local gangsters but released with his plea and formal statement pledging close supervision over them)

[I had such humiliating experience just because of you!]

tamim hatahata *mwusun* nay phyengsayng

homeroom.teacher after.all.things UDM my whole.life

kyengchal-apheyse kakse ssu-ki-n cheum-i-ya!

police-before memorandum write-NOMZ-TOP first.time-be-END

‘As a teacher-in-charge I’ve been through all kinds of things (but), DM! (= what can I say!), in my whole life, this is the first time that I ever wrote a memorandum of understanding in front of police

officers!’ (2006, Drama *Pimihuy kyoceng* Episode #18)

(13) UDM *mwe*

A: [Anyway, congratulations!]

B: [On what?]

A: [On you falling in love (with her)!]

B: [What? Ah, yes...]

A: [Do you feel good?]

B: *mwe kunyang kuleh-ci mwe...*

UDM just be.so-END UDM

‘Well (DM: what), it’s just so... just so (DM: what)...’

(2006, Drama *Nanglang 18-sey*, Episode #12)

The speaker in (12) is evidently agitated by a humiliating experience because of his students and is experiencing difficulties in proper diction, which is indicated by the UDM, serving as a filler. Similarly, in (13), the speaker is shy and is not reluctant to admit the joy of his newly found love. The UDM signals the speaker’s intent of downtoning the statement and at the same time reveals his feigned tepidity.

4.3. Minimizers

Another source category of Korean UDMs is minimizers, i.e., the expressions that denote small amount. There are a few examples such as *com* (< *cokum* lit. ‘a little’ and its tensed variant *ccom*), *yakkan* (< lit. ‘a little’), *weynmankhum* (< lit. ‘(of) a certain degree’, ‘(of) moderate degree’), etc. Of these, *com* ‘a little’ is the most researched DM (Son 1988, Koo 1998, Mok 2001, Chu 2004, Jung 2005, Yu 2008, Ahn 2009, Park 2011, Song and Shin 2014, among many others). Its UDM usage is exemplified in the following:

(14) UDM *com*

A: (counts the money, puts in an envelop, and presents to B to pay

for her part-time job)

na-to com te cwu-myen coh-keyss-nuntey...

I-also a.little more give-COND be.good-FUT-CONN

yocum com kuleh-ta

these.days UDM be.so-DEC

‘If I could give you a little more, I would feel very good, too,
but (the situation) these days is UDM (somewhat) so (so).’

B: [I know (the situation) very well, ma’am.]

(2009, Drama *Oyinkwutan* Episode #3)

In (14), the UDM signals that the speaker is experiencing some cognitive inability to describe the situation in a more concrete way than ‘be so’. In contemporary Korean *com* is among the most frequently used DMs and carries the function, among others, of mitigating assertion and thereby signaling politeness or seeking unaccountability (see 5.4 for more discussion).

4.4. Sortal Modifiers

Still another source category of Korean UDMs is sortal modifiers, e.g., *ilen* (< lit. ‘this kind of’), *kulen* (< lit. ‘that kind of’), and *celen* (< lit. ‘that kind of’). It is to be noted that Korean has a tripartite deictic system with the speaker-proximal *i* ‘this’, speaker-medial *ku* ‘that’, and speaker- and addressee-distal *ce* ‘that’. The UDMs in this category actively exploit the distance contrast (see Rhee forthc.). The proximal-based UDM *ilen* is exemplified in the following:

- (15) (A number of clan patriarchs, B, C, and others, are waiting at a restaurant for A’s bride, who joins the clan through solemn formalities. The bride’s arrival at the event is delayed, which is an egregious *faux pas*.)

A: [Honorable clan leaders. She’s coming soon. If you could wait a little longer.]

B: (a little angry) [That's alright. I need to leave now.]

C: [I will remember today for a long time.]

elun-tul-ul pwull-e.noh-ko ettehkey *ilen* ...

senior-PL-ACC invite-PERF-and how UDM

‘(You) invited old men and how UDM (I’m surprised/I don’t know what to say...)...’ (2004, Drama *Nanglang 18sey*, Episode #7, modified)

In the excerpt, Speaker C says the UDM *ilen* (lit. ‘this kind of’) and does not continue the utterance to complete it but elides what is expected to follow with some elongated decay (note the elliptical notation). This indicates the speaker’s genuine or pretended inability to access appropriate words to complete the utterance.

4.5. Contingency Connectives

The last conceptual category of Korean UDM sources is contingency connectives. These connectives include *kulenikka* (< lit. ‘because it is so’, ‘so’, ‘therefore’), *kulssey* (lit. ‘at it being so’), *malhacamyen* (< lit. ‘if (I) am to say (it)’), *ettehkey pomyen* (< lit. ‘if (one) is to see it from certain ways’), *ilultheymyen* (< lit. ‘if (one) is to tell’), etc. The UDM *kulssey* is exemplified below:

(16) UDM *kulssey*

(A picking up B, discharged from a penitentiary after serving a term)

A: [You seem to have been expelled from school. A young man shouldn’t be jobless.]

B: (with a bitter smile) *kulssey*, mwe.. chacha

UDM UDM slowly

sayngkakha-ypw-aya-cy-o

think-ATTM-must-END-POL

‘UDM (well, I’m not sure), UDM (well..) (I) need to take time thinking about it.’ (2000, Drama *Kkokci* Episode #16)

(17) UDM *ilultheymyen*

A: [First, you give me your heart. You should try, OK?]

B: ani, kulen kyeysan-i ani-la, *ilultheymyen*...

no such calculation-NOM be.not-CONN UDM

eyi molu-keyss-ta

INTJ not.know-FUT-DEC

‘No, not such kind of calculations, but UDM (what can I say),
sh*t, I don’t know.’ (1998, Drama *Weytingtuleysu* Episode #10)

The speaker in (16), just released from a prison, does not have much to say about his career. This uncertainty prompts him to employ the UDM. In (17), a couple are discussing how to be in better relationship. Speaker A suggests a way, which Speaker B finds too calculative. But Speaker B does not have a concrete idea about the issue, employs the UDM, likely to earn time, but eventually gives up. The situation clearly suggests uncertainty of the speaker as to formulating his idea.

5. Discussion

Based on the description of UDMs in English and Korean in the foregoing section, we will discuss some notable issues, i.e., engagement-disengagement, intersubjectification-disintersubjectification, structural change, developmental paths and conceptual networks.

5.1. Engagement-Disengagement Strategies

Among the notable strategies that are involved in the development of UDMs are the engagement-disengagement strategies. There are various means employed for this effect in English and Korean. For instance, in English, the use of person deixis is prominent, as seen in the two source categories, i.e., absence of knowledge and lack of confidence. With respect to the UDM *I*

don't know, Östman (1995) identifies 'involvement' (see Aijmer 2009: 158) and Baumgarten and House (2010) note the 'stance-taking function', largely due to the use of the first-person pronoun, as in *I don't know, I think, I guess*, etc. In other words, the speaker present himself or herself as the source of the evaluation, claim, or, more generally, information being presented. The involvement effect thus created may bring forth not only the claim of engagement or authorship (e.g., "I" am the author), but also, in apparent contradiction, disengagement or weakening of the validity of the proposition, in the light of personal assessment as opposed to objective truth (e.g., "At least I" think/believe so). The disengagement effect may be further promoted by the lexical meanings of the source lexemes, such as 'not know', 'think', 'guess', 'believe', etc., all negating the presence of steadfast knowledge.

On the other hand, the engagement-disengagement strategy in Korean is actualized by means of feigned interaction. In the case of monologal questions and interrogatives, speakers feign interaction, whereby the interlocutors' attention can be more easily secured or reclaimed. For instance, if the speaker utters the UDM *ku mwenya?* 'what is it?', the interlocutor is naturally drawn into the interaction because the utterance, at least on its surface manifestation, is a question, a universally impositive speech act.³ As argued for in Rhee (2004a,b, 2008, 2018), Korean often utilizes feigned interaction as a source of DMs as well as other grammatical forms. For their impositive nature, interrogatives constitute the ideal means of securing the addressee's engagement. At the same time, by employing additional means to signal non-interactivity, e.g., a monologal marker (or 'audience-blind' forms, Koo and Rhee 2013, Rhee and Koo 2017), the speaker disengages the interlocutor. Another significant aspect associated with interrogatives and questions is that questions are inherently indeterminate (e.g., unless rhetoricity is intended, one asks a question because s/he does not know) and thus the indeterminacy brings forth uncertainty, vagueness, etc. (see Yae et al. 2023,

³ A similar type of non-genuine interaction, i.e., audience orientation in monologic academic discourse in the form of metadiscourse, e.g., "What I want you to remember is...", "You may have noticed...", etc., has been analyzed in Ädel (2014).

Rhee and Kuteva, in press).

As indicated above, even though English and Korean both utilize the engagement-disengagement strategies, their details are significantly different. English uses personal pronoun for self-engagement and personal discursive stance and specific lexemes for self-disengagement and mitigation. On the other hand, Korean uses questions (and question-related interrogatives) for other-engagement and non-interactivity for other-disengagement. In other words, in terms of engagement and disengagement, English is speaker-centered, whereas Korean is addressee-centered.

One shared feature of engagement-disengagement strategies in the two languages is that they both use sortal expressions (e.g., *kind cf, sort cf, like*, etc. in English and *ilen, kulen, celen*, etc. in Korean), which create vagueness in reference. Rhee (forthc.) asserts that the vagueness of sortal expressions leads to the creation of diverse vagueness-related concepts, e.g., pause-filling (inability to find a specific form), mirativity (inability to assimilate the information and describe it), feigned surprise (pretending to be unable to assimilate the information and describe it), etc. For instance, speakers, while in lexical search for an appropriate word, may fill the spot with a vague term under the pressure to continue speaking, i.e., an ‘any port in a storm’ strategy. Employment of these UDMs help speakers distance themselves from the veracity of the proposition or the definiteness of the meaning of the lexemes selected, whereby they preempt the potential criticism or responsibility that may arise from the speech act. The effectiveness of the vague terms is well manifested in the fact that the sortal modifiers constitute the sole conceptual category of UDMs exploited by both languages. This is a natural consequence, because sortal modifiers in language mediates non-definiteness or imprecision in the world and uncertainty in the human conceptual system.

5.2. Intersubjectification-Disintersubjectification

The second topic that warrants our attention is the intersubjectification-disintersubjectification strategy. It has been widely observed that in language

change in general, particularly in grammaticalization, and further most notably in the emergence of DMs, intersubjectification is a crucial process. The notion of ‘intersubjectification’ has been proposed by a line of research by Traugott and her colleagues, e.g., Traugott (2003, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2014a,b), Traugott and Dasher (2002), among others, and has been championed by numerous researchers. According to Traugott (2003, 2010), intersubjectivity is a general characteristic of all language use, and is the explicit expression of SP/W’s attention to the ‘self’ of AD/R in both an epistemic sense (paying attention to their presumed attitudes to the content of what is said), and in a more social sense (paying attention to their ‘face’ or ‘image needs’ associated with social stance and identity. Koo and Rhee (2016: 319), in their discussion of pejoratives, call for attention to downward changes (e.g., signaling pejorative attitude; negative consideration) in addition to the upward changes (e.g., addressing the interlocutor’s social need and face; positive consideration).

Intersubjectification, a process of increase of intersubjectivity, is manifest in the development of all UDMs, since DMs are used mostly in consideration of the audience, either real or imagined, with the primary intent to be more persuasive to the addressee, i.e., interlocutor management, even though they may also be used to manage the interaction, topic, and content (see Rhee 2020a). For instance, Aijmer (2016) analyzes the functions of *actually* including hedging-politeness, topic change, marking change in the direction of the discourse, etc. The signal of surprising nature of the information toward the addressee has also been noted by Oh (2000) and Hickey (1991). Hickey (1991) notes that *actually* mitigates potential surprises or contractions like “I’m sorry to say” (see also Gray 2012, Aijmer 1986, 2016). As all these authors suggest, *actually*, a source lexeme denoting ‘a situation exists or happened’, whereby the aspect of ‘act’, ‘reality’, ‘truth’, etc. is highlighted, has now become a marker more interaction-oriented (as in politeness, mitigation, prefacing continuation, etc.). Similar observations can be made with respect to many other UDMs in English, especially those in the source category of certainty.

Intersubjectification is also manifest in the development of Korean UDMs.

For instance, UDMs in the source category of contingency connectives such as *kulenikka* (< lit. ‘because it is so’), *kulssey* (< lit. ‘at it being so’), etc. The connective *kulenikka*, as the literal semantic designation shows, denoted the causal reason between the described existing situation and the proposition about to be presented. However, the situation-based causality has completely bleached in the course of its development into an UDM; it is primarily used as a pause-filler when the speaker is experiencing difficulties in lexical search (even though there are a number of other, quite dissimilar functions, see Rhee 2020a). The connective *kulenikka* in its non-UDM usage still retains the causality meaning, an instance of ‘divergence’ (Hopper and Traugott 2003[1993]).

It is interesting to note, however, that Korean also employs ‘disintersubjectification’, a notion we propose here to refer to a phenomenon whereby an originally intersubjective form loses intersubjectivity in its function en route to change. Intersubjectivity in Korean is most prominently marked in honorification, formality, politeness, etc., typically marked by sentence-enders. Our special attention at this point is on the genuinely interactive interrogative sentence-enders, i.e., *-nya*, used for the plain speech level ([-honorific], [-polite]). By virtue of being an interactive sentence-enders, it is an intersubjective marker. In other words, by employing this sentence enders, the speaker treats the addressee in a manner describable as [-honorific] and [-polite] (as in the speech act performed by a father to his son). When the previously full-fledged questions *ku mwenya* (‘What is it?’) and *mwenya* (‘What is (it)?’) are coopted into UDMs, the intersubjective features [-honorific] and [-polite] are completely bleached. In other words, a speaker in interaction with their social superior or a stranger, who, therefore, is qualified for [+honorific]/[+polite], can use the UDMs *ku mwenya* or *mwenya* in their speech. This situation is well illustrated in the following excerpts, with the forms under focus underscored and in bold:

(18) UDM *ku mwenya*

(A’s father passed away, and A’s friend B is paying condolences to

A at the funeral service at a church.)

A: [I can't believe that this is real. I just feel as if my father would be after me brandishing his walking-stick any moment I talked nonsense.]

B: mwe-lako... cham... tuli-l malssum-i eps-ney-yo.
 what-COMP truly give-ADN word-NOM not.exist-MIR-POL
 yayki tut-ko, maum-i ancoh-ase... w-ass-e-yo.
 news hear-and heart-NOM be.bad-CSL come-PST-END-POL
ku.mwenya... iwuscwumin-ulose... ike-n

UDM neighbor-as this-TOP

yeyuy-i-nkekath-ase.

ettiquette-be-seem-CSL.END

‘(I).. truly... don’t have (proper) words to say [+polite]. (I) heard the news (of your father’s passing) and felt sorry, so I came here [+polite]. UDM (what can I say...) Because (I) thought this is proper as a neighbor.’

(2009, Drama *Naycouy yewang* Episode #19)

(19) UDM *ku mwenya*

(The speaker’s mother-in-law passed away, and she speaks to her mother-in-law in a framed photo, asking for permission to buy a cello for herself.)

emeni cey-ka-yo pwuthaktuli-l ke-y iss-e.kackwu...
 mother I:HUM-NOM-POL request-ADN thing-NOM exist-CSL
 cey-ka emeni, 8-nyen-tongan ttongocwum ta pat-kwu-yo
 I:HUM mother 8-year-for excreta all dispose-END-POL
ku.mwenya yokchang an sayngki-key tolly-e nwuphi-kwu
 UDM bed.sore not emerge-MOD turn-CONV lay.down-and
 cwumwull-e.tuli-kwu-yo cey-ka mwe icey w-ase
 massage-BEN:HON-END-POL I:HUM-NOM UDM now come-SEQ
 sayngsayknay-keyss-ta-nun-ke-n ani-ntey-yo
 take.credit-INTN-COMP-ADN-NOMZ-TOP be.not-END-POL

‘Mother(in-law), I am [+polite].. I’m here to ask you a favor... I, Mother, disposed of your stool and urine for eight years (while you were bed-ridden), so you don’t get UDM (what can I say/ what is it) bed sore I turned you over and massaged you [+polite]. I am, DM (well), not trying to take credit for that after all those years now [+polite].’ (2008, Drama *Peythcpeyn pailesu* Episode #1)

In the excerpts, from the appearance, the UDMs *ku mwenya* and *mwenya* (which are [-honorific] [-polite] in form), being surrounded by [+honorific]/[+polite] sentence-enders, are in violation of the discourse convention of constancy of speech levels. The loss of these interactive features is a good instance of disintersubjectification. This process has occurred as the forms have lost their illocutionary forces of asking a question to the addressee. If the forms carry the interrogative function, they are best interpreted as instances of asking a question to the speaker himself or herself, a situation reminiscent of the ‘polyphonic self’ (Hermans 1996), ‘speaking self’ and ‘hearing self’ (Rhee and Koo 2020), and ‘otherness’ (Bakhtin 1981).

5.3. Structural Change

One of the most significant, thus constituting one of the diagnostic, aspects of DM development is the acquisition of morphosyntactic freedom of the grammaticalization construction. In this regard, Heine (2008, 2013), and Heine et al. (2017, 2021) list syntactic and positional changes among the common effects of cooptation, i.e., from the status of syntactic constituent of the sentence to syntactically unattached status, and from positionally constrained to less constrained placement. Indeed, these two types of structural change are observable in all, or at least most, UDMs, though at varying degrees due to the idiosyncratic features of individual forms. For instance, the English UDM *I don’t know* does not anymore require a theme argument to follow and occurs at any major junctures. The same applies to the UDMs *I think*, *I guess*, *I believe*, etc., all so-called ‘complement-taking

mental predicates' (Van Bogaert 2011). The UDMs developed from modifier phrases, e.g., *kind cf*, *sort cf*, etc., by virtue of their final element being a preposition, requiring a theme argument, do not require an argument anymore (e.g., *kind cf funny*, *sort cf replied*, etc., taken from COCA) and may occur at a non-modifier position (e.g., *I agree*, *sort cf*; *Yeah*, *sort cf*; etc., taken from COCA). Rhee (2023: 195) notes that many DMs in common use are structurally incomplete (e.g., *I know*, *You know*, *I see*, *Look*, *Let's say*, etc.), even though their origins were structurally complete by taking complements.

Another common feature in morphosyntactic change is formal reduction (i.e., morphological coalescence, phonological erosion, prosodic weakening, etc.) as a result of increased syntagmatic cohesion. This is clearly observable when the UDM development is reflected in orthographic change, e.g., *dunno* (< *I don't know*), *sorta* (< *sort cf*). Erosion or omission of component constituents in source constructions is observed in the Korean UDM *mwe* (< *mwenya* < *ku mwenya* < *kukey mwenya* < *kukesi mwenya* < *kukesi mwuesinya*). More subtle cases are observed in most other UDMs which may exhibit only phonological weakening, e.g., inability to be emphasized (cf. *I LIKE you* vs. *We were like/*LIKE, oh my god*).

5.4. Developmental Paths and Conceptual Networks

Since we address a number of UDMs across diverse conceptual sources, analyzing the developmental paths of individual forms in depth is beyond the scope, but some discussion on select aspects, focusing on conceptual change, is in order.

Mental predicates in English UDMs, e.g., *know* (with a negative, *don't*), *think*, *guess*, *believe*, etc., seem to have undergone straightforward change from negating the presence of steadfast knowledge to uncertainty (see 5.1 above). As briefly indicated in 3.2, the mental predicates *think*, *guess*, *believe*, *suppose*, etc. are contrasted with the objective truth or fact beyond the individual's subjective perception, e.g., *I think she is home* implying "What I think is that she is home, but what I think may not be true in reality."

Semantic weakening has proceeded further and the degree of conviction borders on the lack of it, resulting in uncertainty.

The sortal modifiers, found both in English UDMs and Korean UDMs, e.g., *kind cf, kinda, sort cf, sorta, in a way, like, perhaps, maybe, ilen* (< lit. ‘this kind of’), *kulen* (< ‘that kind of’), *celen* (< ‘that kind of’), etc., developed from designating ‘the kind’ (thus ‘sortal’), to marking uncertainty. As briefly alluded to in 3.3, the development is largely due to the reduced specificity (Rhee 2023, *forthc.*). The non-definite attitude associated with imprecise nature of sortal expression is responsible for the emergence of diverse vagueness-related concepts in discourse. This is an interesting aspect that an entity designated by the sortal expressions has the tendency of being contrasted with the core member of the category instead of a peripheral member or an entity outside the category. In other words, the expression *I am sort cf happy* tends to be interpreted as “I am not exactly (very) happy” rather than “I am happier than those who are marginally happy” or “I am not among those who are not happy.” This comparison with the core member brings forth the weakening of the described quality, thus leading to conceptualization of uncertainty in the domain of epistemicity.

The development of the lexemes denoting certainty into the UDMs of uncertainty is quite intriguing. As regards the apparent anomaly between the ‘certainty’ lexemes and ‘uncertainty’ functions, Bolinger (1989: 128) observes that *no doubt, surely, doubtless* are “stereotyped for ‘uncertainty’ despite the literal meaning of the words.” Similarly, of *really*, Stenström (2002: 306) notes, “Due to semantic bleaching, *really* can either reflect strong commitment and be used as an intensifier or weak commitment and be used as a hedge.” This type of change into face-saving and mitigating function is also found in *actually* (Simon-Vandenberg 2013a,b) and extensive semantic bleaching in *basically* has been noted in Simon-Vandenberg (2013a,b). Butler (2008: 46) notes, with respect to *basically*, that it is possible that “habitual use may result in the degradation of the originally strong subjective force of *basically* into an involuntary indication of insecurity (underscored emphasis added)”. It has been observed that linguistic forms for

intensification tend to lose their intensifying force fast due to the loss of novelty and thus are subject to fast renewal (Stoffel 1901: 2, Quirk et al. 1985: 590, Peters 1994: 269, Hopper and Traugott 2003[1993]: 122, Rhee 2016: 425), which has been aptly described by Bolinger (1972: 18) as: intensifiers afford “a picture of fevered invention and competition that would be hard to come by elsewhere, for in their nature they are unsettled.” The notion of “an involuntary indication of insecurity” (Butler 2008) is insightful and intriguing but, in practice, is hard to prove empirically from the data. Perhaps, this is directly relevant to fast semantic deterioration of intensifiers and markers of certainty, in general.

The development of UDMs from questions and interrogatives has to do with the inherent nature of indeterminacy associated with questions in general (Rhee 2004a,b, 2008, Yae et al. 2023, Rhee and Kuteva, in press). In the simplest form, a question like *Is he honest?* is motivated by the speaker’s ignorance and uncertainty as to, and desire to know about, *his* being honest or not. This uncertainty on the part of the speaker may be projected to the uncertainty on the part of the quality of the entity being described. Therefore, the pragmatic inference from “one should serve a longer prison term if he repeats the same crime, because of [what is it?] the aggravated punishment act” to “the longer prison term is because of [something like, but I am not quite sure] the aggravated punishment act.” (see (19) above) seems to be well motivated.

The development of UDMs from minimizers, e.g., *com* (< *cokum* ‘a little’), *ccom* (< *com* < *cokum* ‘a little’), *yakkan* (< lit. ‘some quantity of’), etc., seems to be due to the downtoning effect associated with the minimizers. It is notable that these minimizers, when used as DMs, do not (anymore) make reference to quantity. For instance, when the DM *com* of politeness-marking is used in a sentence, *Phyo hancang-man com cwuseyyo* ‘Please give me [a little] only one ticket.’, the utterance does not mean that the speaker want a little bit of a ticket. The DM simply minimizes the burden on the part of the addressee by signaling that the expectation on the part of the speaker is not big, i.e., even a minimal compliance would be appreciated. Similarly, if *com* is used as an UDM as in: *Yocum com kulehta*

‘These days are [a little] so’, the utterance is interpreted as ‘The situation these days are [somewhat] so’, in which ‘somewhat’ signals that the speaker is unable to find a good descriptor for the current economic situation (see (14) above).

The development of contingency connectives, *kulenikka* (< *kulehanikka* lit. ‘because it is so’), *kulssey* (< *kulehalsay* lit. ‘at it being so’), etc., to UDMs is largely due to the ‘contingency’ semantics of the connectives and the non-definiteness associated with *kule-* ‘be so’ (Rhee 2020a, Kim et al. 2021). Note that *kule-* is also the source form of sortal modifier (involving the speaker-medial demonstrative *ku*) discussed in 4.4. One of the defining characteristics of contingency is incidentalness or absence of necessity (cf. ‘a future event or circumstance which is possible but *cannot be predicted with certainty*’ Oxford English Dictionary, emphasis added). Evidently, this lack of certainty is primarily responsible for those lexemes to develop into UDMs.

From these conceptual motivations, we can graphically represent the developmental paths of UDMs as in Figure 1.

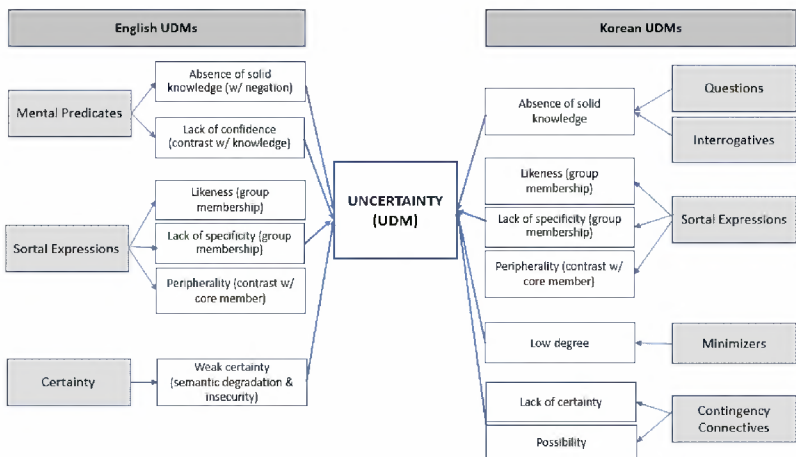


Figure 1. Developmental paths and conceptual network of UDMs

6. Conclusion

This paper addressed one particular type of discourse markers (DMs), i.e., those that signal the speakers' epistemic attitude of uncertainty (uncertainty DMs; UDMs). English UDMs develop from three major conceptual categories, i.e., mental predicates, sortal modifiers, and lexemes denoting certainty. Korean UDMs develop from five major conceptual categories, i.e., questions, interrogatives, minimizers, sortal modifiers, and contingency connectives. Mental predicates in English may develop into expressions denoting absence of solid knowledge or lack of confidence. Sortal expressions, both in English and Korean, engender the likeness, lack of specificity, and peripherality, which altogether contribute to the notion of uncertainty. Certainty lexemes undergo semantic degradation through frequent use, whereby the strong 'certainty' meaning becomes 'uncertainty', a puzzle noted by a number of researchers. Questions and interrogatives in Korean bring forth the meaning of absence of solid knowledge since questions constitute the speech act motivated by the speaker's having no knowledge and the desire to obtain it. Minimizers inherently denote a small quantity or low degree, which contributes to the development of UDMs, i.e., a small quantity in the *de re* world transferring to the low degree in *de dicto* world and the low degree of certainty in the mental world. The contingency connectives, by virtue of involving lack of certainty and possibility, naturally develop into UDMs. Even though the two languages have only one conceptual category, i.e., sortal predicates, as the common conceptual sources, each source category member in the two languages undergoes change that contributes to the 'uncertainty' semantics through selective focus on diverse aspects of the source lexemes and expressions. This paper has shown that the members in the source categories form a complex network due to their conceptual affinity to each other.⁴

⁴ As an anonymous reviewer suggests, a more detailed analysis on typological aspects and language-specific peculiarities warrants future research, which should supplement this macroscopic research.

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