

A corpus-based analysis of *kes kath-* as a discourse marker

This research investigates the Korean construction *kes kathta* “it seems like / I think”, by exploring its various meanings and functions in discourse. This expression is considered as a modal marker performing attenuative functions (Rhee, 2011).

Research on *kes kathta* mostly focus on its uses as a conjectural expression, by means of which speakers indicate an uncertainty towards the propositional content of their utterance. However, very few studies consider the uses of *kes kathta* implying a certainty (Kim, 2011; Cha, 2016). Following Cha (2016), we propose that the various meanings of *kes kathta* can be identified on a continuum which goes from ‘doubt/uncertainty’ to ‘opinion/certainty’, rather than considering the expressions of doubt and opinion as discrete concepts. The expression *kes kathta* is then analyzed according to the degree of certainty it expresses, as well as various epistemic stance markers (Simon-Vandenberg, 2000; Kärkkäinen, 2003), in relation to its placement within turn and sequence.

This study draws on the transcriptions of approximately one hour of audio-recorded informal dyadic conversations, involving four native speakers of Korean. Sixty-one tokens of *kes kathta* occur in the data.

Corpus data show that *kes kathta* is mostly used by speakers to express a high degree of certainty. This specific usage, where the speaker asserts a subjective opinion in a less assertive way, covers a various range of usages: (i) when speakers display cognitive search, *kes kathta* occurs either when they are trying to remember an experience in the past, or when they exchange instant opinions in the course of the unfolding of talk-in-interaction; (ii) moreover, *kes kathta* can be used by speakers as a smooth refutation when they disagree with the co-speaker’s previous statement. In this particular usage, *kes kathta* occurs in responses to question (in a responsive turn) as well as in initiative turns; (iii) finally, *kes kathta* occurs as a softening device when speakers express their feelings. In these two last usages, *kes kathta* thus appear as a politeness strategy adopted by speakers for not imposing on others (Cha, 2016; Kim, 2011; Rhee, 2011). On the other hand, when it expresses a low degree of certainty, *kes kathta* marks a lack of evidence.

Regarding its polyfunctionality in discourse, we also suggest that the modal marker *kes kathta* is grammaticalizing into a discourse marker (Schiffrin, 1987), thus appearing at a pragmatic and discourse level. As a matter of fact, results show that *kes kathta* does not only function as an epistemic marker by means of which a speaker expresses a stance, but also as a strategic device for accomplishing interactional functions. A semantic weakening and a pragmatic strengthening show a grammaticization of *kes kathta* (Hopper & Traugott, 2003), which itself suggests a routinization into a fixed expression.

References

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