

Rhetorical Adjunct *Mwue(-l)* 'what' in Korean

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1. Introduction

According to the online dictionary (『*Our Speech Fountain Dictionary (Wulimalsaym Sacen)*』), the expression *mwue(-l)* 'what-ACC' is classified as an exclamative interjection, making a humble statement made by the speaker that his action/behavior is not great when the other interlocutor praises or appreciates it. It is used particularly in a neural style of speech (*panmalchey*) ignoring social deference.

- (1) “노래를 참 잘 부르던데.” “**뭘**, 박자도 잘못 맞추었는데.”
(2) “야, 너 대단하더라.” “**뭘**, 그걸 가지고 그래.”

On top of this general use, it fulfills several related and other functions, as follows. First, *mwue(-l)* in sentence-final position also expresses the speaker's humble response toward the other interlocutor's words of praise, appreciation, and forgiveness.

- (3) “얼마 부서지지도 않았는데, **뭘**” 하시며 내 어깨를 다독거리 주셨다.

This function is especially evident when followed by such deictic expressions as 'kuleh'/'kukes' '(be) so/it' that describe the other interlocutor's words/behaviors of praise, appreciation, and forgiveness.

- (4) 아이구, **뭘 그런** 일로 여기까지 오셨어요.

We can also respond with “*mwuel-yo* 'you bet'” when we're thankful to the other interlocutor for his favor:

- (5) **뭘요**, 역할이 역할이니까 그래 보였던 거죠.

The speaker humbly accepts the words/behaviors of the conversation partner and goes on to provide additional information in the ensuing part of the sentence

Second, as for *mwue(-l)* in question sentences containing deictic expressions such as *kulay* 'be so'/'*kulehkey* 'so'/'*ikkacis kes* 'this small thing', it means “why you make such a

response” to the conversation partner's words or actions, exhorting him/her not to.

- (6) **뭘** 그렇게 놀라니?
 (7) 사실을 말했을 뿐인데, **뭘** 그래?

Third, the speaker uses *mwue(-l)* to refute the conversation partner's remark and goes on to deliver additional information to him, as follows:

- (8) “저야 **뭘** 가겠습니까?! 그때도 우연히 몽금포 가는 길에 옥점 씨를 만났으니, ...”
 (9) “아이를 깨워요” “아이가 이제 막 잠들었는데, **뭘**.”

Fourth, the speaker can use *mwue(-l)* in either question or non-question sentences to mean that the other person's behavior is unsatisfactory.

- (10) 아니 근데 당신들은 **뭘** 앉아서 콩이네 팔이네 하구 있는 거예요?
 (11) 이 새끼 비키란 말야. **뭘** 꾸물대고 있어.

Despite its several different attestations, we are going to concentrate on its uses in the clauses containing stative adjective predicates, because in the sentences with action verbs its usage overlaps with the usage of *mwue ha-le* ‘in order to do what’. In other words, the former can represent the contracted form of the latter, as follows:

- (12) a. 거길 내가 **뭘/뭐** 하러 가.
 b. 가운이를 내가 **뭘/뭐** 하러 만나?

Of course, if a certain eventive predicate is incompatible with *mwue ha-le*, that eventive predicate with *mwue(-l)* will do for our investigation.

Thus, in the discussion to follow, excluding its realization in the clauses containing action verbs, we narrow down to its use in the question clauses containing a copula and a stative adjective. The following clauses with a copula contain *mwue-l* decomposed into *mwue(s)* ‘what’ plus *-l* ‘Acc’ marker, or *mwue-ka* decomposed into *mwue(s)* ‘what’ plus *-ka* ‘Nom’ marker.

- (13) a. *** 의원이 **뭘/뭐가** 스파이냐?
 b. 저런 새끼들은 사회적으로 망신을 줘야한다. 교수는 **뭘/뭐가** 교수냐?
 c. 이 XX가 **뭘/뭐가** 욱이냐?

Likewise, *mwue(-l)* or *mwue-ka* can occur in the clauses with adjectives as stative predicate.

- (14) a. 예쁘기는 **뭘/뭐가** 예뻐?
 b. 훌륭하기는 **뭘/뭐가** 예뻐?
 c. 네가 **뭘/뭐가** 피곤하니?

In these sentences, *mwue(-l)* or *mwue-ka* literally means “in what respect”, markedly being construed as an ordinary wh-question, but the whole sentences are preferentially construed as a rhetorical sentence, with *mwue(-l)* or *mwue-ka* expressing emphatically negative force.

Mwue(-l) is accompanied by one additional wh-phrase, as in (16) and (17). In this case, these sentences are also construed as a complaint, retort, or grumble;

- (15) a. **뭘** 누가 지금 외롭대?
 b. 당연히 자연이지 **뭘** 누가라고 쳐묻고 있노?
 c. "자장면이야." 그랬더니 이효리가 이렇게 말한다. "**뭘** 무엇이야?"

- (16) a. 경제가 **뭘** 어떻다고?!
 b. 님의 기준자체가 다른데 그걸 **뭘** 어떻다 저떻다 누가 맞다 틀리다 말 할 것도 아니라고 봄.
 c. 이 부분은 **뭘** 어떻다 할 수 있는 게 아니고 다음 세션에서 어떻게 바꿀 수 있는 것도 아니고 ...

In addition, there are multiple wh-elements besides *mwue(-l)*. In the following cases, the unmarked interpretation of the following sentences is that of the ordinary multiple wh-constructions (that is, generally, multiple pair construals for multiple wh's).

- (17) a. 그런데 누가 **뭘** 어떻다고?
 b. 누가 **뭘** 어떻든 ... 나는 몰라
 c. **뭘** 누가 어떻느니 비교할 필요가 없다.

2. The Syntax of Rhetorical *Mwue(-l)*

Kurafuji (1996), Ochi (1999; 2004), and Nakao and Obata (2009) suggest that in Japanese, the ACCusative Case-marked wh-adjunct *nani-o* ‘what-Acc’ in intransitive sentences is interpreted very much like English *why (the hell)* (or Japanese *naze* ‘why’) as in (1).

- (18) John-wa **nani-o/naze** hasit-tei-ru no?
 John-Top what-ACC/why run-PROG-NPST Q
 ‘Why is he running?’

The distinctive syntactic/semantic aspects of the ACCusative WHAT-adjunct *nani-o* have been noted in comparison to its counterpart *naze*. First, sentences with the WHAT-adjunct

nani-o have a special connotation that the speaker is surprised at, or is in disapproval of the subject’s unexpected behavior (Ochi, 1999). Second, the WHAT-adjunct *nani-o* imposes an animacy restriction on the subject of a clause (Kurafuji, 1997). Third, the interpretation of the WHAT-adjunct *nani-o* in Japanese is not clause-bound (Kurafuji 1997). Fourth, the WHAT-adjunct *nani-o* can occur in multiple wh-questions (Kurafuji, 1997). Fifth, the WHAT-adjunct *nani-o* is only allowed to take wide scope over the subject QP (Tsai, 2008). Sixth, the WHAT-adjunct *nani-o* cannot undergo sluicing (Ochi, 1999).

As noted above, the Korean counterpart *mwue(s)* with the ACC Case marker comes with eventive predicates, but that with the ACC or Nom Case marker can occur with stative or copula predicates, as follows:

- (19) ku-ka **mwue(-l)/mwue-ka** ttotokha-ni?
 he-NOM what-ACC/what-NOM smart-Q
- (20) Enni-i-ci **mwue(-l)/mwue(-ka)** hyeng-i-ya?
 elder sister-COP-CONN what-ACC/what-NOM elder brother-COP-Informal
 ‘(She is) an elder sister, but WHAT is she an elder brother?’

This paper argues that the construction at issue is unmarkedly a rhetorical question, and derives from this view such properties as documented above for Japanese WHAT-adjunct *nani-o*.

It has been noted (Collins, 1991) that *why* and *how come* behave differently with respect to rhetorical questions: questions with a negative bias, as seen in (4) and (5).

- (21) **Why (the hell)** did you do that?
 (22) ***How come** you did that?

The example in (21) is felicitous as a rhetorical question since the negative bias in the question (‘you did not do that’) does not interfere with any other factors. However, the same negatively biased question is not permitted with *how come*, as shown in (22). Since the Japanese (Ochi and Hsin 1999, 315) and the Korean WHAT-adjuncts are associated with a negative bias, it is a right tack to assimilate them to English *why (the hell)* rather than to *how come*.

But note that the Korean WHAT-adjunct can be construed not only as ‘why’ but also as ‘how’ or ‘in what respect,’ as follows:

- (23) Ney-ka chimkwu-lul ta kacye ka-myen, nay-ka **mwue(-l)**
 you-NOM bedding-ACC all take-if I-NOM what-ACC
 cal swu iss-keyss-ni?
 HOW sleep CAN-WILL-INTERR
 ‘If you take all the bedding (here), HOW can I sleep (without it)?’
- (24) Nay kho-ka **mwue(-l)/(-ka)** khu-ni?
 MY nose-NOM what-ACC/-NOM big-Q
 ‘In WHAT RESPECT is my nose big?’

In addition, the following sentences in (17), repeated below as (25), are not construed as a rhetorical question. Thus, a multiple wh-construction is resistant to being interpreted as a rhetorical question.

- (25) a. 그런데 누가 **뭘** 어떻다고?
 b. 누가 **뭘** 어떻든 ... 나는 몰라
 c. **뭘** 누가 어떻느니 비교할 필요가 없다.

3. The Semantics and Pragmatics of Rhetorical *Mwue(-l)*

The construction at issue like (18)-(20) and (23)-(24) is translated into an ordinary wh-question, but it can be properly construed as a rhetorical question (RhQ). In fact, this construction has the hallmarks of RhQs: (i) RhQs don't expect an answer; (ii) RhQs have the feel of an assertion; (iii) RhQs can optionally be answered (in keeping with Caponigro & Sprouse, 2007; Biezma & Rawlins, 2017; contra Yang & Mizuno, 2019). For example, the answer to the sentence in (19) is not expected because it is already inferable. Thus, on the one hand, RhQs are essentially a regular question, but their answer is known to both the speaker and the addressee -- a question in which the answer is (already) part of the Common Ground (in the Stalnakerian sense; Stalnaker 1970, 2014). On the other hand, RhQs have the feel of an assertion because the asker publicly makes a commitment (in some sense) to a single proposition that is already in the common ground. In fact, in some limited cases, the Korean WHAT-adjunct can occur in non-question, declarative clauses as in (26).

- (26) sihayngchako epsi **mwue(-l)** ka-l swu iss-tako sayngkakhaci-nun
 trial-error without what(-ACC) go-CAN-COMP think-CONT.TOP
 anh-supnita.
 don't-ENDER
 'I don't think that I can go what with trial and error.'

As point out above, no answer to RhQs is ordinarily expected, but the answer, e.g., to (19), can be provided by the addressee, as follows:

- (27) pan-eyse hangsang ildung ha chanh-a
 class-in always the first do don't-Informal
 '(He has always been) the top in our class.'

To reiterate, the RhQ marker gives rise to the speaker's negative attitude reading on the proposition. In order to shed light on the issue of negative attitude reading induced by the RhQ marker, we focus on its contribution in terms of pragmatic perspectives. We assume that the RhQ marker *mwue(-l)* does not appear to contribute any descriptive content to the truth-conditional meaning. That means, the meaning of the RhQ marker *mwue* is not associated with the core property of the question marker at the at-issue level, but the negative expressive content which gives rise to the speaker's negative attitude reading on the proposition at the multi-dimensional level. In this light, we will show that the RhQ marker *mwue(-l)* arises the negative expressive meaning.

Before jumping into the main discussion, we briefly introduce the basic setup of the CI theory of a logic for Conventional Implicatures (CIs) based on Potts (2005, 2007a, 2007b). Building on Karttunen & Peter's (1979) multi-dimensional theory of CIs, Potts (2005, 2007a, 2007b) provides a novel multi-dimensional compositional system. He defines CIs as follows

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