Diachronic Analysis of the Accusative Marker in the Korean language

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Since the first century BCE, Korea had to borrow Chinese characters because they did not have their own writing system. Additionally they had also to use Chinese syntax, the one used by Han China until the 5th century. Korean is an agglutinative language and its grammatical structure did not fit well with Chinese syntax. So the Korean language started to modify the shape of the original text into a Korean syntax. The most famous example of this phenomenon is probably a Silla stele called ‘The Imsin Vow Stone’. On this stone, the order of the Chinese characters is completely different from that of Classical Chinese. The order is almost purely Korean. From this moment, we see the rise of writing systems such as Hyanch’al and especially Idu. These grammatical systems could express for the first time the grammatical markers of Korean language, such as the ending verb, subject marker, and also accusative form. Mostly, the accusative marker in Idu was using the Chinese character 之 but it would take other appearances later on with the third writing system named Kukyŏl (10th century), and of course with the creation of the Korean alphabet 을 in the 15th century. This study will present the different evolutionary path of the accusative marker in Korean, through a historical analysis, from the stele of Kwanggaet’o (Old Korean) to the official’s documents written in Idu and the Buddhist sutras texts in Kukyŏl (Early Middle Korean). We will also focus on its utilization when the Korean alphabet was created (Late Middle Korean), which is basically the modern form that is used today (contemporary Korean).

Key words: Old and Middle Korean, Chinese Characters, Accusative Markers, Idu and Kukyŏl

Selected References:

