Epistemic Conditional Construction in Korean

One and the same conditional construction can be used in the content domain, the epistemic domain, or the speech-act domain (inter alia, Sweetser 1990, Schwenter 1999, Dancygier and Sweetser 2005). In Korean, however, there is a conditional construction used exclusively in the epistemic domain, as illustrated in (1).

(1) kwuk-i ccan kel po-myen sokum-ul manhi nehun keney
soup-Nom is.salty Comp see-if salt-Acc much put Epis
(Lit.) 'If (I) see that the soup is salty, (they) must have put much salt in it.'
'If (as I know) the soup is salty, they must have put much salt in it.'

Although the "main predicate" of the protasis in this construction is the verb po- 'to see,' the content of the complement clause is not restricted to visual perception. It can be any type of perception (visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, or gustatory) and even cognition: some of them are illustrated in (2-4). This paper aims to explore the formal and semantic aspects of the epistemic conditional construction and the grammaticalization processes involved in this construction.

It first examines formal characteristics of the epistemic conditional construction in comparison with general conditional constructions in Korean. It argues that the construction in question can be marked by the conditional marker -myen, but not by –tamyen ‘if,’ because the former, but not the latter, can convey positive epistemic stance. It also argues, based on morphological and syntactic evidence, that the form po- in the construction is not a verb any longer, but that the complex form po-myen has become grammaticalized into the marker of the protasis of the epistemic conditional construction. It then argues that the epistemic stance (cf, Fillmore 1990) conveyed by the epistemic conditional construction is always positive, that is, the speaker commits to the truth of the proposition of the protasis. It also investigates the grammaticalization processes involved in this construction, paying special attention to the function of the conditional marker –myen ‘if’ and the semantics of the verb po- ‘to see.’

Data
(2) cip-i coyonghan kel po-meyn aki-ka canun keney.
house-Nom is.quiet Comp see-if baby-Nom sleep Epis
'If (as I know) the house is quiet, the baby must be sleeping.'  [Auditory]
(3) naymsay-ka isanghan kel po-myen umsik-i sanghan keney.
   smell-Nom is.strange Comp see-if food-Nom is.rotten Epis
   'If (as I know) the smell is strange, the food must have gone bad.'   [Gustatory]

(4) kukes-ul kiekhaci moshanun kel po-myen nemu manhi
   It-Acc remember cannot Comp see-if too much
     masyessten kes kathta
     drank Comp seem
   'If (as I know) I cannot remember it, I must have drunken too much.'   [Cognition]

References