

# Is the Worldview of Koreans Conditioned by Korean Verbs?

## Expressing “Possession” Using the Existential Verb *Issda*

Kyu Suk Shin

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After two decades of disrepute, Whorf’s linguistic relativity has regained its momentum in the debate on the influence of language on thought. This paper examines the existential verb *issda* in the context of categorizing Korean verbs in order to establish the connection as to how reality is conceptualized in the Korean language. Each language categorizes/segments nature differently, and Korean speakers can express their experiences only through the usage of the grammatical categories available in Korean. The use of grammatical categories in expressing experience is claimed to be an automatic process; hence it becomes habitual thought. In Korean, the existential verb *issda* is used to denote two meanings: existence and possession. The grammatical and semantic structure of *issda* is examined in comparison with English to determine the conceptualization of possession. The paper demonstrates how the conceptual structure of possession is constructed when the theme, reference object, and location make thematic relationships. The worldview of Koreans’ regarding possession is very different from English speakers as the spatial relationship between human beings and the object references is conditioned by the verb *issda*.

Keywords: Linguistic relativity, grammatical categories, conceptualization, thematic relations

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### Introduction

If we were observing the same phenomenon in the world, the description would be grammatically varied according to the language used. Whether we describe natural occurrences such as a tsunami or talk about relatives in one’s family, the

speakers have no choice but to express their views and experiences using grammatical categories available in their native language. Whorf's linguistic relativity hypothesis in the 1950s inspired many scholars to debate the relationship between language and thought—an ongoing intellectual inquiry. The pursuit of the theory experienced some setbacks in the 1960s due to the rise of cognitive psychology that held the view that, as human cognition is universal across languages, structures of a specific language have little impact on the “thinking process” of speakers of that language. The debate, however, moved again to linguistic relativism in the late 1970s, posing the question of whether linguistic differences between languages have any influence on thoughts of the speaker.

In considering the inseparable relationship between language and thought, the central question that we ask is how each of us forms a worldview. Do we have some sort of concepts in our heads first and then speak about them, or do we speak about our experiences in the language, which was pre-conceptualized by the grammatical categories of that language? In other words, are we conditioned by our language?

This paper aims to examine the existential verb *issda* in the context of the categorization of Korean verbs in comparison with English and to analyze the grammatical and semantic structures in order to establish the connection as to how reality is conceptualized in the Korean language.

## Linguistic Relativity

Whorf's linguistic relativity hypothesis (1956a) was influenced by Boas (1858-1942) and Sapir (1884-1939) who tried to explore the relations between language studies and anthropology: Boas ([1911] 1966) had three important points regarding the nature of the language: 1) language classifies experiences; 2) languages vary in categorizing experiences of the world; and 3) linguistic phenomena are unconscious in nature and produced automatically. However, his view was tentative in relating the role of language to shaping thought as he saw language as primarily reflecting culture and thought.

Sapir (1949) advanced his teacher Boas's view on language and thought, extensively comparing languages and demonstrating how two languages differ in categorising the same experience. In his view, this was due to the “formal completeness of the language system” in any given language. Sapir acknowledged that our experiences of the world are interpreted by grammatical cate-

gories of the language, through conceptual reality, which channels thought. Sapir explains the relationship between language and thought:

From the point of view of language, thought may be defined as the highest latent or potential content of speech, the content that is obtained by interpreting each of the elements in the flow of language as possessed of its very fullest conceptual value.

...

It is, indeed, in the highest degree likely that language is an instrument originally put to uses lower than the conceptual plane and that thought arises as a refined interpretation of its content. (Sapir [1921] 1949: 14-5)

Whorf was not a professionally trained linguist, but his study on the American Indian Hopi language in comparison with English lead him to develop a firm view that language influences thought. Hence he proposed the linguistic relativity hypothesis. His main arguments are 1) that languages differ in the way they classify experience of the world; 2) that when we use limited linguistic categories for expressing infinite experiences of the world, linguistic categories are used as guides in habitual thought; and 3) that therefore speakers of different languages have different views of the world (Whorf 1956a: 221).

## **The Categorization of Experiences**

When humans are presented “a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions,” we categorize those impressions in order to make a sense of the world—we divide and dissect things to satisfy our understanding of nature, relationships, and ultimately the cosmos and we do this through “the linguistic systems of our minds” (Whorf 1956a: 213). The range of classification is endless: from the concrete division (i.e., male and female; humans, animals, and plants) to the abstract division of ideas and concepts. This ability is vital to human cognition as Lakoff (1982: 142) states, “any adequate account of the human conceptual system must provide an accurate theory for all our categorization, both concrete and abstract.”

The process of classification is claimed to be automatic, as it never rises into consciousness nor give secondary reasoning or to re-interpretation (Boas [1911] 1966: 63; Lakoff 1982). For example, native speakers of languages with gender distinction do not think about whether a noun is masculine or feminine but use

words automatically. The complex kinship terms in the Korean language is a good example of how Koreans categorize family relationships by distinguishing paternal and maternal relatives and use them from very early age while this distinction is not necessary in English.

Languages vary in expressing states of affairs as they categorize the same experience differently. Boas gives a classical example using the words for snow in Eskimo. Eskimos have many different words for categorizing snow, e.g., “one word, *aput*, expressing SNOW ON THE GROUND; another one, *qana*, FALLING SNOW; a third one, *piqsirpoq*, DRIFTING SNOW; and a fourth one, *qimuqsuq*, A SNOWDIRFT” (Boas [1911] 1966: 21-22). Whorf found that in the Indian Hopi language the tense is irrelevant as the Hopi people perceive time and space completely different from English speakers.

Speakers of Korean and English have different ways of describing joining objects (Choi and Bowerman 1991). For example, when English speakers say,

I put a ring on my finger. (1)

or

I put a ring on the table. (2)

There is no difference in describing the containment sensitivity relationship (i.e., tight versus loose) between the object and the referent whereas Koreans distinguish the relationship whether a ring can fit tightly or loosely into containment using the verb accordingly. The experiment shows this spatial concept was instilled in Korean children as they encounter successive use of the word. Consequently when describing spatial events, Koreans are much more sensitive towards the spatial relationship, i.e., *kkida* (fit in) as in (1a) and *nota* (put on) as in (2a), whereas English speakers give more attention to the properties of the objects i.e., “This one is made of glass,” “This is a tall object.” (Choi and Bowerman 1991: 416).

*banji-leul songalak-e kki-n-da.* (1a)  
 ring-ACC finger-to fit-in-PRES-END  
 “Fit a ring to the finger.”

*banji-leul chaeksang-wi-e no-ass-da.* (2a)  
 ring-ACC desk-on-LOC put-PAST-END  
 “Put a ring on the table.”

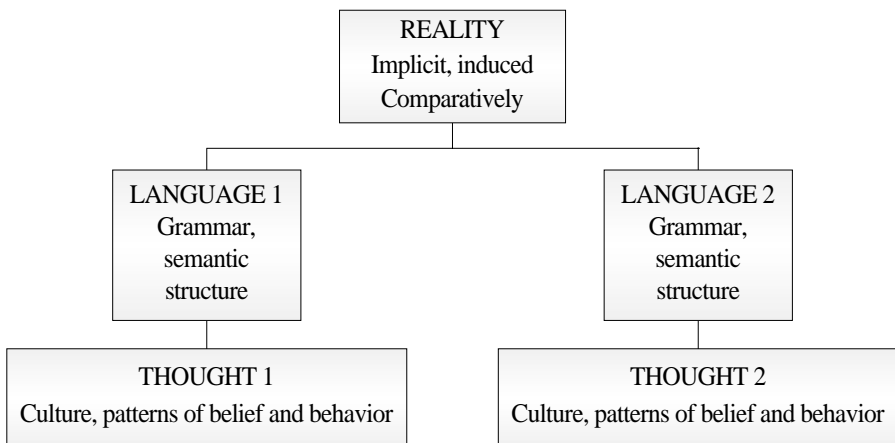
## Methodology

Languages differ in their grammatical structures and the way they organize grammatical categories. In order to make comparisons between languages to identify the interrelationship between language and culture, Whorf noted that in “Standard Average European” languages, i.e., English, French and German, there are few differences (1956a: 138) and argued that the best approach is to make a comparison with an exotic language and to pose the questions:

- (1) Are our own concepts of ‘time,’ ‘space,’ and ‘matter’ given in substantially the same form by experience to all men, or are they in part conditioned by the structure of particular languages? (2) Are there traceable affinities between (a) cultural and behavioural norms and (b) large-scale linguistic patterns? (Whorf 1956a: 138)

Korean is one of the exotic languages, and this study should be able to illustrate how differently Koreans perceive the existence of an entity by examining the existential verb *issda*. The study also attempts to establish the connection between the Korean language and its speaker’s thought and cultural beliefs because, “When we are studying semantics of natural language, we are by necessity studying the structure of thought” (Jackendoff 1983: x).

The diagram below underlies the methodology of this study.



**Figure 1** Whorf’s formulation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis (Lucy 1992b: 259)

## The Categorization of Korean Verbs

When Koreans observe an entity or a phenomenon, a significant segment of their experiences are inevitably expressed in their verbs. There have been different views on categorizing verbs in Korean. For instance, H. B. Choe (1937) treated the existential verb as a descriptive verb and some (Nam and Go 1985) classify the copula as a predicative particle. However, because of the particular characteristics of the existential verb, *issda*, and distinctive functions of the copula, *ida*, it is generally accepted that it is better to have four verb types, including these two (Seo 1994). The four verb types; the existential verb, the copula, the descriptive verb and the action verb are related to the most primary human perceptions. In the English verb, the existential, copula, and descriptive categories often share the same verb “to be” and are thus not so readily distinguished semantically.

Imagine a situation--we see something is moving in the garden. First, we observe and perceive the existence of an entity and express the experience by using the existential verb *issda*:

<i>jeogi(e)</i>	<i>mwo-ga</i>	<i>iss-da.</i>	(3)
there-(LOC)	what-NOM	exist-END	
“There is something.”			

And then we wonder about it and then utter what it is--to identify the entity by the copula *ita*:

<i>mueos-i-ji?</i>	<i>mwo-ji?</i> (Spoken form)	(4)/(4a)
what is-END	what (is)-END	
“What is it?”	“What is it?”	

<i>goyangi-i-da</i>	(5)
cat-is-END	
“It’s a cat.”	

Next, we describe a state of the entity by the descriptive verb:

<i>goyangi-ga</i>	<i>keu-da.</i>	(6)
cat-NOM	be-big-END	
“The cat is big.”		

Finally, we predicate what the entity is doing by the action verb.

<i>goyangi-ga</i>	<i>dalana-ss-da.</i>	(7)
cat-NOM	run away-PAST-END	
“The cat ran away.”		

Among the four verb types, the existential verb *issda*, the copula, and the descriptive verb are categories that are fused in English as seen in the use of the verb “is” in the English equivalents shown above. In the following section, the semantic structure of the verb *issda* is examined in detail to trace conceptualizations and thoughts that are particular to Koreans.

### Existential Verb *Issda*

The existential verb *issda* is the second most frequently used predicate after the verb *hada*, “to do.” If we exclude the “Noun + *hada*” form, *issda* is the top of the frequency scale in all predicates (Yeonse Malmungchi and Yu 1998). The existential verb is treated separately because of its particular syntactic characteristics: sometimes it behaves like a processive verb, taking the relativizer *-neun*; but sometimes it is more like a descriptive verb, in not taking *-(eu)n* for the past tense. The existential verb is known for denoting two different meanings, existence and possession. There are only three words in this category; *issda* is the basic form, *eopda* is the antonym and, the honorific form is *gyesida* (Seo 1994; Yu 1998). Although this verb generally describes a stative situation, when the subject is animate, the verb can be used as a processive verb as shown in the following examples (Lee Keedong 1993: 163, 8[a] and [b]).

- |                              |                          |     |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----|
| a. <i>na-neun oneul</i>      | <i>jib-e iss-da</i>      | (8) |
| I-TOP today house-LOC        | is-END                   |     |
| “I will be at home today.”   |                          |     |
| b. <i>na-neun oneul</i>      | <i>jib-e iss-neun-da</i> |     |
| I-TOP today house-LOC        | is-PRES-END              |     |
| “I will stay at home today.” |                          |     |

In 8(b), the verb *issda* can take the present tense marker *-neun* and it indicates

the subject's intention to stay home but the situation may change over time, which makes this verb a processive verb. Because of this processive nature of the verb, D. J. Lee (1992) argues that *issda* should be divided into three categories based on the semantic interpretation: “stay,” “exist,” and “have.”

When *issda* has the semantic interpretation of either “existence” or “possession,” it has a different syntactic structure. As we can see from Table 1, the existential *issda* has an inanimate noun with the location particle *-e* at the beginning of the sentence whereas possession is expressed by having an animate noun with the location particle *ege/hante* at the beginning of the sentence, which indicates that semantic constraints are manifested as syntactic constraints.

The following section analyzes how the syntactic structure enables the construction of the intended meaning of “existence” or “possession.” English is compared without detailed structural analysis.

**Table 1** Summary of Syntactic Characteristics of *Issda*

	Existential <i>issda</i>	Possessive <i>issda</i>
Structure	NP1(Inanimate) <i>-e</i> NP2- <i>ga issda</i>	NP1(Animate)- <i>ege/hante</i> <i>/neun/ga</i> NP2- <i>ga issda</i>
1. Head Noun for relativization	NP1- <i>e</i> and NP2- <i>ga</i>	NP1- <i>ege</i>
2. Honorific	<i>gyesida</i>	<i>iss-eusi-da</i>
3. Resumptive	No	Bound resumptive pronoun
4. Adverb	Descriptive adverb (e.g., <i>jal</i> “well”)	Gradable adverb (e.g., <i>kkwae</i> “quite”)
5. Coactive	Imperative, Propositive, Promissory	No

### 1. NP-*i/ga issda*

The most basic syntactic structure of the verb *issda* requires only the subject, and its semantic structure is to express the existence of an entity or a state. The noun phrase “NP-*e*” is unnecessary because it requires only a single reference location, which Jackendoff explains as the existential field as below:



Existential field:

- a. [THINGS] and [STATES] can serve as theme.
- b. There is one reference region, called [EX], expressed by “existence.”  
(1983: 202, [10.32])

For example in (9), whether or not there is a ghost is expressed by *issda* therefore *i sesang-e* (in this world) is not required.

*gwisin-i (i sesang-e/Ø) jeongmal iss-eul-kka?* (Nahm 1993: 21 [20a]) (9)  
ghost-NOM (this world-LOC/Ø) really exist-PROS-END  
“Do ghosts really exist?” “Are there really ghosts?”

Also, when the subject is a dependent noun such as, *jeok* (case), *ttae* (time), or nouns like *yaksok* (promise), *il* (work) and *somun* (rumor) as in (10), it does not require a noun phrase with the locative particle *-e* because the subject noun does not need to have a “place” to exist (Nam 1993: 21).

*tteun somun-i iss-da.* (10)  
rumor-NOM exist-END  
“There’s a rumor.”

## 2. NP1-e NP2-i/ga *issda*

NP1- <i>e</i>	NP2-i/ga	<i>issda</i>	
<i>eodi-e</i>	<i>nu-ga/mwo-ga</i>	<i>iss-na?</i>	(11)
where-LOC	who-NOM/what-NOM	exist-END	
“Where is who/what?”			

In this sentence structure, “NP-*e*” is required to indicate the location of the subject as in (12). The static locative particle *-e* is used with inanimate nouns only and indicates the spatial boundary of the location and “*-e issda*” denotes the maintenance of that position.

<i>migug-e</i>	<i>dongsaeng-i</i>	<i>iss-da</i>	(12)
America-LOC	brother-NOM	exist-END	
“My brother is in America.”			

The verb *gyesida* is used only for human existence as a fossilized honorific predicate and the word order of NP1 and NP2 is interchangeable as in (13a and b). However, if the “NP-*e*” is omitted then, it indicates “existence” only, which means “My parents are still alive” instead of “My parents are in Korea.”

(*hangug-e*)      *bumonim-i*      *gyesi-n-da*      (13a)  
 Korea-LOC      parents-HON-NOM      are(HON)-PRES-END  
 “I have my parents.” = “My parents are still alive.”

*bumo-nim-i*      (*hangug-e*)      *gyesi-n-da*      (13b)  
 parents-HON-NOM      Korea-LOC      are(HON)-PRES-END  
 “I have my parents.” = “My parents are still alive.”

### 3. NP1-*ege* NP2-*i/ga issda*

NP1-*ege*      NP2-*i/ga*      *issda*  
*nugu-ege*      *mwo-ga*      *iss-na?*      (14)  
 who-LOC(with)      what-NOM      exist-END  
 “Who has what?”

This is the typical syntactic structure expressing possession in Korean. In NP1, the static locative particle *-ege*, *-hante* and the honorific form *-kke* can take only animate nouns. In this syntactic structure, the NP1 is obligatory with the particle *-ege* which indicates a location-goal. The semantic structure is to denote “NP2 (something) exists with NP1 (somebody).” Here we have the key question of this study as to how the [NP1-*ege* NP2-*i/ga issda*] structure is used for expressing “possession” first and foremost in Korean and what the significance of this concept is.

Jackendoff defines possession largely in two different notions: “inalienable possession-the way one possess one’s nose, for instance-and alienable possession-the way one possesses a book” (1983: 191). The Thematic Relations Hypothesis (TRH), which was first proposed by Gruber (1965), provides clues as to how the semantics of motion and location has major implications for semantic fields as a whole. Jackendoff has extended the TRH theory and gives a summary as below:

Thematic Relations Hypothesis (TRH)

In any semantic field of [EVENTS] and [STATES], the principal event-, state-,

path-, and place-functions are a subset of those used for the analysis of spatial location and motion. Fields differ in only three possible ways:

- a. what sorts of entities may appear as theme;
- b. what sorts of entities may appear as reference objects;
- c. what sort of relations assumes the role played by location in the field of spatial expressions. (Jackendoff 1983: 188)

Jackendoff argues that the concept of alienable possession is constructed when the grammatical elements, i.e., theme, reference object, and location satisfy the terms stipulated as below:

Alienable possession:

- a. [THINGS] appear as themes.
- b. [THINGS] appear as reference objects.
- c. Being alienably possessed plays the role of location; that is, “y has/possesses x” is the conceptual parallel to the spatial “x is at y.” (Jackendoff 1983: 192, [10.9])

In the light of the Thematic Relations Hypothesis, we can see how the [NP1-*ege* NP2-*i/ga issda*] structure is interpreted as possession. Let’s see in the following example:

Y-Location	X		(15)
<i>Yeongsu-ege</i>	<i>apateu-ga</i>	<i>iss-da.</i>	
name-LOC	apartment-NOM	exist-END	
“Yeongsu has an apartment.”			

In (15), the conceptual relations between the theme, reference object, and location is that Y, *Yeongsu*, is PEOPLE which implies that PEOPLE can act on and apply physical force to an OBJECT (Schank 1975) and claim ownership of that object. Consequently Y (NP1) has possession of X (NP2), thus the interpretation is that *Yeongsu* has an apartment. Schank (1975) argues that conceptualization is built by the relations between concepts; i.e., ATRAN: to change the abstract relation with respect to an object, e.g., possession.

We can apply other object references such as *don* (money), *yeojachingu* (girl friend), *halmeoni* (grandmother), and *maelyeok* (charm) as the object reference and there are no problems in establishing alienable possession. However, (16) is

unnatural because nose is inalienably possessed by PEOPLE. We can confirm that “Thematic structure is the only means available to organize a semantic field of events and states coherently-it is an indispensable element of everyday thought” (Jackendoff 1983: 209).

* <i>Yeongsu-ege</i>	<i>ko-ga</i>	<i>iss-da</i>	(16)
NAME-LOC	nose-NOM	exist-END	
**“Yeongsu has a nose.”			

However, the concept of “possession” expressed by the verb *issda* is limited to certain grammatical structures. We are therefore unable to express some semantic functions. For example, *issda* cannot take an object nor make imperative, propositive, desirative or intentional expressions. These particular characteristics clearly demonstrate that the semantic structure of the verb *issda* is different from the English possessive, “have.”

### The Verb *Gajida*

The verb *gajida* is a transitive verb, which requires an object. The difference in the semantic structure with the verb *issda* is that *gajida* requires that the spatial relationship be closer to the theme and it denotes that the subject is able to “keep” the object and the object “belongs” to the subject. The below examples demonstrate that the verb *gajida* “to have (something) (on) one,” “to own” can be used for grammatical and semantic functions that *issda* is unable to perform:

### Imperative

<i>i-geo</i>	<i>gaji-si-eyo.</i>	(17)
this-thing	have-HON-END	
“Have this.”		

* <i>i-geo</i>	<i>iss-eusi-eyo.</i>	(17a)
this-thing	exists-HON-END	
For “Have this.” compare above (17)		

**Intentional**

*na, neo(leul) gaji-lkkeo-ya.* (18)  
 I you (ACC) have-am going to-END  
 “I am going to make you mine.”

\**na, neo(ga) iss-eul kkeo-ya.* (18a)  
 I you (NOM) exist-am going to-END  
 For “I am going to make you mine.”

*na-neun ai-leul net gaji-gess-da.* (19)  
 I-TOP children-ACC four have-will-END  
 “I will have four children.”

\**na-neun ai-ga net iss-gess-da.* (19a)  
 I-TOP children-NOM four exist-will-END  
 For “I will have four children.”

**Desirative**

*Gwinyeo-leul gaji-go sip-eusi-pnikka?* (20)  
 NAME-ACC have-want to-HON-END  
 “Would you like to make *Gwinyeo* yours?”

\**Gwinyeo-ga iss-go sip-eusi-pnikka?* (20a)  
 NAME-NOM exist-want to-HON-END  
 For “Would you like to make *Gwinyeo* yours?”

**Propositive**

*kkum-eul gaji-ja.* (21)  
 dream-ACC have-PROP  
 “Let’s have a dream.” (=Be ambitious.)

(21a)

\**kkum-i*            *iss-ja.*  
 dream-NOM        exist-PROP  
 For “Let’s have a dream.” (=Be ambitious.)

### “Not being able to”

(22)

*agi-leul*    *gaji-go sip-eodo*            *gaji-l su eop-neun*            *chingu*  
 baby-ACC have-want-to-even though have-not being able to-REL friend  
 “A friend who wants to have a baby but can’t.”

(22a)

\**agi-ga*    *iss-go sip-eodo*            *iss-eul su eop-neun*            *chingu*  
 baby-NOM exist-want-to-even though exist-not being able to-REL friend  
 For “A friend who wants to have a baby but can’t.”

The above examples show very different grammatical and semantic characteristics of “possession” compared to English. The Korean possessive *issda* denotes that an entity is already being existence in observable objective state and located at someone therefore the spatial relationship is alienated from the subject. It is a temporary alienable ownership of the object by a mortal animate such as a human being. This appears to be the Korean view on possession, which is markedly different from English.

#### 4. NP1-*i/ga* NP2-*i/ga issda*

Finally the [NP-*i/ga* NP-*i/ga issda*] structure is also used for expressing possession. The semantic difference between [NP-*ege* NP-*i/ga issda*] and [NP-*i/ga* NP-*i/ga issda*] has not been made clear. Syntactically, the difference is that the locative noun phrase “NP-*ege*” is shifted to the nominative case “NP-*i/ga*” functioning as the subject to make the “double subject sentence.”

NP1-*ege* NP2-*i/ga issda.*



NP1-*i/ga* NP2-*i/ga issda.*

Yang (1995: 218) suggested that it may be that [NP-*ege* NP-*i/ga issda*] expresses possession but in temporary control whereas [NP-*i/ga* NP-*i/ga issda*] mainly expresses an alienable possession but in more permanent basis. But when comparing (15) and (15a), we cannot find such a semantic difference.

<i>Yeongsu-ege</i>	<i>apateu-ga</i>	<i>iss-da.</i>	(15)
NAME-LOC	apartment-NOM	exist-END	
“Yeongsu has an apartment.”			

<i>Yeongsu-ga</i>	<i>apateu-ga</i>	<i>iss-da.</i>	(15a)
NAME-NOM	apartment-NOM	exist-END	
“Yeongsu has an apartment.”			

In my analysis, in (15), the focus is “What does *Yeongsu* have?” whereas in (15a) it is “Who has an apartment?” therefore the difference is not in semantics of possession, rather it is in the focus of grammatical elements.

## Conclusion

This study has shown how Korean speakers have different worldviews regarding “existence” and “possession” compared to English speakers. The existential verb *issda* is categorized separately and known for denoting two meanings, “existence” and “possession.” However, the analysis of the grammatical and semantic structures of *issda* reveals that the semantic function of *issda* is “existence” only. The conceptual structure of possession is constructed when the theme, reference object, and location make thematic relationships; the meaning of “alienable possession” is inferred. Guided by the categorization of the verb, Korean speakers use the verb *issda* repeatedly on a daily basis over time, hence it becomes habitual thought. As examined, *issda* is limited in admitting certain grammatical structures, i.e., imperative, propositive, and desirative, etc., and is consequently unable to express possession with certain semantic functions. To Koreans, possession expressed by *issda* is not an event but an observable objective state by which the subject makes an alienable spatial relationship with an object reference. In order to express any coactive ownership, the verb *gajida* is used. The spatial relationship of *gajida* is much closer to the subject hence it denotes a strong sense of “keep” and “belong” between the subject and the

object. It is fascinating to realize that “all one’s life one has been tricked, all unaware, by the structure of language into a certain way of perceiving reality, with the implication that awareness of trickery will enable one to see the world with fresh insight” (Whorf 1956a: 27). Further studies on this subject will confirm various cultural Korean beliefs associated with possession.

### Abbreviations

ACC	Accusative particle
ATTR	Attributive
END	Sentence ender
HON	Honorific suffix
LOC	Locative particle
NOM	Nominative case particle
PAST	Past tense
PRES	Present tense
PROP	Propositive ender
PROS	Prospective
REL	Relativizer
TOP	Topic marker

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**Kyu Suk Shin** is the founding member of Korean Program at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia. She has research interests in Korean linguistics, applied linguistics, and second language acquisition and has produced a number of Korean textbooks and teaching materials. She is currently Head of Department of Languages and Intercultural Education.

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