

From Declarative to Mood: Semanticizing the Speech-Act Layer of Korean *-ta*

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Introduction. Korean *-ta* presents a puzzle at the syntax-semantics interface. As a root-level sentence-final particle, *-ta* marks declarative sentence type, associated with the force of assertion. Yet unlike other declarative speech-style particles (*-supnita*, *-eyo*), *-ta* freely embeds under verbs (Portner et al., 2019), where it has been analyzed as a mood marker (Lee et al., 2015; Wymann, 1996). These accounts, however, leave two questions unanswered: what is the formal semantics of embedded *-ta*, and why does it display slightly different readings depending on the embedding verb—an embedded assertion under some verbs, and an indicative-like mood reading committing the subject to the truth of the embedded proposition under others? The present paper addresses both questions under a unified structural analysis.

- (1) Mina-ka pang-ey tuleka-ess-ta.
Mina-NOM room-DAT enter-PST-DECL
'Mina entered the room' (Assertion)

Data Embedded *-ta* is selected by belief, epistemic, and reportative attitude verbs, as shown in (2). It stands in near-complementary distribution with other embeddable sentence-type complementizers: *-nka/lkka* (INT; Kang and Yoon 2022, 2020) and *-la* (IMP). The distribution of *-ta* raises a first question: what licenses the embedding of a declarative complementizer under these verbs?

- (2) a. Mina-ka [(?solcikhi) i phurojectu-ka putamsulep-ta-ko]
Mina-NOM [(?frankly) this project-NOM be.overwhelming-DECL-COMP]
sayngkakha-ess-ta.
think-PST-DECL
'Mina thought [(?frankly) that this project was overwhelming.]'
b. Mina-ka [(solcikhi) i phurojectu-ka putamsulep-ta-ko]
Mina-NOM [frankly this project-NOM be.overwhelming-DECL-COMP]
malha-ess-ta.
say-PST-DECL
'Mina said [(frankly) that this project was overwhelming].'

The meaning of embedded *-ta*, however, is not uniform. Under attitude verbs of epistemic flavor ('believe/think/remember'), it receives a mood reading: the embedded proposition reflects the matrix subject's mental state. Under bridge verbs ('say, tell, claim, suggest') (matching the class A verbs in Hooper and Thompson 1973), it receives an assertion reading: the embedded proposition is what the matrix subject asserts. Also, this contrast goes hand in hand with the compatibility with speech-act modifiers, such as adverbs *solcikhi* 'frankly', *kamhi* 'dare', *kulentey* 'by.the.way', *chesjjaylo* 'firstly' etc—which modify properties of a speech act (Krifka, 2023). As (2-a) and (2-b) show, these modifiers are felicitous under assertion-embedding verbs but degraded under epistemic verbs, suggesting that the former but not the latter encodes speech-act level meaning. A second question thus arises: can an analysis of embedded *-ta* account for both readings?

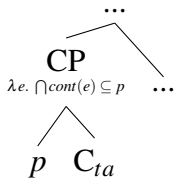
Analysis. The analysis begins from the observation on root *-ta*. Asserting p at the root level can be modeled dynamically: the effect of an assertion with propositional content p with respect to a context c is to add p to its common ground ($cg + p = cg \cup \llbracket p \rrbracket$) (Stalnaker, 1978; Heim, 1983). This dynamic update involves two components: a **dynamic** component (+)—the act of updating the common ground—and a **static** component—the resulting state in which the common ground entails p ($cg \cup \llbracket p \rrbracket \subseteq p$).

Assuming this root update operates at the pragmatic level, the present analysis proposes that in embedded environments, these two components are semanticized and layered as two distinct functional heads, as in (3) and (4). Following the framework in which modal semantics is composed at the complement level and relativized to an event argument (Moulton, 2009a; Kratzer, 2006; Hacquard, 2010), C_{ta} encodes the static component: the content of the event argument entails p (parallel to the treatment of $-ta$ in nominal complements in Bondarenko 2025). Above C_{ta} , $Assert^0$ adds the dynamic component, modeling the embedded event as an assertion event targeting a reported context C_r (Farkas, 1992).¹

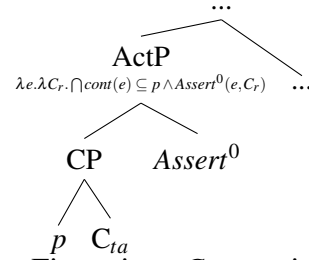
$$(3) \quad \llbracket C_{ta} \rrbracket = \lambda p. \lambda e. \bigcap cont(e) \subseteq p$$

$$(4) \quad \llbracket Assert^0 \rrbracket = \lambda P_{vt}. \lambda e. \lambda C_r. P(e) \wedge assert^0(e, C_r)$$

(5) Lower projection (up to CP)



(6) Higher projection (up to ActP)



This layering addresses the two questions raised earlier. First, since C_{ta} requires its event argument to carry propositional content, and this event argument is identified with the matrix event, only attitude verbs that introduce content-bearing events can license $-ta$ —explaining its restricted distribution. Second, the two readings follow from projection height. The mood reading in (2-a) involves lower projection in (5): $\exists e. Agent(Mina, e) \wedge Think(e) \wedge \bigcap cont(e) \subseteq p$. The embedded assertion reading in (2-b) involves higher projection in (6): $\exists e. Agent(Mina, e) \wedge Say(e) \wedge \bigcap cont(e) \subseteq p \wedge Assert(e, C_r)$.² Since speech-act modifiers are base-generated in [Spec, ActP] (Krifka, 2023), they are licensed only when up to ActP is projected, accounting for the contrast in (2-a) vs. (2-b).

Conclusion. The proposed layering of embedded $-ta$ explains its two interpretations by connecting them to the static and dynamic components of root assertions. The two readings are not lexically ambiguous but structurally derived from the same continuum. More broadly, the analysis proposes one possible mechanism underlying the cross-linguistic link between declarative clause type and belief/assertion-embedding verbs.

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¹I use $Assert^0$ to distinguish from root assertion: it abstracts away from speaker information and the result state of context update, retaining only the targeting relation between the event and C_r .

²Following the spirit of Moulton's (2009b) decompositional approach, the matrix verb contributes the manner of assertion (saying, whispering, announcing, etc.), while $Assert^0$ encodes the assertion core.

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