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The Syntax and Semantics of Sentence-Ending-Ney: A Modular Interface Approach

Park, Myung-Kwan
(Dongguk University)

Park, Myung-Kwan. 2025. The Syntax and Semantics of Sentence-Ending-Ney: A Modular Interface Approach. ***Sign Languages and Linguistics Convergence Research,*** *2*(2), 163-193. This paper examines the Korean sentence-final ending *-ney*, focusing on its syntax, semantics, and diachronic development to assess competing theories of clause structure. Engaging recent debates between cartographic approaches (Rizzi & Cinque, 2016) and modular, interface-based models (Manzini, 2025), it argues that *-ney* supports a modular view of grammar rather than a densely layered hierarchy of functional projections. Historically, *-ney* derives from the fusion of *-na, -i,* and *-ta*, shifting from a polite declarative marker to a mirative-evidential form associated with surprise, realization, and direct perception. Syntactically, it behaves as a single portmanteau head in the Force/Mood domain, with its interpretation determined by prosody and discourse context rather than by multiple syntactic heads. Semantically, *-ney* encodes the speaker's epistemic stance, yielding either mirativity (unexpected realization) or confirmatory evidentiality (recognition of expected events). These readings correlate with distinct intonation contours (LH% vs. LHL%). The analysis shows that *-ney*'s flexibility results from modular interactions among syntax, pragmatics, and phonology, demonstrating how fine-grained meaning can emerge from an economical clause structure.

Key Words: Mirativity, Evidentiality, Sentence-Final Particles, Korean Syntax, Modular Grammar

1. Introduction

Recent developments in cartographic syntax, especially those advanced by Rizzi and Cinque (2016), propose a richly articulated structure of the clause in terms of hierarchically ordered functional projections. Within this framework, the CP zone encodes discourse-related and illocutionary features such as Force, Topic, Focus, and Interrogative, as in (1), while the IP zone is decomposed into fine-grained projections encoding tense, aspect, modality, and mood, as in (2). Each projection is associated with specific interpretive features, and their rigid ordering is taken to reflect a universal hierarchy of functional heads across languages. This proposal -- often visualized as a multi-layered structure encompassing ForceP down to FinP and beyond -- has profoundly influenced how researchers map syntactic structure to semantic interpretation.

(1) CP zone:

[Force [Top* [Int [Top* [Foc [Top* [Mod [Q_{emb} [Fin [$_{IP}$ . . .]]]]]]]]]

Within the IP domain in (2a), Cinque's (1999, 2006) work elaborates a universal hierarchy of adverbial and functional heads, such as $Mood_{(speech\ act)}$, $Mood_{(evaluative)}$, $Mood_{(evidential)}$, $Mod_{(necessity)}$, $Asp_{(habitual)}$, $Asp_{(continuous)}$, and so forth. Each head corresponds to distinct semantic notions -- ranging from speech-act level evaluation (e.g., *frankly, oddly*) to epistemic and evidential distinctions (*probably, allegedly*), and to fine-grained aspectual classes (habitual, prospective, completive) as in (2b). The underlying assumption is that a great deal of semantic information is encoded directly in syntax: semantic notions are turned into syntactic primitives, and syntactic order mirrors interpretive hierarchy. This tight syntax-semantics mapping exemplifies the Uniformity Principle (Culicover & Jackendoff, 2005), according to which identical meanings are expressed through identical structural configurations across languages.

(2) **IP zone**:

a. **$MoodP_{speech\ act}$ > $MoodP_{evaluative}$ > $Mood_{evidential}$ > $ModP_{epistemtic}$ > $TP_{(Past)}$ > $TP_{(Future)}$ > $MoodP_{irrealis}$ > $ModP_{alethic}$ > $Mood_{habitual}$ > $AspP_{repetitive(I)}$ >**

AspP$_{\text{frequentative(I)}}$ > **ModP**$_{\text{volitional}}$ > **AspP**$_{\text{celerative(I)}}$ > **TP**$_{\text{(Anterior)}}$ > **AspP**$_{\text{terminative}}$ > **AspP**$_{\text{continuative}}$ > **AspP**$_{\text{retrospective}}$ > **AspP**$_{\text{promximative}}$ > **AspP**$_{\text{durative}}$ > **AspP**$_{\text{generic/progressive}}$ > **AspP**$_{\text{prospective}}$ > **ModP**$_{\text{obligation}}$ > **ModP**$_{\text{permission/ability}}$

b. speech act A(dverb): *frankly* > evaluative A: *oddly* > evidential A: *allegedly* > epistemic A: *probably* > past/future A: *then* > necessity A: *necessarily* > possibility A: *possibly* > habitual A: *usually* > delayed A: *finally* > predispositional Aspect: *tendentially* > repetitive A: *again* > frequentative A: *frequently* > volitional A: *willingly* > celebrative A: *quickly* > anterior A: *already* > terminative A: *no longer* > continuative A: *still* continuous A: *always* > retrospective A: *just* > proximatinative A: *soon* durative A: *briefly* > prospective A: *imminently* > obligation A: *obligatorily* > frustrative A: *in vain* > completive A: *partially* > manner A: *well*

Cinque (2006)

However, not all theoretical approaches embrace the cartographic richness of syntactic representation. A contrasting line of research, represented most recently by Manzini (2025), argues for a fully modular theory of syntactic projection. Under this view, syntax maintains a much leaner inventory of functional categories and refrains from encoding semantic distinctions directly into structure. Instead, the interface between syntax and semantics is handled by independent interpretive modules, allowing for greater explanatory economy and typological flexibility. From this perspective, the intricate cartographic hierarchies are not syntactically primitive but emerge from the interaction between syntax and other interpretive systems.

The Korean language provides a particularly revealing testing ground for evaluating these competing theoretical perspectives. Korean exhibits a rich system of sentence-final endings that express nuanced combinations of mood, modality, and evidentiality. Among them, the sentence-ending particle *-ney* presents an intriguing case: it encodes a speaker's stance toward the proposition -- often associated with surprise, discovery, or evaluative judgment -- yet resists straightforward classification within the cartographic hierarchy of Mood or Modality projections. This dual nature makes *-ney* an ideal empirical probe into

whether such meanings are encoded syntactically or arise through post-syntactic interpretive mechanisms.

This paper offers a case study of the Korean sentence-ending morpheme *-ney*, arguing that its behavior supports Manzini's (2025) fully modular approach over the richly articulated cartographic model of Rizzi and Cinque (2016). It will be shown that *-ney*'s interpretive variability -- ranging from evidential to evaluative readings -- cannot be captured by positing a fixed syntactic position in a universal Mood hierarchy. Instead, the data suggest that *-ney*'s semantics arise at the syntax-pragmatics interface, without recourse to an expanded inventory of functional heads. The analysis thus contributes to an ongoing typological and theoretical debate: whether syntactic structure should encode fine-grained semantic distinctions, or whether such distinctions emerge from modular interpretive principles operating over a leaner syntax.

Unlike prior studies that either assimilate Korean sentence-ending particles into finely articulated cartographic hierarchies or treat their meanings as lexically specified functional heads, this paper is qualitatively distinct in both theoretical orientation and methodology. Theoretically, it adopts Manzini's (2025) fully modular view of grammar, rejecting the assumption that mirativity, evidentiality, and evaluativity must be encoded as separate syntactic projections. Methodologically, it integrates synchronic interpretation, diachronic development, and prosodic variation to show that *-ney*'s meanings emerge at the syntax-pragmatics interface. In doing so, the paper reframes *-ney* not as a problem for cartography, but as evidence for a structurally economical, interface-driven model of grammar.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 shows that *-ney* functions as both a declarative and exclamatory ending, with a core mirative meaning that arises from pragmatic factors rather than fixed syntax. Section 3 traces its diachronic shift from a polite declarative to a mirative-evidential marker. Section 4 argues that *-ney* occupies a single clause-final head in the Force/Mood domain, with its interpretation determined by prosody and discourse. Section 5 demonstrates that intonation differentiates mirative and confirmatory evidential readings. Section 6 concludes that *-ney* supports a modular, interface-driven grammar over an expanded cartographic hierarchy.

2. Basic uses of '-ney'

The Korean sentence-ending morpheme *-ney* occupies a unique place in the system of sentence-final endings in contemporary Korean. It can be broadly divided into two types, each associated with different styles and degrees of formality.

(3) a. declarative:
hayngsa-nun nayil-pwuthe sicakha-**ney**. nayil ka-sey.
event-TOP tomorrow-from start-NEY tomorrow go-PROPOSITIVE
'The event starts tomorrow. Let's go tomorrow.'
b. declarative with exclamative force:
e, hayngsa-nun nayil-pwuthe sicakha-ney!
ah, event-TOP tomorrow-from start-NEY
nayil ka-ya-keyss-e.
tomorrow go-should-CONJECTIVE-INFORMAL
'Oh, the event starts tomorrow. I guess I should go tomorrow.' (Kang, 2025: 280)

The first is the declarative sentence-final ending *-ney* used in the *hakey*-style, which marks a formal, moderately low politeness level. This type expresses simple statements of fact, as illustrated in (3a), where the second sentence also ends with the *hakey*-style ending *-sey*. The second is the exclamatory sentence-final ending *-ney*, commonly classified as part of the *haychey*-style. This form is informal and neutral in politeness, often co-occurring with the *hay*- and *hayla*-styles. The exclamatory *-ney* conveys a sense of realization about something just perceived or understood at the moment of speaking, as seen in (3b), and is described in the Standard Korean Dictionary as expressing a direct, experiential awareness of new information.

The multifunctionality of *-ney* has been widely recognized in the literature. Beyond its basic declarative and exclamative uses, scholars have identified a range of semantic and pragmatic extensions. These include modal uses (Chang, 1985; Park, 2006; Kwon, 2013, 2015), evidential uses (Song, 2009, 2014, 2015),

mirative uses (Park, 2011; Chung, 2012, 2014; Lee, 2019), and even uses expressing indirect speech acts such as requests or confirmation-seeking. Among these, the most essential and widely discussed function in contemporary Korean is the mirative use, which encodes a speaker's experience of sudden realization or discovery.

According to Park and Choi (2021), the core meaning of *-ney* in its exclamative use is mirativity,[1] the marking of an unexpected realization or discovery. This function aligns closely with cross-linguistic definitions of mirativity proposed by DeLancey (1997, 2012) and Aikhenvald (2012), encompassing notions such as surprise, new information, and the speaker's immediate experiential awareness. In this sense, *-ney* is consistently used when the speaker encounters new information that has not yet been integrated into their prior knowledge. In contrast, evidentiality, the indication of the source of information, is considered a peripheral meaning, often accompanying the mirative interpretation.

Evidential uses of *-ney* typically prefer contexts of direct sensory perception (seeing, hearing, etc.), though indirect evidence through inference or hearsay can also support its use when the mirative component is strong. Thus, while evidentiality may appear as a by-product of the speaker's direct awareness, it is not a necessary condition for *-ney*'s occurrence. The essential meaning lies in the speaker's stance toward new information, rather than in encoding a specific evidential source.

Park and Choi (2021) further propose that exclamative *-ney* exhibits two distinct subtypes of use -- typical and atypical -- which differ according to contextual, pragmatic, and inferential parameters. The typical use represents situations that maximally reflect the core meaning of mirativity, as in (4a-b). In these cases, *-ney* is employed when the speaker reacts to new, perceptually obtained information, often without deliberate reasoning or directed communication toward a listener. The utterance is expressive rather than assertive, reflecting the

1) Mirativity is not necessarily expressed through a category on its own; Aikhenvald (2004) points out that a mirative meaning may also be coded by using other grammatical devices such as an evidential or tense marker. This led some researchers to question the status of mirativity as an independent grammatical category. Lazard (1999) suggested that evidentials and miratives would be subsumed under the term mediative. Hill argued that the evidence given by DeLancey (1992, 2001) and by Aikhenvald (2004) was either wrong or insufficient.

speaker's spontaneous reaction to an unexpected event.

(4) a. (Looking out the window at the rain [visual perception])
cikum pi o-ney.
now rain come-NEY
'It's raining now.'
b. (Glancing at my watch all of a sudden)
ee↗ yelsi-ka nem-ess{-ney,/??kwuna}!,[2)3)]
ah, 10 o'clock-NOM pass-PST-NEY/KWUNA
pelsse ileh-key tw-ayss-na?
'Whoa, it's already past ten? Has it gotten this late already?'
(Park & Choi, 2021: 289)

In contrast, the atypical use of exclamative *-ney* arises in contexts where the speaker does address a listener and bases the statement on inference rather than direct perception. Here, the speaker's confidence in the inference is high, and the utterance functions assertively rather than expressively. Although the mirative meaning remains, it is mitigated by the inferential and assertive nature of the speech act. This shift illustrates the flexibility of *-ney*, which allows the expression of both spontaneous realization as in (5a) and reasoned judgment as in (5b), depending on context.

(5) a. (Context: While watching Sherlock Holmes with a friend, suddenly realizing that A must be the culprit.)
ce salam-i pemin-i-{ney/kwuna}(LHL%)!
that person-NOM criminal-OP-NEY-KWUNA
'That person is the culprit!' (with realization)

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2) The symbol ↗ refers to rising intonation (and ↘ to falling, where relevant).

3) (4b) with *-kwuna* sounds somewhat unnatural, as this ending is typically used in contexts involving inference rather than direct perception. Likewise, witness the contrast:

(i) (I saw someone walking toward me in the darkness and thought)
a↘ sensayngnim-i-si{[?]ney/kwunyo}
'Oh, you're the teacher! '

b. A: caknyen-ey nay tongsayng-i kyewu sey pen manna-n yeca-hanthey
last.year-in my brother-NOM only three times meet-MOD woman-to
panhay-se kyelhonha-ntako nanli-yess-e.
feel.for married-DECL fuss-PAST-INFORMAL
'Last year, my brother fell for a woman he only met three times and made a big fuss about marrying her.'
B: A↘ yeca-ka yeypp-ess-{ney/kwuna}(LHL%)
ah, she-NOM pretty-PST-NEY/KWUNA
'Ah, she must have been pretty.'

(Park & Choi, 2021: 291)

To sum up, *-ney* exhibits a dual nature in its exclamative use -- ranging from highly spontaneous expressions of mirativity based on direct perception to more deliberate, inference-based statements that retain a trace of the speaker's realization. This continuum reflects the interaction between evidential and mirative meanings, supporting the view that *-ney*'s semantics arises from a broader discourse-pragmatic system rather than a fixed syntactic category. Its versatility makes it an important testing ground for theories of how mirativity and evidentiality are represented or not represented within the syntactic structure.

3. Historical development of *-ney*

The historical development of the Korean sentence-ending *-ney* provides crucial insight into the meanings and functions it exhibits in contemporary Korean. Tracing its diachronic evolution not only illuminates how its present forms came to encode mirative and evidential nuances but also reveals how shifts in morphological composition and pragmatic use reflect broader changes in the Korean verbal system. As with many sentence-final endings, the meaning of *-ney* cannot be understood solely in terms of its synchronic function; rather, its development shows a continuous process of phonological reduction, functional reanalysis, and semantic extension.

(6) a. na(ㄴ) + i(old ㅇ) + ta
① '-na(ㄴ)': imperfective/present tense pre-final ending (PE)
② 'i(old ㅇ)': *hasyosye*-style PE[4] - addressee politeness
③ '-ta': declarative ending (Lee, 1982: 152)
⟹ addressee politeness speech style
b. '-nay(ㄴ+i)' + i (declarative ending) (Chang, 2002: 321)
⟹ speech-level tantamount to *hakey*-style

Lee (1982) analyzes the formal origin of *-ney*, proposing that it derives from the combination *-na(ㄴ) + -i(old ㅇ) + -ta* as in (6a), in which *-na(ㄴ)* functioned as an imperfective or present-tense pre-final ending, *-i* encoded a degree of addressee politeness, and *-ta* served as a declarative marker (but Chang (2002) proposes that *-i* rather than *-ta* did so, as in (6b)). Over time, the final *-ta* was elided, and the reduced form stabilized as an independent sentence-final ending. As Nam (2009) notes, this truncation lowered the speech level, transforming an originally honorific construction into a moderately polite one, yet the form still remained within the honorific system. In the modern *hakey*-style *-ney*, the function of the earlier *-na(ㄴ)* element has disappeared entirely through morphological fusion, leaving *-ney* as a single, unanalyzable morpheme. This process of fusion appears to have begun in the nineteenth century, contemporaneous with broader restructuring in the Korean verbal morphology prompted by the emergence of new tense and modality markers such as *-es-(엇)* (past) and *-keys-(겟)* (conjectural/future).

In terms of its usage, early attestations of *-ney* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts such as personal letters and foreign language learning manuals show that it was primarily employed in formal narratives to convey factual or descriptive statements. As Kang (2025) observes, the ending seldom appeared in affective or evaluative contexts during this period, reflecting its earlier status as a neutral declarative marker rather than an expressive one.

As the language evolved, *-ney* began to appear with increasing frequency in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Korean verse prose (*kasa*), where it took on

4) It is tantamount in honorificity and politeness to modern *hasipsio*-style.

new expressive connotations. In these texts, *-ney* was often used to convey internal reflection, surprise, or heightened emotion, frequently co-occurring with negative predicates such as *ep-ney* as in (7) to intensify emotional expression. This stylistic use likely contributed to the association of *-ney* with meanings of unexpectedness and realization, paving the way for its later mirative interpretation.

(7) ... sulphwu-ki-to hanlyang-ep-ney ≪Sep. 14, 1897『Toknipsinmwun』3ㄱ≫
sorrowful-NM-also amout-no-NEY
'It's endlessly sorrowful.'

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the compound form *-keys-ney(*것네*)* began to appear in *phansoli*-based narrative texts such as *『Namwonkosa』* and *『Hungpwucen』*. In this combination, *-keys-* expresses conjecture or introspection, while *-ney* functions as an assertive sentence-final ending. Together, they convey strong internal emotion or evaluative judgment, often in negative or self-reflective contexts. This pattern suggests an expansion of *-ney* from a declarative to a more affective and interpretive function.

(8) ... amo-lye-to mos sal-kay-ney. ≪1864『Namwenkosa』2:25ㄴ≫
anymore can't live-CONJECTIVE-NEY
'I just can't live like this anymore.'

At this stage, *-keys-ney* was used primarily with first-person subjects, expressing the speaker's own feelings or realizations. Over time, however, its use extended to second- and third-person subjects, signaling a shift toward evidential and inferential readings. By the late nineteenth century, the construction had come to convey not only subjective inference but also evidentiality and surprise.[5] In this sense, *-ney* developed into a marker that could encode both the direct perception of events and the speaker's inferential stance. The evidential function could be either direct, based on sensory perception, or indirect, through inference

5) Evidentiality may be direct or indirect: direct evidentials are used to describe information directly perceived by the speaker through vision as well as other sensory experiences while indirect evidentials consist of the other grammatical markers for evidence such as quotatives and inferentials.

or hearsay.

This expansion of function continued into the twentieth century, as *-ney* became increasingly associated with the marking of present, perceptually grounded events. Its use in describing directly observed phenomena, particularly visual and auditory experiences, signaled the grammaticalization of an evidential or mirative dimension.

(9) a. pi o-ney!
rain come-NEY
'It is raining!'
b. isangha-n naymsay-ka na-ney!
strange-MOD smell-NOM come.about-NEY
'It is smelling strange.'

By the early twentieth century, examples of *-ney* in narrative and spoken-style texts clearly show its emerging role in expressing the speaker's immediate reaction to perceptual stimuli. In such contexts, the speaker's utterance functions as both an evidential report and an exclamative realization.

(10) A - cinsa oysamchon o-si-ney. ≪1908『Songloykum』1st Vol.: 9≫
Ah uncle come-HOR-NEY
'Ah-verily, my dear uncle is arriving.'

Additional features characteristic of the exclamative or mirative *-ney* include its frequent co-occurrence with interjections such as *(e/)*, which highlight its expressive, non-neutral nature, and its association with rising intonation patterns, distinguishing it prosodically from the flat tone of the declarative *-ney*. Over time, *-ney* solidified its distribution in present-tense, perceptual, and interactive discourse contexts, functioning as a marker of direct experience, surprise, and newly acquired awareness. The historical trajectory of *-ney*, from a polite declarative ending to an expressive, evidential-mirative marker, thus reflects a broader shift in Korean from structurally encoded politeness distinctions toward pragmatically driven markers of speaker stance and information source.

4. The syntax of *-ney*

The Korean sentence-final ending *-ney* manifests a rich array of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties that reflect multiple layers of meaning. Its functions range across exclamative (with sub-types of 'non-understanding' (i.e., direct perception-based) mirativity and 'understanding' (i.e., inference-based) realization), evidential (direct perception vs. inference), and interpersonal (self-directed vs. addressee-oriented) dimensions, as well as assertion and indirect speech-act usage. According to Moon (2014), the accompanying interjections that frequently occur with *-ney* -- short rising-tone forms such as *Ah*↗ or *Oh*↗ versus long falling-tone ones such as *Ah*↘ or *Oh*↘ -- reflect distinct cognitive states of the speaker: the former express surprise or confusion ('non-understanding interjections'), while the latter convey comprehension or realization ('understanding interjections'). These phonological patterns provide direct evidence that the interpretation of *-ney* is intimately tied to the speaker's epistemic stance and cognitive orientation toward new information.

(11) Exclamatives (understanding):
A: caknyen-ey nay tongsayng-i kyewu sey pen manna-n yeca-hanthey
last.year-in my brother-NOM only three times meet-MOD woman-to
panhay-se kyelhonha-ntako nanli-yess-e.
feel.for-CONN married-COMP fuss-PST-INFORMAL
'Last year, my brother fell for a woman he only met three times and made a big fuss about marrying her.'
B: *A*↘ *yeca-ka yeypp-ess-{ney/kwuna}(LHL%)!*
Oh she-NOM pretty-PST-NEY
'Oh, she must have been pretty.' (Park & Choi, 2021: 295)

The use of *-ney* in (11) illustrates the exclamative reading associated with 'understanding' or realization. Here, the speaker arrives at a conclusion based on linguistic input, expressing both epistemic inference and an affective sense of discovery. The boundary tone (LHL%) differentiates this interpretation from the higher rising tone associated with surprise or confusion.

In addition to its exclamative functions, *-ney* can also encode epistemic modality and assertion. Kwon (2013) observes that when combined with adverbs of certainty such as *hwaksilhi* 'definitely' as in (12), *-ney* expresses firm conviction rather than surprise. Though mirativity and evidentiality frequently co-occur, the modal reading is strengthened when the proposition is supported by reasoning or evidence already accessible to the speaker.

(12) epistemic modality:
hwaksilhi ney sayngkak-i thulli-ney. (Kwon, 2013: 57)
definitely you thought-NOM wront-NEY
'You're definitely wrong.'

When (12) conveys 'new information,' it may be accompanied by surprise; however, when supported by sufficient reasoning, it serves as an expression of strong conviction or assertion.

A further pragmatic extension involves *-ney* as a marker of confirmation-seeking. When the speaker presents a proposition that has not yet been integrated into their knowledge and invites validation from the listener, *-ney* functions as a request for confirmation, as in (13). This usage bridges exclamation and interrogation, maintaining the declarative form but signaling pragmatic incompleteness.

(13) request for confirmation:
A: Yenghuy-nun naynyen-ey mikwuk-ey ka-ntay.
Y-TOP next.year-in America-to go-HEARSAY
'Younghee says she's going to the U.S. next year.'
B: kulem Chelswu-nun honca nam-key toy-ney?
then C-TOP alone be left-CONNECTIVE become-NEY
'Then Chulsoo will be left alone, huh?'
A: ani, Chelswu-to kathi ka-nta-tentey. (Park, 2006: 166-167)
no, C-also with go-DECL-HEARSAY
'No, they said Chulsoo is going with her too.'

In certain contexts, *-ney* also serves as an indirect-speech-act marker. The

same form used in self-directed exclamation may, in addressee-directed contexts, function as an indirect request. This dual interpretation demonstrates the high contextual adaptability of *-ney* and its pragmatic dependence on speech-situation variables such as addressee presence and shared expectations.

(14) indirect (speech act) request:
pi-ka o-ney. (Lee & Chae, 2000: 257)
rain-NOM come-NEY.
(i) self-directed; (ii) addressee-directed → [Making an indirect request for an umbrella]

The multifunctionality of *-ney* can be further interpreted through the framework of Cinque's cartographic hierarchy and the Uniformity Principle (Culicover & Jackendoff, 2005), which posit that identical meanings map onto identical syntactic structures. In a cartographic representation, *-ney* would correspond to a cluster of projections spanning the Force and Mood domains, each encoding specific semantic dimensions.

(15) CP-zone: $\text{Force}_{(\text{assertive/confirmative})}$ ⇔ *-ta / -i*
Addressee politeness/self-directedness ⇔ *i (old ㅇ)*
IP-zone: $\text{Mood}_{(\text{exclamative (mirative)})}$[6] ⇔ *-na-*
$\text{Mood}_{(\text{evidential})}$ (current direct perception/inference)
$\text{Modality}_{(\text{epistemic})}$

The mapping of the relevant morphemes of *-ney* onto the cartographic hierarchy in (15) mirrors the morphological structure of its historical composition, as noted in (6) and repeated in (16):

(16) a. *na(ㄴ) + i(old ㅇ) + ta*
① '-na(ㄴ)' : imperfective/present-tense pre-final ending (PE)
② 'i(old ㅇ)' : *hasyosye*-style PE - addressee politeness

6) The sentences with this mood are referred to as declarative sentences with exclamatory force.

③ '-ta' : declarative ending (Lee, 1982: 152) ⇒ addressee politeness speech style

b. '-nay' + *i* (declarative ending) (Chang, 2002: 321) ⇒ speech-level tantamount to *hakey*-style

Over time, these morphemes in (16) fused lexically to yield the modern sentence-final *-ney*, which behaves as a single portmanteau morpheme inserted into syntax, as in (17). As Park (1998) notes, this process parallels the formation of other informal endings such as *-tey*, in which pre-final elements merge before syntactic insertion.

(17) The two or three morphemes historically comprising *-ney* are fused in the lexicon and inserted into syntax as a portmanteau (blended single) morpheme.

Evidence for this lexical fusion comes from coordination structures. As shown below, the morphemes constituting *-ney* cannot reoccur within coordinated clauses, even though *-ney* appears as an independent sentence-final morpheme. This pattern indicates that *-ney* functions as a clausal head (Mood/Force) rather than as an inflectional affix within TP.

(18) a. [[pi-ka o]-ko [nwun-to o]]-ney.
rain-NOM come-and snow-also come-NEY.
'It rains, and it snows!'

b. *[pi-ka o]-n-ko [nwun-to o]-n-ey.

c. *[pi-ka o-ne]-ko [nwun-to o-ne]-y.

(See Kendall & Yoon, 1986; Yoon, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1997)

To reiterate, the ungrammaticality of (18b-c) shows that *-ney* occupies a clause-final, post-Tense position and cannot be decomposed into finer syntactic heads. Following Yoon's (1990) analysis, *-ney* thus realizes a composite head that integrates mood, modality, and illocutionary features, as illustrated in (19).

(19) Mo(o)dP/ForceP
/ \
TP Mo(o)d/Force
-ney

(It is attached to the stem of the copula '-i-', to the stem of a predicate, or after the endings '-usi-', '-ess-', or '-keyss-'.")

When *-ney* functions as a Force head, it can bear multiple illocutionary values -- exclamative, assertive, or confirmative -- depending on pragmatic interpretations. Because the morphological fusion of Mood and Force neutralizes distinct syntactic projections, Korean employs prosody as a grammatical strategy to disambiguate illocutionary force. Specifically, boundary tones such as LH%, LHL%, and H% correlate systematically with the pragmatic types of *-ney* clauses.

(20) a. Declarative sentences with exclamatory force / mirative (non-understanding) → LH%
b. Exclamative declarative (understanding) → LHL%
c. Declarative (assertive) → L% or LHL%
d. Request for confirmation → (L)H%

The following examples from Park and Choi (2021) illustrate how boundary tones convey distinct illocutionary interpretations.

(21) a. (The moment I looked at the answer sheet)
e↗ kyeysan thull-yess-ney! (LH%)
Oh calculation wrong-PST-NEY
'Oh! My calculation was wrong.'
b. (Listening to a friend and agreeing in response)
a↘ kule-ney! (LHL%)
Ah so-NEY.
'Ah, you're right.'
c. A: caknyen-ey nay tongsayng-i kyewu sey pen manna-n yeca-hanthey
ast.year-in my brother-NOM only three times meet-MOD woman-to

panhay-se kyelhonha-ntako nanli-yess-e.
feel.for-so married-COMP fuss-PST-INFORMAL
'Last year, my brother fell for a woman he only met three times and made a big fuss about marrying her.'

B: a↘ yeca-ka yeypp-ess-ney! (LHL%)
Oh, she-NOM pretty-PST-NEY
'Oh, she was beautiful.'

d. (Same context, seeking confirmation)
a↘ yeca-ka yeypp-ess-ney? (H%)
Oh, she-NOM pretty-PST-NEY
'Oh, was she beautiful?'

(Park & Choi, 2021: 295)

These tonal contrasts demonstrate that the illocutionary force of a *-ney* sentence is lexically encoded, syntactically projected, and phonologically externalized, as outlined in (22a-d), which corresponds to (21a-d), respectively. Intonation thus functions as a morpho-phonological correlate of Force, ensuring the correct interpretation at the Conceptual-Intentional (CI) interface.

(22)

	speech situation (pragmatic factors)					Syntactic/phonological realization	
	source of speaker's information	level of reflection	speech act	listener	speaker's expectation	co-occuring exclamative particle	boundary tone
a	perception	a bit	exclamative (non-understanding)	no	no	a/e↗	LH%
b	language	yes	exclamative (understanding)	yes	no	a/e↘	LHL%
c	inference	yes	assertion	yes	no	a/e↘	LHL%
d	inference	yes	confirmation	yes	no	a/e↘	H%

The co-occurrence of interjectional particles *a/e 'ah/oh'* with exclamative *-ney* further supports this interface view. The left-edge interjection parallels modal

adverbs in occupying a preverbal position, while *-ney* anchors the right-edge of the clause, together framing the utterance's epistemic or mirative contour (cf. Park & Choi, 2021). In this sense, the left-right pairing of interjection + *-ney* is analogous to the structure of modal adverb + mood marker combinations in Cinque's hierarchy.

The distribution of boundary tones in *-ney* constructions thus reveals that prosody is not a mere phonetic reflex but a grammatical realization of illocutionary distinctions. Different tonal patterns correspond to distinct pragmatic forces -- mirative surprise, comprehension, assertion, or confirmation -- allowing a single morphological form *-ney* to encode multiple speech-act values without positing a complex syntactic decomposition.

Taken together, the multiple uses of *-ney* do not derive from an articulated CP/IP sequence of stacked functional projections, as in the cartographic account, but from the lexical and compositional semantics of the portmanteau morpheme itself. The form's interpretive versatility arises through interaction among lexical meaning, discourse context, and prosodic realization rather than through a syntactically rich hierarchy of functional heads.

Before closing, one more remark is in order. When *-ney* combines with the addressee-politeness marker *-yo*, further structural evidence supports its low syntactic position.[7)]

(23) [pi-ka o-ney]-∅/yo.
'It rains.'

(24) a. [pi-ka o-ney-yo] kuliko [nwun-to o-ney-yo].
'It rains and it also snows.'
b. [pi-ka o-ney] kuliko [nwun-to o-ney]-yo.
(?? '-yo' scoping over the first conjunct)

---

7) In (23) and (24) we focus on *-ney* plus *-yo*, arguing that they are inseparable in syntax. Likewise, informal ending *-e* and *-yo* are inserted as one complex morpheme in syntax.

(i) [pi-ka o-ko nwun-to o-ass]-e.yo.
rain-NOM come-and snow-also come-PST-INFORMAL(HON)
'It rained and it snowed.'
(ii) *[pi-ka o-e. kuliko nwun-to o-ass-e]-yo

The distribution of *-yo* shows that *-ney* and *-yo* form a unified clausal complex: *-ney* alone (with the null polite morpheme ∅) marks a lower deferential level, whereas *-yo* adds a politeness feature without projecting an independent syntactic layer. Contrary to Ceong (2019) and related analyses, *-yo* is therefore not a phrasal affix but a head-level suffix that adjoins to the same projection as *-ney*. This reinforces the view that the Korean sentence-final system expresses pragmatic nuance through morphological composition rather than through the articulation of separate functional projections.

Taken together, the syntactic, prosodic, and pragmatic evidence shows that *-ney* occupies a single Force/Mood head position whose interpretation is modulated by context and tone. Its multiple meanings -- exclamative, evidential, modal, or confirmative -- emerge from the interplay between lexical fusion, prosodic encoding, and discourse conditions, rather than from a fixed structural hierarchy of functional categories. Thus, *-ney* epitomizes the kind of syntactic economy envisioned by Manzini (2025): a 'poorer' syntax whose rich interpretive effects arise not from additional functional projections but from modular interaction at the interfaces between syntax, semantico-pragmatics, and phonology.

5. The semantics of -ney

The semantic profile of the Korean sentence-final ending *-ney* reveals a dynamic interplay between mirativity and evidentiality, each reflecting different aspects of the speaker's epistemic stance. Historically, mirativity emerged first, with *-ney* marking spontaneous realizations and expressions of emotional intensity. In nineteenth-century *kasa*-style verse prose, which was characterized by introspective and self-directed narration, the declarative ending *-ney* frequently co-occurred with emphatic negative expressions such as *chuknyang-ep-nay* 'immeasurable' and *bahi-ep-nay* 'boundless'. These combinations intensified affective tone and conveyed heightened awareness, surprise, or renewed realization. Through repeated association with such affective contexts, *-ney* developed a mirative meaning, expressing the speaker's sudden recognition of an unexpected situation. This development exemplifies the process of semantic spreading, in which

pragmatic inferences of unexpectedness become conventionalized as core meaning.

Evidentiality emerged later as a secondary but related function. By the late nineteenth century, the rise of the *-keys-ney* construction introduced inference-based meanings that enriched *-ney* with evidential nuance. Initially, *-keys-ney* denoted internal evidentiality, that is, inferences grounded in the speaker's reasoning or mental state. Over time, however, its meaning broadened to include external evidentiality, referring to observable facts or environmental evidence accessible through perception. This semantic extension led to the modern interpretation of *-ney* as expressing direct perceptual evidentiality, as in utterances like *pi o-ney* 'It's raining', where the speaker reports what is seen or heard.

Taken together, the historical trajectory of *-ney* can be summarized as a progression from simple declarative use to mirative, to mirative-evidential, and finally to perceptual-evidential readings. Cross-linguistically, this pattern parallels the development described in Rett (2008, 2009, 2011) and related work, which links mirativity to affective or exclamative speech acts (Sadock & Zwicky, 1985; Kaplan, 1997; Michaelis, 2001; Castroviejo-Miró, 2006). Mirativity typically arises not as a propositional assertion of surprise but as an illocutionary expression of it. The frequent association of mirative uses with present tense and imperfective aspect such as the old Korean imperfective/present-tense marker *-na (ᄂᆞ)* further supports this typological pattern.

Rett and Murray (2013) propose the category of mirative evidentials (ME) to capture cases where a single morpheme encodes both mirativity and evidentiality. According to their analysis, MEs express either speaker surprise or indirect evidence, depending on context. The dual function arises from a structural overlap between the semantics of unexpected information and the encoding of evidential source. The presence of an ME does not necessarily imply that the speaker lacks direct access to the event; rather, it reflects the epistemic status of the proposition, specifically whether it violates the speaker's prior expectations.

Building on Rett and Murray (2013), we suggest that evidentials contribute not-at-issue constraints on the source of knowledge, while mirativity contributes illocutionary constraints on the speaker's expectations at the time of learning. In other words, evidential meaning concerns how the speaker knows that p is true, whereas mirativity concerns the psychological state of realizing that p was

unexpected. Because of this duality, MEs serve as ideal test cases for understanding how expectation and knowledge interact in linguistic encoding. (In)direct evidence and surprise are often linked through a shared epistemic structure: new, perceptually or inferentially acquired information typically violates what the speaker previously believed, giving rise to mirative force. Consequently, many languages including Korean employ a single morpheme to express both evidential and mirative meanings.

Rett and Murray (2013) formalize the semantics of MEs as follows:

(25) A sentence with a mirative evidential contributes:
〈p, E ⊨ p, if uttered within target state of learning p, then p ∉ Eτ(el)〉
Where: p = proposition (e.g., "It's raining.")
E = epistemic source
E ⊨ p = p is entailed or supported by E
el = event of the speaker learning p
τ(el) = time of the learning event
Eτ(el) = speaker's expectation set at time e

In other words, if a sentence is uttered shortly after the speaker learns that *p* is true, and *p* was not among the speaker's expectations at that time, the utterance acquires mirative force. This formalization captures the essential condition that mirativity is tied to a mismatch between newly acquired information and the speaker's prior belief state.

In parallel, a Korean sentence with exclamative (surprise) *-ney* contributes a similar semantic schema:

(26) 〈p, E ⊨ p, if uttered within the target state of realizing p,
then [condition on expectation set Eτ(el)]〉

Building on this schema, we go on to define the semantics of exclamative (mirative$_{surprise}$) *-ney* in (27) as (28):

(27) e↗ pi manhi o-ney! (LH%) → Exclamative surprise at unexpected rain.

'It is raining a lot.'

(28) Exclamative (mirative$_{surprise}$):
〈p, E ⊨ p, if uttered within the target state of realizing p, then p ∉ Eτ(el)〉
p = proposition (e.g., *pi-ka o-ney* = 'It's raining.')
Eτ(el) = speaker's expectation set at the time of learning

In this case, the speaker is not expecting *p*, so the utterance conveys surprised exclamation.

By contrast, we can define the semantics of exclamative (affirmatory) *-ney* in (29) as (30):

(29) e↘ pi manhi o-ney! (LHL%) → Exclamative affirmation
'Ah, just as expected (via the weather forecast), it's raining.'

(30) Exclamative (affirmatory) *-ney*:
〈p, E ⊨ p, if uttered within the target state of confirming p, then p ∈ Eτ(el) and el ⊨ p〉

In this case, the speaker already expected *p* -- for instance, based on a weather forecast -- and now perceptually confirms it. The utterance thus conveys affirmation or evaluative recognition rather than surprise.

The two subtypes in (27) and (29) exemplify the semantic bifurcation of *-ney*. When *p* conflicts with prior expectations ($p \notin E\tau(el)$), the result is mirativity. When *p* aligns with expectations ($p \in E\tau(el)$), the interpretation becomes affirmatory evidentiality, as summarized in (31). The difference in intonation contours (LH% vs. LHL%) corresponds to this contrast in epistemic stance, thereby linking semantic representation to phonological realization.

(31)

Type	Expectation Status	Learning Event	Intonation	Function
Exclamative (mirative$_{surprise}$)	p ∉ Eτ(el)	p newly learned	LH%	Surprise, unexpectedness
Exclamative (affirmatory)	p ∈ Eτ(el), el ⊨ p	p confirmed via perception	LHL%	Affirmation, recognition, emotional uptake

All in all, the semantics of *-ney* encapsulate the intersection of evidentiality and mirativity within a unified framework. Historically, *-ney* evolved from a declarative marker into a mirative-evidential form through processes of semantic expansion and pragmatic inference. Synchronically, its interpretation depends on the relationship between the proposition *p* and the speaker's expectation set at the time of realization. When *-ney* is uttered upon encountering unexpected information, it expresses mirativity; when the speaker confirms an anticipated event, it expresses recognition or affirmation. This dual behavior supports a modular view of semantics, where evidential and mirative meanings interact through pragmatic and prosodic interfaces rather than being hardwired into separate syntactic projections.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the Korean sentence-final morpheme *-ney* from historical, syntactic, and semantic perspectives, arguing that its behavior supports a modular and economical view of grammar rather than the richly layered cartographic approach. Through its diachronic development and multi-functional uses, *-ney* exemplifies how complex interpretive meanings can arise from interactions among syntax, pragmatics, and phonology, without positing a proliferation of functional projections.

Historically, -ney originated as a polite declarative form, derived from the fusion of *-na* + *-i* + *-ta*, and gradually evolved into a mirative-evidential marker expressing surprise, realization, and direct experiential awareness. This evolution reflects a broader tendency in Korean toward reinterpreting morpho-syntactic markers of politeness and tense as devices for expressing speaker stance and information source. By the late nineteenth century, *-ney* had come to mark perceptually grounded statements and immediate reactions, signaling the speaker's epistemic relationship to newly acquired information.

Syntactically, *-ney* functions as a single, clause-final head in the Force/Mood domain, not as a composition of functional projections. Evidence from coordination structures and its co-occurrence with the politeness marker *-yo* confirms that *-ney*

behaves as a portmanteau morpheme, syntactically indivisible yet semantically rich. Its interpretation is further shaped by intonation contours, which systematically differentiate mirative, confirmative, and assertive readings. The tight alignment between prosodic form and pragmatic function illustrates how phonological cues operate as grammatical exponents of illocutionary force in Korean.

Semantically, *-ney* encodes the speaker's epistemic stance through two interrelated meanings: mirativity, marking unexpected realization (when a proposition conflicts with prior expectations), and confirmatory evidentiality, marking recognition of an anticipated event. These meanings are dynamically determined by the speaker's expectation set at the time of learning, following the framework of mirative evidentials proposed by Rett and Murray (2013). Thus, *-ney* does not merely report information but also encodes the speaker's psychological orientation toward that information.

Overall, the findings suggest that the interpretive diversity of *-ney* stems from modular interaction -- the coordination of syntax, semantics, prosody, and discourse -- rather than from a syntactically enriched hierarchy. The analytical framework proposed here is not limited to *-ney* but can be extended to other Korean sentence-final endings and related grammatical categories expressing mood, evidentiality, or stance. This suggests broader applicability and theoretical impact, offering a unified, modular approach to Korean clause-typing and speaker-oriented meaning. Korean *-ney* thereby exemplifies how languages can achieve expressive and epistemic complexity through morphological fusion and interface effects, maintaining syntactic parsimony while enabling nuanced communication of stance, awareness, and evidential perspective. This supports a model of grammar in which meaning emerges from the interaction of distinct interpretive modules, not from an expansion of syntactic structure.

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Appendix

The restriction illustrated in (32) shows that sentence-final elements like *-ney* cannot occur within embedded clauses in Korean.

(32) *Chelswu-nun [pi-ka o-ney-(ko)] po-n.ta.
C-TOP rain-NOM fall-NEY-SUBORD see-DECL
'Chelswu captures it raining.'

This ungrammaticality highlights a fundamental root restriction on the distribution of *-ney*, which patterns with other addressee-sensitive or allocutive suffixes in Korean. The form *-ney* -- together with polite or non-polite allocutivity markers such as *-yo* or *-supnita* -- is licensed only in matrix (root) clauses and systematically excluded from embedded environments. The pattern suggests that the syntactic projection responsible for speech-act interpretation, typically labeled cP (or "Speech Act Phrase"), is present only at the topmost clause level and cannot be embedded under a higher predicate such as *po-nta* ('see').

A quick theoretical solution adopts the proposal of Portner et al. (2019), who argue that the cP layer houses two discourse-related arguments: the Speaker

(SAP) and the Hearer (sap). Since these arguments define the discourse coordinates of the speech act, the projection is inherently non-embeddable. That is, cP can only occur in a syntactic domain corresponding to an independent utterance. Consequently, *-ney* and other allocutive morphemes are prohibited in embedded clauses because embedding would require an illicit recursive speech-act structure.

The cP layer (a speech-act-related projection that houses speaker (SAP) and hearer (sap) arguments), per Portner et al. (2019), is allowed only in the root clause, but not in the embedded clause. While this explanation captures the Korean data, cross-linguistic comparisons complicate the picture. Languages such as Japanese and Basque show that, under certain conditions, allocutive or polite morphology can appear in embedded clauses, suggesting variation in whether cP can occur below the matrix level.

(33) Taroo-wa [Hanako-ga iki-masu to] omotteiru. (cf. Tomioka & Ishii, 2022)
'Taroo thinks [Hanako will go (polite)].'
(*-masu* licensed because *to*-clause includes cP)

In (33) of Japanese, the polite marker *-masu* can appear within *to*-complement clauses, indicating that embedded speech contexts may host their own cP projection. This suggests that some languages allow locally projected speech acts -- for example, embedded reported speech -- without violating overall root constraints.

(34) [Manex joan-en du-a-la/de-la] uste duk
Manex go-FUT AUX-2SG.FAM.MASC-Q/AUX-COMP
think AUX
'You think Manex will go.'

In (34) of Basque, conservative dialects such as Zuberoan restrict allocutive markers (*-du-a-*) to root declaratives, while younger southern speakers increasingly allow them in embedded clauses and sometimes throughout an entire utterance. This dialectal variation implies that allocutivity is undergoing syntactic

reanalysis, potentially extending the availability of cP-like projections beyond root domains.

Korean, however, remains more restrictive. Allocutive or politeness-related suffixes -- such as *-pnita* and *-yo* -- occur only in root or quasi-root clauses, as shown in (35).

(35) a. pika o-pnita-ma-nun ipen nongsa-ka cal toy-ki-nun thullyesssupnita.
비가 옵니다-마는 이번 농사가 잘 되기는 틀렸습니다.
'It is raining, but this year's crop is unlikely to do well.'
b. cwunpi-nun chelcehi ha-yss-supnita-man seto, pwulanha-pnita.[8)]
준비는 철저히 했습니다만 서도, 불안합니다.
'I prepared thoroughly, but even so, I feel uneasy.'

In both (34a-b), *-pnita* marks addressee politeness but is restricted to matrix clauses, despite coordination or subordination. Attempts to embed such clauses under predicates like *po-nta* ('see'), as in (32), result in ungrammaticality. This pattern supports the view that Korean allocutive and expressive endings, including *-ney*, are root phenomena, whose licensing depends on the presence of the cP layer that anchors discourse participants.

However, this paper proposes that the ungrammaticality of (36) should not be attributed solely to a ban on cP embedding, but rather to a c-selectional restriction imposed by the embedding predicate. In other words, verbs like *po-nta* ('see') do not c-select for a complement clause containing a full speech-act layer. The restriction is not a universal prohibition on embedded cPs, but a language-specific limitation on the selectional capacity of Korean embedding predicates. This accounts for the contrast with Japanese and Basque, where certain complementizers or clause types can host embedded speech-act morphology.

Thus, the Korean ban on *-ney* and other allocutive endings in embedded clauses arises not because the grammar disallows cP categorically, but because the embedding environment fails to license it. The explanation integrates

8) The suffix *-man* is a reduced form of *-ma-nun*, a contrastive auxiliary particle that concedes the preceding fact while presenting a conflicting situation or doubt. It also combines with sentence endings like *-ci* or *-ta* to form extended connective endings such as *-ciman* and *-taman*.

syntactic and lexical factors: while cP remains inherently root-oriented, its availability ultimately depends on whether the matrix verb's selectional frame accommodates a speech-act projection. This approach reconciles Korean's root-only distribution with cross-linguistic evidence for more flexible systems, supporting a parameterized account of allocutivity grounded in predicate-based selection rather than absolute syntactic exclusion.

Park, Myung-Kwan
30, Pildong-ro 1-gil, Jung-gu, Seoul
04620, Republic of Korea
Professor
Department of English
Dongguk University

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