From the riches to the reality to revelation: The development of *qishi/kisil* in Chinese and Korean

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The Chinese noun phrase *qi-shi* ‘the riches, the reality’ and its borrowed form *ki-sil* in Korean exhibit a series of parallel semantic and pragmatic developments (‘semasiological cyclicity’, Hansen 2008). The two cognate lexemes have undergone a series of changes that can be characterized as: noun phrase > content adverbial > discourse marker (DM), in terms of grammatical category; ‘its fruit’ > ‘its fact/reality’ > interpretive reality > hidden reality > preface to revelation, in terms of meaning; and content-level uses > context-level uses, in terms of function. Modern Chinese uses *qishi* as a DM to signal, among others, that the following information departs from common knowledge or perceived reality, and further that the addressee should be prepared for surprising information about to be revealed. The etymon has traveled a remarkably similar developmental path in Korean, even though oral contact between the two languages was nearly non-existent and the contact was limited to occasional import of written texts of religion, science, and technology. The similarity in change is noteworthy considering that contact-induced change generally occurs in spoken language (Heine and Kuteva 2005: 250). Thus, the situation is a linguistic analogue of identical twins reared apart, who have grown to be remarkably similar in different environment without a meaningful level of mutual interaction. The Chinese ‘twin’ currently prospers as a DM, whereas the Korean ‘twin’ met an untimely demise in the 20th century as part of language purification initiative, presumably because it is a phrasal (syntactic) borrowing (cf. *ki-sil* ‘that reality’) with a high pedantic flavor, which contrasts with a large number of lexical borrowings that are tolerated. The similarity of change in the two languages strongly suggests similar cognitive mechansims driving language change, and the different fates of the etymons show that the course of language change may be affected by diverse factors such as external intervention by language purism.

References

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