

The holy grain: Etymology of Korean grain words

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Korean has two main words for ‘grain’: *ssal* ‘uncooked grain’ and *pap* ‘cooked grain’. The etymology of these two words has so far been unclear. Vovin [1] and Robbeets [2] have argued that *ssal* is a loanword from proto-Japanese *wasar (or an older variant of it), but I argue that their explanations are circular. Francis-Ratte [3] has analyzed the etymology of two words as compounds consisting of pre-Middle Korean *po-sól and *po-ap, but this explanation bears the weakness of relying on ad-hoc reconstruction of hypothetical morphemes.

In this study, I propose different explanations for the etymology of the two words. First, *ssal* ‘uncooked grain’, formerly *psól* in Middle Korean (MK), comes from Middle Chinese (MC) *bu-sat ‘Bodhisatva’. Ogura [4] has already pointed out that in a certain Japanese dialect, rice was once referred to as *bosatsu* ‘Bodhisatva’. This is in striking parallel with a Buddhist ritual in the Gyeongju province of Southern Korea, where grains are worshipped as the body of Buddha [5]. Given that grain (in general or a specific type of it) was associated to a Buddhist holy figure in both Korean and Japanese societies, it is likely that the etymology of MK *psól* is MC *bu-sat ‘Bodhisatva’. This is further consistent with the 12th century source *Jilínlèishì* 鷄林類事 listing the Korean word for ‘grain’ as *posal* 菩薩 ‘Bodhisatva’, which, I argue, is not only a phonological approximate of the Korean word but also a faithful reflection of its etymology. This is consistent with Gang’s [6] claim that *Jilínlèishì* was written not by the claimed Chinese author Sun Mu but rather Korean officers. Moreover, this etymology is in line with the worldwide-observed phenomenon of **theophagy** (eating god), the most well-known example being the Christian ritual of Eucharist, where believers consume god’s flesh (bread) and blood (wine) every Sunday [7].

Second, I reconstruct the proto-form of *pap* ‘cooked grain’ as baby-talk term *papa ‘food’. Cross-linguistically, baby-talk terms for ‘to eat’ or ‘food’ are mostly reduplicated or semi-reduplicated syllable consisting of a bilabial consonant and a low vowel, as shown in Table 1. It is also possible for some of these baby-talk words to be elevated into adult-talk word, as Tsuchida [8] has observed for the case of Saaroa. Thus, it is likely that Korean *pap* was originally baby-talk *papa. The loss of the final *a is due to the final vowel loss that occurred prior to MK, observable in the Baekje words that retain the final vowel not present in MK [9].

References

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Table 1: Baby-talk terms meaning ‘food’ or ‘to eat’

Language	Term	Meaning
Bardi	ɲamɲam	food
Bislama	nana	to eat; yummy; food
Bulgarian	papa–	to eat
Choctaw	pa:pah	to eat
Gilyak	mama, ɲaɲa	food
Gurindji	ɲæɲæ	food
Havyaka	a:mu	to eat
Hopi	mama	wanting food
Japanese	manma	food
Kurdish	ʕæme	food
Kusaiean	meme	to eat
Lahu	ma-ma	cooked rice
Louisiana French	n(j)ãmn(j)ãm	to eat
Marathi	məmməm	food, meal
Miskitu	dam dam	to eat
Nootka	papaʃ	eat!
Romani	pap(k)a, hamham	food; to eat
Sahaptin	papa	food
South Estonian	nʲæmmʲ	food; tasty
Towet Nungon	nana	food
Walpiri	ɲaɲa	food

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