Unpacking the functions of the Korean response token *kulekey* in interaction

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In line with a growing body of recent empirical research on specific sequential and interactional contexts of different Korean response tokens (Young & Lee, 2004; Oh & Park, 2017), this paper examines the use of the Korean response token *kulekey* in interaction. Studies have proposed that as a listener response token, *kulekey* (often translated as ‘right’) functions to display the listener’s agreement (Ahn & Yap, 2013; Rhee, 2015) and sympathy (An, 2012; Jo, 2017). Although prior studies have adequately shown that *kulekey* expresses a listener’s affiliative stance, the degree of commitment it indicates compared to other agreement tokens (e.g., *kulehchi, kulssey, kulenikka*) remains unclear. Furthermore, some studies have claimed that *kulekey* also serves to display the listener’s hesitant or evasive stance (An, 2012; Jo, 2017). Utilizing a conversation analytic perspective and analyzing naturally occurring instances of *kulekey*, this paper seeks to provide a clearer picture of when and how *kulekey* is used in interaction and to reconcile these diverging views. The data include 34 instances of *kulekey* in 29 telephone conversations and three face-to-face video-recorded interactions (1020 minutes in total).

The analysis shows, first, that *kulekey* as a response token expresses not only concurrence to an immediately prior utterance, but the listener’s lower epistemic stance compared to that of the utterance’s speaker. In excerpt 1, Mia and Jun are watching a soccer match on television. (S is the sportscaster.)

**Excerpt 1**

1  S: ‘See, German players pass the ball very low and fast. One needs to watch out for that.’
2  ‘They don’t pass it high. Most of the time, they [don’t pass it high.’ [Knowledge state +]
3  M: [kulekey: ‘KULEKEY:’] [Knowledge state - ]
4  sweden-hako toykey talu-ta:.
   SWEDEN-WITH REALLY DIFFERENT-DC
   ‘(Oh,) Their style is very different from Sweden.’
5  J: un
   ‘Yes.’
6  M: heli wi-lo cal an ollaka-n-ta: kong-i
   WAIST ABOVE-TO WELL-NEG GO.UP-PRS-DC BALL-NOM
   ‘(Oh), it does not go above their waist. The ball.’

When the sportscaster describes the German players’ style (lines 1–2), Mia utters *kulekey*, expressing her realization that the description is true (line 3). Mia’s comments following her *kulekey* response (lines 4 and 6) display her awareness of the process in which she changes from an unknowing to a knowing state. Excerpt 2 also shows a case in which *kulekey* expresses lower epistemic stance, but with a difference: Bora and Hyun are discussing Hyun’s character, a topic on which Hyun might be expected to have epistemic primacy.

**Excerpt 2**

1  B: ‘What made you decide to get married?’
   ((Repair sequences occur in the omitted lines.))
7  H: ‘I just thought I would never be able to meet someone like her again.’
8  B: e:: toykey elin nai-ey kulen sayngkak-i tu-ney:. [Knowledge state +]
   OH REALLY YOUNG-AGE-AT SUCH THOUGHT-NOM OCCUR-FR
   ‘Oh::, you had such thoughts at a really young age.’
9  H: kulekey. [Knowledge state - ]
   ‘KULEKEY.’
In line 8, Bora positively assesses Hyun’s maturity at a young age. Hyun uses kulekey in response, which, in contrast to other agreement markers such as kulenikka or kulssey ‘that’s what I mean’, not only entails consensus to Bora’s assessment, but also displays his subordinate epistemic position by suggesting that he only came to understand this aspect of his own character after Bora brought it up. By thus downgrading his epistemic stance regarding himself, he displays a somewhat detached attitude, avoiding potentially being seen as praising himself.

The analysis further demonstrates that kulekey also serves to tailor one’s affiliative stance by adjusting the degree of affiliation. Kulekey as a response token can endorse the proposition in a prior speaker’s utterance, while not necessarily endorsing the action or project that underlies the utterance. This function is clearly shown when kulekey is used in response to a double-barreled question (Schegloff, 2007), as in excerpts 3 and 4.

Excerpt 3
1 M: ceke way an hay cwu-nya?
   THAT WHY NEG DO.SOMETHING.FOR.ME-Q
   ‘Why haven’t they installed the (shelf) for us?’
2 J: kulekey. (Jun continues to watch television.)
   ‘KULEKEY.’

In line 1, Mia uses a question to complain that the landlord has not yet installed a shelf. Jun responds, neutrally, with kulekey: he concurs only with what Mia has noticed (the shelf remains uninstalled), without joining her in the action of complaining. Excerpt 4 is even clearer, as Sun’s complaint in line 1 is clearly a request that Min complete a specific action: letting her go. Min’s response of kulekey acknowledges that Sun’s utterance is true, but he does not take the action of letting her go (line 3). As such, kulekey serves to limit affiliation with a prior utterance to the surface level, which may be one of the reasons it has been proposed to display an evasive stance.

Excerpt 4
1 S: ya way an-ko-man iss-e? milchyenay-ya-ci:.
   DM WHY HUG-PROG:ONLY-Q PUSH.OFF-MUST-COMM
   ‘Why are you still holding me? You’re supposed to push me off.’
2 (1.0)
3 M: kulekey-yo:. ((Min continues to hold Sun in his arms.))
   ‘KULEKEY:.’

Excerpt 5 further underlines kulekey’s ability to limit affiliation by showing the need for separate endorsements of a proposition and the action it would entail.

Excerpt 5
1 A: ‘So, I’m thinking of all kinds of possibilities. Did father go to a nursing home?’
2 (2.0)
3 B: ‘Really?’
4 A: ‘Is there a way to find out?’
5 B: yanglowen-ey ka-myen-un kuley com pissa-nya?
   NURSING.HOME-TO GO-IF-DEL THAT:NOM DM EXPENSIVE-Q
   ‘Do you know how expensive nursing homes are?’
   KULEKEY I SO NURSING.HOME THOUGHT OCCUR-NML-NOM NEG-DC
   ‘KULEKEY:. I don’t think (he is at) a nursing home.’

Bum’s question in line 5 makes two assertions: nursing homes are very expensive, and it is unlikely that Ara’s father is at a nursing home. In line 6, Ara endorses the former claim with kulekey and then explicitly affiliates with the latter claim by stating an opinion.
A systematic analysis of kulekey’s use in social interaction clearly demonstrates the important role of kulekey as a resource for listeners to adjust and tailor their epistemic and affiliative stances in social interaction. The use of kulekey as an agreement response token does not position the listener as a passive recipient, but as an active participant who can control and adjust the degree and scope of his/her commitment to a prior utterance in interaction.

References