The Semantic Prime 'THIS' in Korean

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1. Introduction

One of the main claims of the NSM theory is that indefinable semantic primes exist in all natural languages and that they are lexicalised in that they can be expressed by any parts of speech including affixes or fixed phrases. This paper tests the hypothesis of the NSM theory in relation to the prime THIS in the context of Korean.[1] Korean is known to have three different demonstratives, which are used differently according to context. Despite numerous studies on the meaning and function of these three words, it is difficult to find a clear semantic analysis of these words in the literature. The main goal is, therefore, to identify the counterpart of the prime THIS in Korean and on this basis, to explore the possibility of analysing the meanings of the remaining demonstratives. This attempt aims not only to contribute to the expansion of the NSM theory, but also, to show a new way of analysing the meaning of three language-specific demonstratives in Korean.

1.1. Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) theory

The NSM theory is one of contemporary approaches to semantics, and its methodology has been developed as a language independent tool for semantic analysis. This theory has been proposed and developed by Wierzbicka (1972, 1980, 1991, 1992, 1996) and her colleagues for more than three decades. The NSM theory strives for clarity and simplicity in defining meaning. In order to avoid obscurity and circularity, this approach assumes a few principles. First of all, the definition of a word or an expression must be presented by the 'natural language' of the defined words or expressions. This is because any arbitrary artificial language, using diagrams or formulae as in other approaches, eventually has to be translated into natural language in order to be understood. Secondly, the NSM theory assumes that human concepts are hierarchical, in the sense that there are more complicated and sophisticated concepts as well as relatively simple and intuitively understandable concepts. These concepts are indefinable and called 'semantic primitives or primes' in the NSM theory.[2] According to this, a more complicated concept must be able to be reduced into these simpler and intuitively understandable concepts so that its definition (often called 'explication') can be clearly understood. Finally, a definition achieved by using the NSM approach is claimed to have 'substitutability'. This means that ordinary native speakers of a certain language can verify whether an explication in that language means exactly the same as the original expression and whether the expression can be substituted by the explication.

The current lexicon of NSM theory consists of around 60 lexical items. The concept THIS is one of the putative semantic primes, despite the fact that languages differ in deixis. The semantic primitives are proposed by "a great deal of trial-and error experimentation in

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[1] The NSM theory comprises both lexicon and syntax that is claimed to have an inherent grammar. However, while the combinatorial characteristics of the prime THIS were represented at the conference they are not discussed here due to limits of space. All the proposed combinations of the prime THIS are supported in Korean except for the use of THIS as quasi-substantive.

[2] See Wierzbicka (1972, 1980) for the detailed discussion on the theoretical background for the existence of 'semantic primitive'.

diverse areas of semantic analysis" (Goddard 1997: 3), and are presented in the table below.[3]

TABLE 1. THE PROPOSED NSM SEMANTIC PRIMITIVES (Wierzbicka 1999)

Substantives	I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE/PERSON, SOMETHING/THING, BODY
Determiners	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH
Evaluators	GOOD, BAD
Descriptors	BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech	SAY, WORD, TRUE
Actions, events and movement	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence & possession	THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death	LIVE, DIE
Time	WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR; SIDE, INSIDE
"Logical" Concepts	NOT, MAYBE, BECAUSE, IF, CAN
Intensifier, Augmentor	VERY, MORE
Taxonomy, Partonomy	KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity	LIKE

2. The primitive concept 'THIS' in Korean

The word THIS is proposed as one of the universal semantic primes in Wierzbicka (1996: 42).[4] The concept THIS is often labelled as 'demonstrative', 'deictic' or 'determiner' linguistically. On the basis of cross-linguistic investigations, Wierzbicka (1996) claims that there is evidence of the universal existence of this concept in all natural languages. In order to test the existence of the equivalent concept in Korean, however, three different words, *i*, *ku*, and *ce*, have to be explored. In descriptions of the Korean language these are known as definite demonstratives (Sohn 1994) or deictic adjectives (Lee 1989).

The meanings and functions of these words: *i*, *ku*, and *ce*, are known to be somewhat complicated, and have been the subject of much research (cf. Song 1983; Kim 1985; Chang 1980; Kim 1982).[5] As a result of previous studies, it is agreed that these three words, *i, ku,* and *ce*, are used according to the speaker's judgement of the physical or psychological distance between the three elements involved: reference, speaker, and hearer, in deictic use. Oh (1998) claims that the choice among the three words depends on deictic and anaphoric contexts. According to her, in the deictic context, *i* has to be used only when something is located close to the speaker, while *ku* is used when it is located close to the addressee, and *ce* is used when it is located close to neither the speaker nor the addressee. In the anaphoric context, *ce* is not used at all in modern Korean, and *i* is used with restriction while *ku* can be used freely. She concludes, therefore, that the principles of reference are: *i* refers to the object with [+ proximity], *ce* refers to the object with [- proximity], [0 sharedness], and *ku* refers to the object with [- proximity], [+ sharedness] (1998: 101).

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[3] The primes are capitalised to indicate that the proposed universal meanings are not the same as the natural language meanings.

[4] Some of the canonical sentences provided to identify the primitive meaning of THIS are as follows: 'Something is inside/above this'. 'Someone/something like this'. 'I think /do/feel/say like this'.

[5] Chang (1980) and Kim (1982) are quoted in Oh (1998).

If Oh's analysis is valid, no word among the three seems to be equivalent to the proposed semantic prime THIS, because a prime is not definable and does not necessarily indicate the spatial distance or 'sharedness'. This analysis, however, will be compared later with the meaning analysis based on the NSM method. Having discussed the different uses of these words, the first step in identifying the Korean exponent of the prime THIS will be testing those words against canonical sentences.

(1)   *I /ku/ce   kos-ey   nwuka   iss-ta.*
         This   place-LOC   someone there is -DEC
         There is someone in this place.[6]

         (Speaker is referring to the place depending on the distance from him/her)

The context of (1) is vague. However, if this sentence is used in deictic context, all three words can be used expressing somewhat different meanings from the prime THIS. They are used differently according to the distance between the speaker and the reference. For instance, *i* is used when the speaker refers to a place close to him/her or a place where s/he is, *ku* is used when a place is close to his/her interlocutor or where the interlocutor is, and *ce* is used when a place is close to neither of them. This principle is parallel to the sentence (2).

(2)   *I/ ku /ce   salam-eykey mwusun-il-i   ilena-ss-ta.*
          This   person-GEN some event-NOM happen-PAST-DEC
          Something happened to this person.

The fact that three words can replace the English prime THIS in canonical sentences such as (1) and (2) does not mean that these are allolexes[7], which carry no meaning difference among them. Each of the words is used differently according to physical distance (it can also be extended to psychological distance as discussed in Oh 1998). For the purpose of distinguishing the meaning of these three forms, more examples with different contexts are needed in addition to the canonical sentences provided by Wierzbicka and Goddard (1994, In Press). The given canonical sentences are not sufficient for identifying the Korean candidate for the prime THIS. The examples in (3) show different uses of three words according to context. Two people are close to each other (facing each other) and are talking about a dress which is referred to by different demonstratives.

 (3)   a. ***I*** (*ku, *ce) *os   ettay?* (Speaker is pointing out what the she's wearing)[8]
              This   dress how

              What do you think about this dress?

           b. ***ku*** (*ce, *i) *os   ne-hantey cal ewulli-n-ta*
               That   dress you- DAT well look good –PRE-DEC

               You look pretty with that dress. (*i* can be used if this person is touching

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[6] One can argue that even in English *this* sounds odd when the reference is in the distance. It is much more natural to say 'that place over there' when it is in the distance. It seems to be true that the word *this* is hardly used when a reference is in the distance in natural English. However, the prime THIS is vague in its meaning without a given context like (1) and does not necessarily imply that the reference is physically close, while the Korean word *i* does in deictic contexts.

[7] The notion of allolexy in the NSM theory is that a prime can be expressed by variant forms depending on syntactic contexts. For instance, the English prime SOMETHING can be realised as 'thing' in the combination with determiners and quantifiers (Goddard 1998: 59).

[8] The * , and ? are used to indicate the unacceptability and oddness (but not necessarily unacceptability) of the expressions, respectively.

the dress while s/he is talking)

   c. *I* (**ku,*ce) os-i ce (*ku,* i) os-kwao saykkkal-man thuli-ci kath-un   os-iya.*

     this   dress -Nom that   dress-with colour only   different same-Adj dress-Dec.

     This is the same dress as that one except for the colour.
     (pointing out a dress displayed in a shop window)

In the example sentences above, *i* is used to refer to 'something close to the speaker' and *ku* is used to refer to 'something close to the interlocutor' and *ce* is used to refer to 'something not close to either of them'. This is parallel to example (4) where a customer enters a flower shop and asks questions of the shopkeeper.

(4)   a. *I* (**ku,*ce) kkoch emla   ci-yo?* (pointing out one close to himself/herself)
        This   flower how much Int
        How much is this flower?

       b. *ku* (*i,*ce)-ken   han songi-ey 1000 won ieyo.*
        That -thing-Nom one Clss-per 1000 won   Dec.
        That is 1000 won per stem.

       c. *ku* (**i,*ce)-ken yo*? (pointing out one close to the shopkeeper)
        That –thing-Nom   Int
        How about that one?

       d. (*I ke yo*?)   *I*(**ku,*ce)-ken   2000won ieyo.*

        (this one Int) this-thing-Nom 2000 one –Dec
        (You mean this one?) This is 2000 one.

       e. *Ku*(**i,*ce)-ken yo?* (pointing out still another one close to the shopkeeper)
        that-thing-Nom Int
        What about that one?

       f. *Ce* (**i,*ku)- ken   yo?* (pointing out one far from both of them)
        That   thing-Nom Int
        How about that one?

From the example sentences above, it can be noted that the meaning of the three words can be described using primitive concepts such as NEAR, NOT, I, and YOU which are all proposed as semantic primitives in the NSM theory. For instance, *i* can mean something along the same lines as 'near me, not near you'. Similarly, *ku*, and *ce* can be defined as 'not near me, near you', and 'not near me, not near you', respectively. This can be confirmed by example (5) below which shows that unlike English, Korean demonstratives are used according to the distance, even when they are used to show contrast.

(5)   a. *nay sinpal patak-ey   kwumeng-i na-ss-e.*
        my   shoes bottom-Loc hole -Nom come-Past-Dec
        There is a hole in the bottom of my shoe.

       b. *ku   ccok iya?* (pointing out one of the pairs)
        That pair   be-Int.
        In that shoe?

       c. *Ani. I (*ku,*ce) ccok-i   aniko   i (*ku,*ce) ccok iya.*(pointing out one by one)
        No. this   side-Nom not and this   side   be-Dec
        No! Not in this one but in this (other) one.

The natural English expression will be 'this' and 'that' to refer to 'one side of the pair' and 'another side' in order to contrast two sides of a pair of shoes. The fact that Korean demonstratives are used only according to the 'distance' seems to suggest that the previously mentioned meanings of the three words from example (4) are consistent.

The question then arises whether there is an equivalent concept of the semantic prime THIS among these three words. From the examples above, no word among the three seems to match exactly the prime THIS, which is claimed to be indefinable, since the possible candidate *i* seems to be defined as something like 'near me, not near you'. Notice, however, that there are situations where *i* does not necessarily mean 'something close to the speaker, not to the interlocutor' in the examples below, where a few people, while they are in a car, are listening a very loud music.

(6)   a. ***I*** *nolay   tule-poa-ss-ni?* (*ku, *ce)
         This song hear try-PAST-IN

         Have you heard this song?

         b. ***I*** (**ku,??ce*) *nolay-ka Jonh-i   cen-ey malha-n   **ku*** (*i, *ce) *nolay-ya.*

         This song-NOM   John–NOM before say-ADJ   that   song-DEC
         This song is the one that John told us about before.

In example (6), the song is not closer to any one of the participants and the distance is not practically measurable when someone hears the song in the air.[9] The word '*i*' in (6) is not used because the song is closer to the speaker than to his/her interlocutor. This phenomenon is pointed out by Goddard.

> It is often said that THIS is a spatial deictic and that its meaning involves a component like 'close to the speaker', but this claim is inconsistent with the fact that one can speak of *this time, this song, this word, this day*, and so on, where spatial location is not relevant. (Nor is there any apparent justification for claiming that this wide range of use is due to 'metaphor'.) (1997:22)

The examples mentioned by Goddard, in which THIS has nothing to do with spatial distance are parallel to the Korean examples. For instance, the meaning of *i* in *i ttay* 'this time', *i mal* 'this word', and *i nal* 'this day', is surely not 'close to the speaker, not to the interlocutor'. The reason why people strongly believe that the meaning of '*i*' is like this seems to be in the fact that *ku* ('not near me, near you') and *ce* ('not near me, not near you') contain the spatial components in their meanings. Consequently choosing to use *i* instead of one of these paradigmatic alternates, strongly invites a pragmatic inference that the referent is 'near me, not near you'. However, 'near me, not near you' is incompatible with the meaning of *i* in example (6), and in other cases, such as *i nal* 'this day' and *i ttay* 'this time' etc. This seems to suggest that the meaning of '*i*' cannot be decomposed into more simple and clear concepts than itself. On this basis, I propose *i* as the counterpart of the prime THIS in Korean. The impossibility of replacing the primitive meaning of *i* with *ku* and *ce* (without a change in meaning) seems to suggest that these words are not allolexes of *i*.

Next the question arises whether these two words, *ku* and *ce*, can be defined, since those words which are not semantic primes can theoretically be reduced via primes. The NSM

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[9] The use of *ce* in (6) may be acceptable when it refers to the source of the song which is the car audio. When one uses the expression '*ce nolay*' (that song) in the given context, there seems to be the elliptical clause *ki-eyse nao-nun* 'comes from place'. This means that *ce* in ***cekieyse naonun nolay*** '**the song** come from **that** place' does not refer to the song but to the car audio. This is why this expression may be used (though this is not usual) only by someone sitting in the back seat, since the source is not close to him/her. In fact, one would normally signal the source of the song with body movement when using the word *ce* in this case.

approach seeks a reductive paraphrase of non-primitive concepts using semantic primitives. The possibility has already been noted, and a tentative meaning analysis will now be presented. In order to reach a fully satisfactory definition, two more points should be tested. Firstly, unlike the previous examples, *ku* in example (7) does not mean 'something close to the interlocutor' but refers to 'something commonly shared with the interlocutor'.

(7)   *3nyen cen ku-il sayngki-ko cheum manna-nun-kuna.*(*i,*ce)
          3 year before that happen-and first meet-Pre-Dec.
          We met for the first time after it/that happened three years ago.
(talking to somebody whom the speaker met 3 years ago when he had lost his whole family)

The meaning of *ku* is analysed by Oh (1998: 101) as [- proximity], [+ sharedness] and [+ sharedness] is one of the two features compatible with the meaning of *ku* in (7). The word *ku* in (7) refers to the knowledge that the two interlocutors share in common. This seems to suggest, therefore, that *ku* is polysemous. This is not explicitly explained by previous research including Oh's analysis, where the two features are given without indicating how these can be applied and under what conditions. Apart from the obscurity of the technical terms and the symbols, the analysis may suggest that *ku* means both features at the same time. I propose, therefore, that the meaning of *ku* has to be defined separately according to its two different meanings. *ku* 1 is used for 'something that is closer to the interlocutor' and *ku* 2 for 'something which is commonly shared with the interlocutor'. These seem to be totally different two meanings. One may wonder why the same thing cannot be proposed for *i*, positing *i* 1 for 'something which is close to the speaker, not the interlocutor' and *i* 2 for other uses. The answer will be that the single meaning of *i* as the counterpart of the proposed semantic prime THIS is sufficient to account for its whole range of use, accordingly there is no need for positing polysemy for *i*. More importantly there seems to be no definition for the use of *i* 2. It is simply used for cases where the meaning of *i* 1 is not compatible.

Secondly, it is necessary to test whether or not the component HERE is somehow involved in the meaning of *ce*. In other words, whether *ce* can be paraphrased with the meaning component HERE. This is because one can hypothesise that *ce* may mean something like 'something is not here', since it refers to 'something which is close to neither speaker nor interlocutor'. It is not surprising to see a close semantic link between 'something is far from either the speaker and the interlocutor' and 'something is not here'.

(8)   a. *yeki (I pang-ey)   sey kaci   kwuicwunghan mulken-i iss-ta.*
              Here(this room-LOC) three CLSS   precious   things-NOM exist-DEC
              There are three precious things here (in this room).

          b. *I kes kwoa, ku-kes kwoa, ce-kes ita.*
              This   and   that   and   that (over there)
              This one, that one, and the other one over there.

Example (8) suggests, however, that this hypothesis should be rejected. In other words, *ce* does not necessarily mean 'not here'. Since the sentence says that 'three things are here', and the thing referred to by *ce* is one of them. Therefore, the word *ce*'should not include the component 'not here' and can be defined by 'not near me, not near you'.

To sum up the findings from the examples, the Korean exponent of the prime THIS is *i*, and other words can be defined via *i*.[10] This is because *i* cannot be defined further when it is used to refer to something which is not necessarily close to the speaker, while other words, such as *ku* and *ce*, can be paraphrased via *i* but not vice versa. The reason why the prime *i* is included in the other words is that when one refers to something, one wants to identify it by pointing out what one is talking about. The prime *i* has this function and the components such as, 'not near me, near you' or 'not near me, not near you' are, of course, the extra specifying information on top of the identification of the reference. Without the prime *i* in the definitions of *ku* 1, *ku* 2 and *ce*, the definitions may not fully illustrate the fact that they are referring words. It is also possible to say in Korean '*ku-kes* (thing): *i- naykey kakkapci anhko neykey kakkawun kes*' (THIS - not near me, near you). Therefore, I propose the word *i* as the counterpart of the semantic prime THIS in Korean and the meaning analysis of *ku* and *ce* as follows:

THIS------→ *I*
Ku 1:   THIS- not near me, near you (all)[11]
Ce: THIS- not near me, not near you (all)
Ku 2:   THIS - I want to say something now about someone/something
            I think you know who/what

The proposed meaning analysis using the NSM approach can be compared with the previous analysis. For instance, Oh's analysis, where features like ±, and terminologies such as [proximity] and [sharedness] are used as a means of semantic analysis. The analysis of meaning by the NSM method aims to define concepts using only primitives that are intelligible by themselves and that are self explanatory as shown above. The aim is to avoid obscurity of technical terms which do not clearly show the defined meaning. The tentative analysis presented above is, however, open to further testing to discover whether this can be verified with all uses of these words. This follows the principles involved in forming NSM explications which are totally open until they reach the fully satisfactory version.

As a final step, this analysis can be tested against two different texts where these words are used. This is to test the validity of a definition by substituting it for the original word. The first text is from one of the Korean tales translated into English.[12] In the original text three words: *i*, *ku*, and *ce* are used and this is indicated in the parentheses.

A traditional Korean tale (A boy and the peach from the heaven)

> …A silk gown dropped in front of the boy. That (***ku2*** * *i*,***ce***) was a beautiful gown. The boy thought, " There must be someone behind this (***i***, **ku*, ?*ce*) rock**.** That's why this (***i***, **ku*, **ce*) flew over here in the wind." That (***ku2,*** ?*i*, **ce*) boy climbed to the top of the (***ku2***, ?*i*, **ce*) big rock. There (At that place) (***ku2***, **i*, **ce*) he found a lady crying. That (***ku***, ?*i*, **ce*) woman looked different from an ordinary person to him. The boy said, " I found this (***i***, **ku*, **ce*) on the ground so I brought it here to find the owner." She said, "Please, wait there (that place)(***ku1***, **i*, **ce*), and I will come to you." As she approached him, her face shone with joy. She said, " That's

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[10] The Korean demonstrative *I* is capitalised since it is proposed as the counterpart of the prime THIS.
[11] Since the prime YOU in NSM is singular, I put prime ALL to indicate the case of having more than one addressee.
[12] The original text is written in Korean and the translation is mine. However, the use of demonstratives: *I*, *ku*, and *ce* in parentheses which are bolded are original and other forms that are presented next to it show the impossibility or oddness. Of course the distinction between *Ku*1 and *Ku*2 is not indicated in the original text but by myself to help the readers to capture the meaning of them.

(*ku*1, *i,*ce*) mine. Where did you find it (*ku*1, *i, *ce*)? The boy replied. "Over there (that place)(*ce*, *ku, * i*), at the bottom of this (*i*, *ku, ?ce*) rock."

One can try to put the analysed meaning in the place of the three different words to see if the analysis is consistent with the original meaning and therefore valid. The second text is one of the tentative NSM explications and the Korean equivalent is indicated in parentheses.

Proposed explication of Good Samaritan Script[13]

> (a) When you know something bad happened to someone
>
> (b) It is good if you want to do something good for <u>this</u> person. (*ku2 ?i)*
> (c) If you can do <u>it</u>, it is good if you do <u>it</u>. (*ku2 ? i*)
> (d) It is not good if you don't want to do anything for <u>this</u> person (*ku2 ?i)*
>
> (e) It is bad if you think like <u>this</u>: (*i *ku*)
>
> (f) People like <u>this </u>want to do bad things to people like me (*i* or *ce *ku*)
>
> (g) because of <u>this</u>, I don't want to do anything good for <u>this</u> person (*i* or *ku) (i,*
>   *ku2,* or *ce*)
>
> (h) God wants to do good things for all people
> (i) It is good if you want to do the same.
>
> (j) If you do like <u>this</u>, you can live always with God. (*ku2, ?i*)
>
> (k) God wants <u>this</u>.(*i* or *ku*)

The Korean words chosen for translation of the prime THIS when it is translated into Korean (indicated in parentheses) show that not only *i*, which is identified as the counterpart of THIS, is used but also *ku* is preferred over *i* according to the different contexts.[14] As shown above, the use of '*ku2*' in component (b), (c), (d), and (j) is more natural and comprehensible as natural Korean, although the use of '*i*' in these cases can be understood and not necessarily incomprehensible. On the other hand, '*ku*' must not be used in component (e). In (f), which is deictic context, '*i*' and '*ce*' can be used depending on how one sees the location of the 'person'. In (g), for the second THIS, any of the three can be used again depending on how one sees the location of the 'person'. Therefore, using only *I* (the counterpart of THIS in Korean) in the context of the NSM explications does not raise the main problem except for it does not sound as natural as ordinary Korean. The issue of the trading between the 'naturalness' and 'authenticism' seems to arise here. One can persist using only primitives regardless of the pragmatic oddness, while one can indigenise the explication for the reader's sake. The metalanguage is not natural language, accordingly one should not expect that the metalanguage should include all the aspects of the natural language to sound natural. However, using the natural expressions -only on the basis of a clear meaning definition- can help the reader's greater comprehension. For this reason, I propose to use '*ku* 2', presenting the adjunctive meaning analysis in such components as (b), (c), (d), and (j).

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[13] This explication is taken from *Meaning and Universal Grammar* (Goddard & Wierzbicka (eds.) In Press).
[14] The NSM theory hypothesises that any explication of NSM has to be translatable into any natural language.

3. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to test the hypothesis of NSM theory in relation to the prime THIS in the context of the Korean language. By close examination of three different Korean demonstratives: *i*, *ku*, and *ce*, it has been found that the equivalent concept to the semantic primitive THIS in Korean is *i*. The remaining demonstratives, *ku* and *ce* are found to be decomposable via the prime *i* and other semantic primes. The word *ku* is found to be polysemous, accordingly two different meaning analyses are proposed as well as that of the word *ce*. And finally two different texts are presented so that the validity of the meaning analysis done by using the NSM approach can be tested. The analysis is as follows:

THIS-------> *I*
*Ku*1 :   THIS- not near me, near you (all)
Ce :   THIS- not near me, not near you (all)
*Ku*2 :   THIS- I want to say something now about something/someone
           I think you know who/what

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