

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

**Band:** 34 (1980)

**Heft:** 2

  

**Artikel:** Some remarks on kom (grains, sand, earth) in Korean

**Autor:** Anselmo, Valerio

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-146595>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 25.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## SOME REMARKS ON *KOM* (GRAINS, SAND, EARTH) IN KOREAN

VALERIO ANSELMO  
University of Naples

The task of establishing the linguistic affinity of the Korean language, comparing its syntax, its morphology, and especially its vocabulary with those of other languages, is not an easy one. Much work has been done in this field by G.J. Ramstedt, N. Poppe, Lee Ki-Moon (Yi Ki-mun), Kim Wan-jin, and Kim Pang-han, which suggests the affinity of Korean with the Altaic family.

Although the above mentioned scholars have produced outstanding contributions to this field of research, something can still be done to complete the picture.

In his *Studies in Korean Etymology* G.J. Ramstedt wrote: «*komso* = *sogom* 'the salt'; seems to be a compound, something like 'grain-salt' and 'salt-grain'; possibly with *kom* in the sense of 'sand', cf. t. *qum* 'sand', mo. *qumaki* 'particles of sand, earth or dust', mo. *qumag* id. < yak. *ku-maχ* 'sand'.»<sup>1</sup>

I believe that there are some other words which strengthen Ramstedt's hypothesis that in Korean *kom* could originally mean something like «sand» or «grain.» Here I shall consider two of the most probable examples, which are names of agricultural instruments still used nowadays in Korea, namely the words *komurae* and *kombangme*, as they are pronounced today in standard Korean.

Let us first examine the name *komurae*, which indicates an agricultural instrument made of a wooden board, usually rectangular in shape, from 35 to 70 centimeters wide – according to the different regions – and from 15 to 20 centimeters high, with a long handle.<sup>2</sup> The oldest forms of this word attested by written texts are *komirǎy*<sup>3</sup> and *komire*.<sup>4</sup> In the dia-

1 G.J. Ramstedt, *Studies in Korean Etymology*, 2 vols. (Helsinki, 1949/53), I, 123.

2 Photographs and drawings of this instrument are on plates nos. 71, 72 and 73 of *Han'gugŭi nonggigu*, ed. Munhwa kongbobu (Seoul, 1969), and its specifications are given on p. 69.

3 *Haengyongnimun*, quoted in Yu Ch'ang-don, *Yijoŭ sajŏn* (Seoul, 1964), p. 64.

4 *Mulbo* (18th century), quoted in Yu, *Yijoŭ sajŏn*, p. 64.

lects we find the following terms, that can be subdivided into three groups: first *komilge* (Ch'ungbuk), *komulgae* (Ch'ungnam; Kyönggi, Ansöng), *kömmunde* (Kyönggi, Panwöl), *komurae* (Kangwön, Togyé); second *milgae* (Kangwön, Togyé), *myölgae* (Kangwön, Togyé), *mirae* (Chönnam, Kwansan); third *ttaenggilgae* (Ch'ungbuk, Pongyang), *tanggülgae* (Chönnam, Kömundo), *tanggürae* (Kyöngnam, Yöngsan; Kyönggi, Tökchök).

We know that *-lg-* in an intervocalic position changes to *-l'* (the apostrophe indicates a short glottal stop) and then to *-r-*, as in, for example, modern Korean *möru* «wild grape», middle Korean *möl'wi*,<sup>5</sup> Ch'ungch'öngdo dialect *mölgu*; or modern Korean *siröng* «shelf,» Middle Korean *sil'öy*,<sup>6</sup> dialectal form *silgöng* (except Kyönggi). Bearing this in mind, we can say that the terms *komilge*, *komulgae*; *milgae*, *myölgae*; *ttaenggilgae*, *tanggülgae* with the *-lg-* in an intervocalic position represent an earlier stage than *komurae*, *mirae*, *tanggürae*, and will therefore be preferred in this analysis. The phoneme *-n-* of *kömmunde* must be a modification of the *-l-* of the root *mil-* in the word formation, caused by the different final suffix (*-de* instead of *-gae/-ge*). It would be difficult to take *-n-* as a past or present time suffix attached to the irregular root *mi-*, since, as we shall see in a moment, in these words the simple root or the root with the future suffix in the attributive form is used.

We can begin the analysis by considering the final suffixes of the above mentioned words. There seems to be no doubt that the suffix *-gae/-ge*, voiced form of *-kae/-ke*, has the meaning «instrument», as in *nalgae* «wings» from the verbal root *nal-* «to fly,» *chige* «frame to carry things on the back» from the verbal root *chi-* «to carry on the back,» and so on, where we see the suffix attached directly to the verbal root in its regular form. The suffix *-de*, voiced form of *-te*, probably means «pole,» «stick.»

If we look next at the function of the instrument called *komurae*, this will readily suggest something further about the origin of the word. The principal function of this instrument is that of pushing or drawing earth, of spreading out cereal seeds, and of covering the furrows with earth after having sown seeds in them. In a smaller version it is used also to remove ashes from the fireplace and in this case it is called *korae tanggürae*, that is to say: the *tanggürae* of the hypocaust flues. With the help of this information, we can immediately understand the meaning of *milgae*, *myölgae* and *ttaenggilgae*, *tanggülgae*. The first group is connected with the verbal root *mil-* «to push,» the second one with the verbal root *tanggi-*

5 *Hunmongjahoe* (1527), ed. Han'guk kojön ch'ongsö (Seoul, 1973), 1: 6b.6.

6 *Tusiönhae* (1481), ed. Han'guk kojön ch'ongsö, 7: 6a.3.

«to draw» (the *-l-* before the suffix *-gae* probably being the ending for the future participle in the case of *ttaenggilgae*, *tanggŭlgae*). In these two cases the reconstruction of the original meaning is quite easy, being that of an «instrument for pushing» in the first case<sup>7</sup> and an «instrument for drawing» in the second case. At this point we can be sure that the name of the instrument is derived from its function, that of pushing or drawing something. Identical meanings can be attributed to *mirae* and *tanggŭrae*, forms derived from the ones just examined.

The group *komilge*, *komulgae*, *kömunde*, *komurae* differs from the words just examined in that the first part of the word is *komil-* or *komul-* instead of *mil-*, *myöl-*, or *ttaenggil-*, *tanggŭl-*. It is absolutely clear that no connection can be established between the first group (*komilge*, ...) and the last one (*ttaenggilgae*, ...), so that we are justified in restricting the comparison to the first group (*komilge*, ...) and the second one (*milgae*, ...). The difference here is the initial *ko-* of the words of the first group, which is absent in the words of the second group.

In Middle Korean *ko* could signify a «wooden pestle,» a «club,» so that we could think of a first component having this meaning in the compound word *komilge*, whose meaning is then not too clear: it would be something like a «club-pushing instrument,» where the two components have different, mutually exclusive, meanings. I am in favor of discarding this hypothesis, but I do not know of any other possible solution of the problem, taking into account the morpheme *ko-* just as it is. *Ko* (or better *kom*) could signify also a «hole,» this meaning coming from an analysis of the word *komagi* (stone or clay used as a filling under a broken wooden floor), presumably with the original meaning of «thing to stop a hole.» This example gives us a clue that *ko* of *komilge* could be a reduced or contracted form of something else. If this idea is correct, we can have two other hypotheses besides the one just proposed, that is *kōl* (*korang*) «furrow» and *kom* in the meaning of «sand» or «grains» as pointed out by Ramstedt. The vowel *o* of *komilge* is short, and so is the vowel *o* of *kom* in the meaning just mentioned. With the meaning «bear» or «mildew» *kōm* would have a long vowel, and this fact, along with semantic considerations, keeps us from taking into account the last two meanings in reconstructing the original meaning of *komilge*. Semantically the meaning «furrow» could be considered a good candidate, but the vowel *o* of *kōl* is long. In the *kōl-milge* hypothesis the original meaning could be explained as an

7 Cf. also the Manchu *bireku*, «rolling log» or «instrument for pushing,» quoted in Ramstedt, *Korean Etymology*, I, 148.

«instrument for pushing the furrows,» but it seems to be a rather forced explanation, and moreover the long vowel of *kōl* seems to exclude this interpretation. In the case of *kom-milge* the vowels of both *kom* (the one with the meaning «hole» and the other with the meaning «sand,» «grains») are short and the reduction of *-mm-* into *-m-* is more feasible. For *kom-milge* we can try a first explanation connected with *kom* «hole,» which gives us something like an «instrument for pushing holes,» but it seems rather unlikely as a meaning. For *kom* «sand» or «grains» we can reconstruct a more realistic meaning, as an «instrument for pushing sand, grains or anything similar.» In my opinion this is the most probable answer. The meaning of *kom* must, in any case, be extended in order to include also the sense «earth.» It is then highly probable that the etymology of *komurae* is connected with *kom* meaning «grains,» «earth.»

The next word to be examined is less difficult and seems to give no cause for doubt, because the etymology points clearly to the connection of the word *kombangme* with *kom* in the sense of «earth,» «soil.» Let us then consider the second agricultural instrument, the one called *kombangme*. This is an instrument with a cylindrical part, roughly 30 centimeters long and 10 centimeters in diameter, and a long handle. It is similar to a mallet, but, when it is used, the striking part is the side of the cylinder, and not the base of it. It is used to break clods of earth in the fields and, like the *komurae*, it is used also to cover the furrows with earth after having sown seeds in them.<sup>8</sup> The oldest form of this word is the 18th century one, which is identical with the modern one. In the dialects we find the following words, subdivided here into three groups: first *kombae* (Ch'ungbuk), *kombangi*, *kombaengi* (Chōnnam, Posōng); second *t'onggombae* (Ch'ungbuk, Pongyang); third *mungt'unggombae* (Kyōngnam, Yōngsan).

The second part of the word presents no difficulty, because *-bae*, *-bangi*, *-baengi*, *-bangme* recall *pangmangi* «club,» «mallet» (with *mang* coming from *ma* plus a suffix *ng*). *Panga* is a «pestle for grain» (Ramstedt), and this accounts for the *-bang-* of *kombangme*. (In *-bae* of *t'onggombae* and *mungt'unggombae* there is a further reduction of *-bang-*, but this poses no problem. Here we just have the absence of the suffixes *ng* and *me* of *kombangme*, but the presence of a suffix *i*, which gives to *ba* the value *bae*). The last part, *-me*, must be a suffix analogous to *-mangi*, *-maengi*, *-mengi*, as found besides *pangmangi*, in words as *tolmengi*

8 Photographs and drawings of this instrument are in *Han'gugūi nonggigu*, on plates nos. 69 and 70; its specifications are on p. 68.

«stone,» «pebble» and *almaengi* «stone of a fruit,» «core,» with the common meaning of «clot of hard matter.» We can assume therefore that *pangme* had the original meaning of «something hard used to strike.»

The first part of the name, which permits the subdivision into three groups of the dialectal words, is very interesting, because it gives us clearly the meaning of «earth,» «soil,» reinforced and specified. *Mungt'ung* is connected with *mungt'ongi* «clod of earth» (*mungch'ida* is «to lump,» «to cluster,» «to unite»), while *t'ong-* must be connected with *tongi* «lump,» «clod» or *töngöri* «lump,» «clod» (-*öri* is a diminutive suffix). Or perhaps *t'ong* with the aspiration is just *mungt'öng-* without the first part, the bound form *mung-* «lump.» In any case, *mungt'ongi* and *tongi/töngöri* are closely related and we can be quite sure of this connection (*mungt'ongi* is a big *töngöri*, while *tongi* is a small *töngöri*). Now we have *kom* left to be explained. Let me say here that, following the explanation of *mungt'ung-* and *t'ong-*, I am in favour of considering *kom* as a clear morpheme with the meaning suggested by Ramstedt, or a very closely related one. But we cannot forget that another solution is hypothetically possible, although not very realistic. This other possibility is that *kom* could derive from *ko* (meaning «pestle,» «club,» as we have seen) plus a euphonic suffix *m*. This is not completely impossible, as we have modern Korean *tambae* «tobacco» that seems to come from *tabako*, the Japanese word for «tobacco,» or the dialectal form *sugump'o* «shovel,» «spade,» standard Korean *karae*, for which Ogura Shimpei suggested the derivation from the English *scoop*,<sup>9</sup> and so on, where, between a vowel and the following bilabial plosive consonant (*p*, *b*), there is the insertion of a bilabial nasal consonant (*m*). Neither is it so rare to find a repetition of the same concept in a word, in order to clarify the meaning (a phenomenon best occurring with Sino-Korean compound words). However, I have the feeling that this solution, connected with a phonetic phenomenon not yet fully proved, and whose etymology gives a meaning «club-club» or «pestle-mallet,» is rather forced, because in this case we would have a compound word with two components, both indigenous, meaning the same thing, and a similar case is very rare, if not unique.

The easiest solution and the most probable one remains that of *kom* with the meaning «earth,» «soil.» The meaning of both *mungt'unggom-* and *t'onggom-* must therefore be something like «earth in clods.» The etymology of *kombangme*, clarified by the forms *mungt'unggombae* and

9 Ogura Shimpei, *Chōsen go hōgen no kenkyū*, 2 vols. (Tokyo, 1944), I, 173–174.

*t'onggombae*, suggests the meaning «club» or «mallet for striking (clods of) earth.»

We could still object that *komurae* and *kombangme* could be loans from other Altaic languages, instead of being original Korean words. Theoretically this could be true, because we know that the names of agricultural instruments travelled sometimes from one place to another with the instruments themselves, but, until we can find any other similar word in other Altaic languages, this hypothesis cannot be proved.

In conclusion, from the analysis of the two words *komurae* and *kombangme* we have confirmation of the hypothesis of Ramstedt that the component *kom* (coming from the Proto-Altaic \**qum*) could have in Korean the meaning «sand» or «grains» in compound words. The analysis shows also a further specification of the word *kom*, whose meaning can be extended in Korean from «grains,» «sand» to «grains,» «sand,» «earth» or «soil.»

## GLOSSARY

Ansöng	安城
Chönnam	全南
<i>Chösengo hōgen no kenkyū</i>	朝鮮語方言の研究
Ch'ungbuk	忠北
Ch'ungch'ōngdo	忠清道
Ch'ungnam	忠南
<i>Haengyongnimun</i>	行用吏文
<i>Han'gugūi nonggigu</i>	韓國の農器具
	韓國古典叢書
<i>Hunmongjahoe</i>	訓蒙字會
Kangwōn	江原
Kim Pang-han	金芳漢
Kim Wan-jin	金完鎭
komiräy	古尾乃
Kōmundo	巨文島
Kwansan	冠山
Kyōnggi	京畿
Kyōngnam	慶南
Lee Ki-Moon (see Yi Ki-mun)	

*Mulbo*

Munhwa kongbobu

Ogura Shimpei

Panwöl

Pongyang

Posöng

Togye

Tökchök

*Tusiönhae**Yijoö sajön*

Yi Ki-mun

Yöngsan

Yu Ch'ang-don

物譜  
 文化公報局  
 小倉進平  
 半月  
 鳳陽  
 寶城  
 道溪  
 德積  
 杜詩 諸辭  
 李朝 認辭  
 李基文  
 靈山  
 劉昌惇