

TOPIC, FOCUS AND DOUBLE SUBJECTS IN KOREAN*

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon known as the Multiple Nominative Construction or the Double Subject in Korean, as in Japanese, has been an object of study for many years.¹ It is a challenge to many theories of syntax since the existence of sentences with two subject-marked constituents poses difficulties of analysis under Case Theory.

1.1 Multiple Nominative Constructions in Korean

Korean is an agglutinative SOV language that marks case morphologically with post-verbal clitics. The Korean nominative marker has two phonologically determined allomorphs: *-ka* follows a vowel-final nominal, *-i* a consonant-final nominal. In a Multiple Nominative Construction (MNC), two or more morphologically subject-marked DPs occur in a single clause, as in (1).

- (1) a. Chelswu-**ka** apeci-**ka** pwuca-i-ta
Chelswu-**NOM** father-**NOM** rich person-COP-DECL
'Chelswu's father is rich.'
(Yoon 1998: 76)
- b. John-**i** son-**i** khu-ta
John-**NOM** hand-**NOM** big-DECL
'John's hand is big.'
(Kim, Sells, & Yang 2007: 2)
- c. yelum-**i** maykcwu-**ka** chayko-i-ta
summer-**NOM** beer-**NOM** best-COP-DECL
'Summer is the best time to have beer.'
(Kim, Sells, & Yang 2007: 2)

In the three examples illustrated in (1), it is not the first nominative phrase, but the second that is the argument of the intransitive matrix predicate (Kim, Sells, & Yang, 2007:2) and is closest to the verb: it is the father who is rich, the hand which is big, and the beer that tastes good in summer. Since, in most

* We wish to thank Elizabeth Ritter and Kimiko Nakanishi for their suggestions and comments, and our anonymous Korean participants for their time, expertise and insights. All errors are ours. The following abbreviations are used for the data: COP = copula, DAT = dative, DECL = declarative, GEN = genitive, HON = honorific marker, INTER = interrogative, LOC = locative, I/KA = nominative, IS = information structure, PST = past, TOP = topic marker, 1sg = 1st person singular, 2sg = 2nd person singular.

¹ For example, Kang 1986, Bak 1992 on Korean; Takeishi 2006 on Japanese.

languages, a clause usually contains only one nominative-marked subject, the appearance of the first nominative-marked subject is puzzling.

1.2 Issues for syntactic theory

Case theory is challenged by the existence of such sentences. If nominative case is assigned (or checked) at INFL/T, there is a conflict between the single INFL/T node in a clause and the two or more nominative-marked DPs in MNCs. There have been numerous attempts to reconcile these problems. Even in a structure that allows recursive multiple INFL/T nodes, as we shall see in Section 2.1.3, the system overpredicts the phenomenon of Case Stacking.

1.3 Our proposal

In this paper we propose an information-structure (IS) analysis of the Multiple Nominative Construction in Korean, thereby avoiding the need for exotic case mechanisms.

1.4 Organization of the paper

The paper is organized into four sections following this introduction. Section 2 reviews previous analyses of Korean MNCs, highlighting theoretical difficulties that arise for each. Section 3 presents our suggestion that MNCs involve information structure, supporting the claims of Yoon (1990) and Schütze (1995). Section 4 details the experimental methodology that we have used to test this proposal, and the results of the experiment. Section 5 draws conclusions and suggests directions for future research.

2. Previous analyses

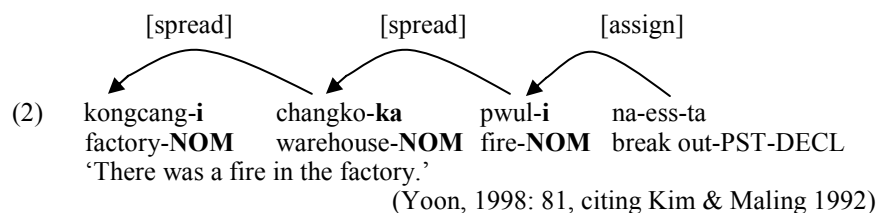
In Section 1.2, we pointed out that multiple nominative constructions in Korean are puzzling and pose problems for basic conditions of case assignment. Numerous attempts have been made to account for MNCs in Korean. Among the analyses put forward are those of case spreading, a default nominative case, focus marking, and raising to multiple SPEC positions.

These analyses can be categorized as information structure based analyses and non-information structure based analyses.

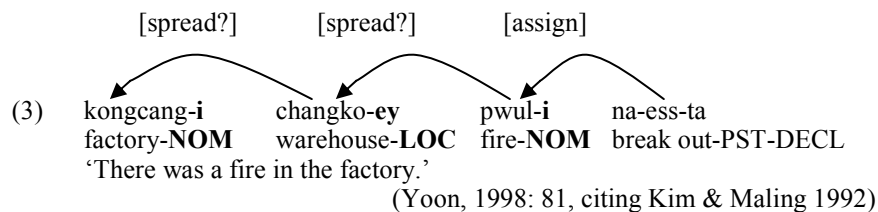
2.1 Non-information structure based analyses

2.1.1 Case Agreement

Kim (1990) and Bak (1992) put forward a proposal in which a “special mechanism” called Case Agreement spreads nominative case to the extra NPs. In this analysis, case originates in the NP closest to T and then spreads to the other NPs within the same DP. In (2), nominative case would be assigned to *pwul* since it is the closest NP to T. Then, through this special mechanism, nominative case would spread to *changko* and *kongcang*.



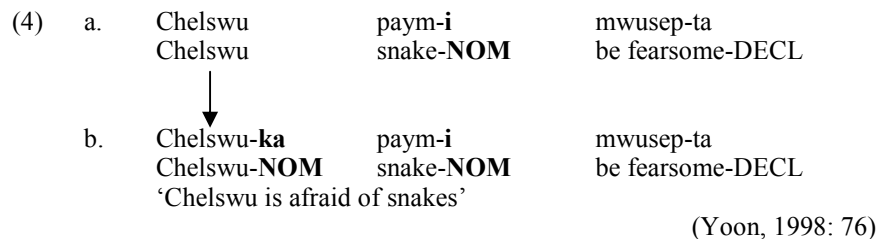
The analysis in (2) appears to solve the problem of assigning case to the extra NPs, but as Kim & Maling (1992) point out this spreading does not need to occur. In fact, in (3), it would be illogical to assume that the NP *kongcang* gets its nominative case marking through case spreading with the NP *changko*, since the latter is marked with the locative case marker, not nominative case.



The optionality of case agreement suggests that this is not a sufficient explanation.

2.1.2 Default Nominative Case

Another analysis views nominative case in Korean as a default case (Kang 1986, Kim 1990). In the “default nominative case” analysis case assignment does not pose a problem as it does in Section 2.1. Instead, extra NPs in MNCs are given nominative case because they cannot be assigned case and they cannot surface without case, as that would be a violation of the Case Filter. This is illustrated in (4). In (4a) *Chelswu* does not have case, but it must in some way acquire case in order to be a grammatical sentence in Korean. The default case approach proposes that nominative case is simply assigned to any NP which lacks case (4b). This analysis suggests that the first DP is an adjunct of some sort.



As Yoon (1998) points out, there is a serious problem with the default case approach. This case-stacking problem is exemplified in (5).

- (5) Chelswu-**eykey**-man-i ton-i manh-ta
 Chelswu-**DAT**-only-**NOM** money-NOM much-DECL
 ‘Only Chelswu has lots of money.’
 (Yoon, 1998: 93)

This example raises the questions of why *Chelswu* is assigned a default nominative case when he already has a dative case. There is no need for an additional case to be assigned here.

2.1.3 Raising to multiple Spec Positions

In 2.1.2, we saw that it is possible for a DP to undergo case-stacking. This is exemplified by the locative and nominative cases being marked on *kongcang* in (6). Yoon (1996) claims that this is possible because when a DP is raised to higher Spec positions, it checks one case at each position.

- (6) i kongcang-**ey-ka** pwul-i na-ess-ta
 this factory-**LOC-NOM** fire-I/KA break out-PST-DECL
 ‘Fire broke out in this factory.’
 (Yoon, 1998:118)

However, this predicts an infinitely recursive number of Specs and potentially infinite case-stacking. The problem is that we never in fact see more than two stacked cases. This is a contradiction that the multiple-Spec analysis fails to explain.

2.1.4 Summary of issues

We see, then, that there are various problems with analyses of MNCs that do not take information structure into account. Case Agreement fails because it need not occur in those environments where it *can* occur; it is optional, and no reason is advanced for this optionality. Default Nominative Case fails because *-i/-ka* appears even on DPs that are already marked with a different case (Case Stacking). An analysis based on raising to multiple Spec positions fails because it predicts Case Stacking to be infinitely recursive, contrary to fact.

2.2 Information structure-based analyses

2.2.1 Focus Marking

Yoon (1990) and Schütze (1995) assume an information-structure role for MNCs and claim that *-i/-ka* attached to the first NP in MNCs is not a case marker, but a focus marker (that happens to take the same form as the nominative marker).

This approach solves the case-stacking problem discussed in Section 2.1.2, as there is now no additional nominative case being assigned/checked:

- (7) Chelswu-**eykey-man-i** ton-**i** manh-ta
 Chelswu-**DAT-only-FOC** money-**NOM** much-DECL
 ‘Only Chelswu has lots of money.’

(Yoon, 1998: 93)

2.2.2 Multiple Nominative Constructions in Japanese

Examples from Japanese also support an information structure analysis. Hiraiwa (2009) claims that in Japanese the first DP of a MNC is always a topic, whether it is marked with the topic-marker *wa* or the nominative case-marker *ga*:

- (8) Jon-**ga** oji-ga isha-da.
 John-**TOP** uncle-NOM doctor-is
 ‘It is John whose uncle is a doctor.’

(Tateishi 2006:58)

3. New support for an information-structure analysis²

Given the issues elaborated in Section 2, we support an information-structure analysis of Korean MNCs, like Yoon (1990) and Schütze (1995). However, as will be shown in Section 4, our experimental participants rejected most sentences where *-i/-ka* appeared on a DP in contrastive focus. We propose, therefore, that *-i/-ka* on the first DP of an MNC is a marker of presentational focus (introductory information) or topic.³

3.1 Evidence in favour of an information-structure analysis

Korean has a clitic marker *-un/-nun*, which appears on continued topics or contrastive topic/focus.⁴ This marker, like the nominative marker *-i/-ka*, has two phonologically-determined allomorphs: *-un* after a consonant and *-nun* after a vowel:

- (9) a. han salam-tang pang-**i** elma i-pni-kka?
 one person-DAT room-**I/KA** how much COP-FOR-INTER
 ‘How much is a room for one person?’

² In this and following sections, we gloss *-i/-ka* not as NOM but simply as I/KA, as we reject the nominative-case analysis of this marker in non-preverbal DPs of MNCs.

³ We make no claims here as to which of these two is marked by *-i/-ka* – presentational focus or topic. The distinction between them is fairly subtle, and further experimental work will be needed to decide this point.

⁴ Contrastive elements may be either topics or foci; the distinction is considerably more subtle than it is in non-contrastive contexts (Erteschik-Shir 2007:49) and we will not elaborate upon it here. Choi (1999:88) argues that *-un/-nun* marks both topic and contrastive focus.

- b. 'ku pang-ey-**nun** taylaypi iss-supni-kka?
 that room-LOC-**TOP** television exist-FOR-INTER
 'Is there a television in the room?'
- (10) a. ce sayngsen-**i** ssa-ta.
 that fish-**I/KA** cheap-DECL
 'That fish is cheap.'
- b. saywu-**nun** pissa-ta.
 shrimp-**TOP** expensive-DECL
 '[However], the shrimp is expensive.'

In Example (9b), we see the topic *pang* 'room' that was introduced in (9a) being mentioned in continued discourse; it is marked with *-un*. In (10b) we have a DP *saywu* 'shrimp' contrasted to *sayngsen* 'fish' in (10a). However, we see in (9a) and (10a) that non-contrastive introductory information (topic/presentational focus) is marked with *-i/-ka*. The phenomenon is illustrated further in (11).

- (11) a. Danica-**ka** Sewul-eyse sal-ass-ci?
 Danica-**I/KA** Seoul-LOC live-PST-INTER
 'Did Danica live in Seoul?'
- b. nay. Nick-**un** kegi sal-ci anh-ass-ta.
 yes. Nick-**TOP** there live-COMP NEG-PST-DECL
 'Yes. **Nick** didn't live there.'

Thus we see that on DPs that are introductory, new information (presentational focus/topic), *-un/-nun* is replaced by *-i/-ka*. This finding suggests that for Korean, an information structure analysis of MNCs is valid, just as Hiraiwa (2009) proposes for Japanese, as mentioned in Section 2.2.2.

One may object that since *-i/-ka* is a nominative marker that ordinarily marks subject DPs, and since *pang* in (9a) and *taylaypi* in (10a) are the subjects of their respective clauses, *-i/-ka* is the marker we should expect to see even if it is not an information-structure marker. However, this analysis does not account for MNCs like that in (12), where the subject of the verb is clearly the pre-verbal DP, *kho* 'nose', not the preceding DP *khokkili* 'elephant(s)'.

- (12) khokkili-**ka** kho-ka kipni-ta.
 elephant-**NOM** nose-NOM be long-DECL
 'Elephants are long-nosed.'

(Ihm et al. 1988)

Introductory topic/presentational focus serves to *background* a DP in an MNC, leaving the following DP foregrounded (narrow-focused). Moreover, we see this function being fulfilled either by *-i/-ka*, as in (12), or by the topic marker *-un/-nun*, as in (13).

- (13) khokkili-**nun** kho-ka cwumek-ulo pyensin
 elephant-**TOP** nose-I/KA fist-INST become
 ‘An elephant’s nose becomes a fist.’
 (<http://humer.weezle.net/3169>)

We can therefore paraphrase (12) as ‘As for elephants, noses are long’, a classic example of topic-comment structure that matches the paraphrase of (13): ‘As for an elephant, a nose becomes a fist.’⁵

The data from (1), repeated below, may now be evaluated in light of (8-13).⁶

- (14) a. Chelswu-**ka** apeci-ka pwuca-i-ta
 Chelswu-**I/KA** father-I/KA rich person-COP-DECL
 ‘Chelswu’s father is rich.’ (‘As for Chelswu, his father is rich.’)
 (Yoon 1998: 76)
- b. John-**i** son-**i** khu-ta
 John-**NOM** hand-**NOM** big-DECL
 ‘John’s hand is big.’ (‘As for John, his hand is big.’)
 (Kim, Sells, & Yang 2007: 2)
- c. yelum-**i** maykcwu-**ka** chayko-i-ta
 summer-**NOM** beer-**NOM** best-COP-DECL
 ‘Summer is the best time to have beer.’ (‘As for summer, it is the best time to have beer.’)
 (Kim, Sells, & Yang 2007: 2)

If the first *-i/-ka* of each MNC in (14) is in fact a marker of information structure, the theoretical difficulties posed by MNCs disappear. The sentence retains a single subject.⁷ Case-assignment/-checking is also straightforward, as true nominative case (assigned or checked at INFL/T) only exists on the last preverbal DP; all preceding instances of *-i/-ka* in the MNC are actually information structure markers. The problem of case-stacking (detailed in Section 2.1.2) disappears as well. Consider (15a, b) (repeated from (5) and (9b)):

⁵ This sentence introduces a posted video clip of an elephant thumping a child on the head with its trunk.

⁶ The lack of third-person genitive pronouns corresponding to those in the paraphrased English translations of (14a-c) is not an issue, as third-person pronouns are rarely used in spoken Korean.

⁷ MNCs with more than two nominative-marked initial DPs are not problematical for this analysis, as only the last will be the subject of the sentence. All others will be part of the information structure. The possibility of multiple topics/foci is viewed as a language-specific parameter by Rizzi (Erteschik-Shir 2007:118, citing Rizzi 2004a). Erteschik-Shir (2007:22-23) views topics and foci as inherently recursive.

- (15) a. Chelswu-**eykey-man-i** ton-i manh-ta
 Chelswu-**DAT-only-FOC** money-I/KA much-DECL
 ‘Only Chelswu has lots of money.’
 (Yoon 1998: 93)
- b. ku pang-**ey-nun** taylaypi iss-supni-kka
 that room-**LOC-TOP** television exist-FOR-INTER
 ‘Is there a television in the room?’

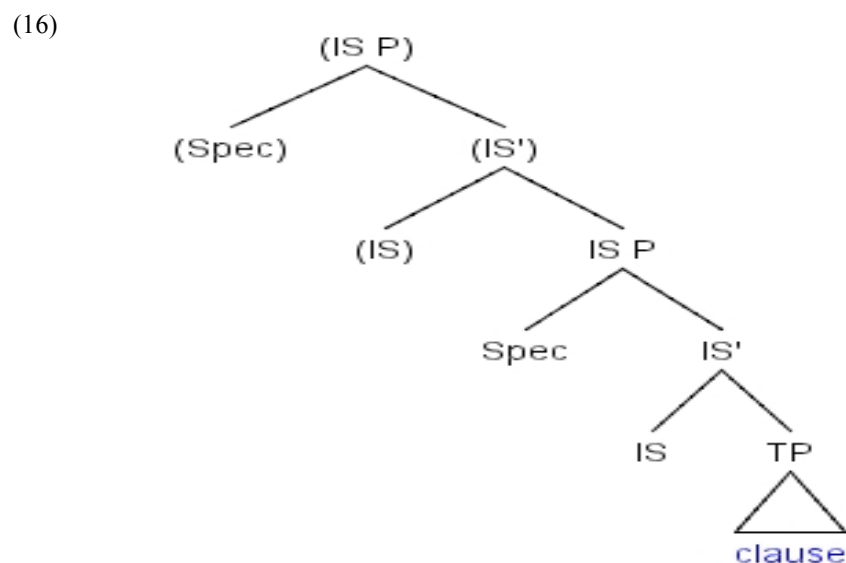
If the *-i* of the first DP in (15a) is actually a topic or focus marker, no case-stacking exists: the dative marker *-eykey* is the only case marking on the noun *Chelswu*, just as the topic marker *-nun* in (15b) stacks with the locative case marker *-ey*. Furthermore, if ‘only Chelswu’ in (15a) is an information-structural element, the occurrence of *-i* outside the case marking and the adverbial particle *man* ‘only’ is to be expected, since the information-structure marker has scope over the entire DP. Absent an information-structure analysis, there is no reason to prefer the structure *Chelswu-eykey-man-i* to (for example) to one with a different ordering of the postnominal clitics.

As *-un/-nun*, an undisputed information structure marker, can stack with case, as in (15b), for *-i/-ka* to do likewise is not surprising.

3.2 Structure of IS marking in MNCs

To allow for multiple topics/foci in an MNC, we adopt a structure based on Rizzi (2004).

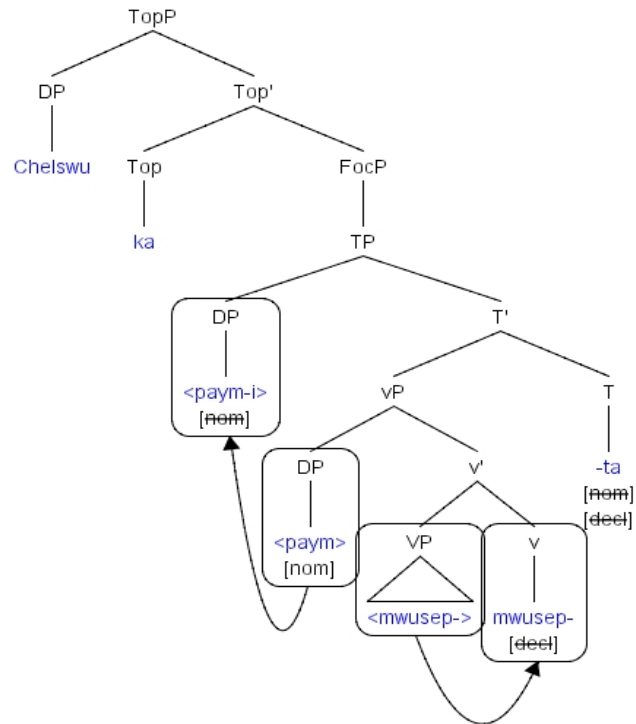
As can be seen in (16), the IS phrase structure is recursive, allowing any number of topics/foci to precede TP.



We assume (a) that a topic/focus DP is base-generated in [Spec, IS P], and (b) following the literature of generative syntax, that the subject of the clause originates in vP and moves to [Spec, TP] to check nominative case.

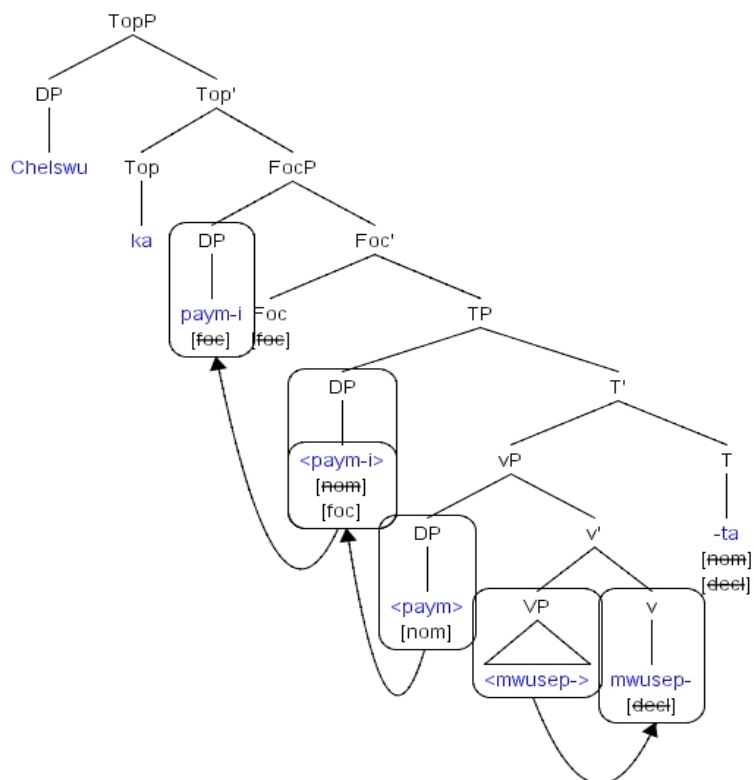
Applying the structure in (16) to (13b) gives us (17):

(17)



It is unclear to us at this time how topic and focus interact structurally. If, under Minimalism (following Kim 1997), focus is interpreted as a strong feature, then presumably when the clausal subject at [Spec, TP] is in focus, we should expect to see a structure like that of (18), where a Topic Phrase precedes and dominates a Focus Phrase, and where the subject of the sentence raises from [Spec, TP] to [Spec, FocP] to check a strong focus feature:

(18)



We leave the exploration of this question for further research.

4. Experimental Testing

In order to test our hypothesis that in Korean introductory, non-contrastive topic/presentational focus is nominative-marked, we elicited acceptability judgments from native speakers of Korean. The methodology, sample questions, and our results are discussed below.

4.1 Methodology

We collected data from 6 participants. All our participants answered our advertisements (posted at the University of Calgary in both English and Korean) seeking volunteers for our study. All participants were also native speakers of Korean who completed high school in Korea and were between the ages of 21 and 27. All had varying knowledge of English and instructions were provided to participants in both English and Korean.

Participants were asked to make acceptability judgments on 18 Korean sentences which we constructed. Sentences were placed in varying contexts (to be discussed in Section 4.2) and each potential answer used varying patterns of *-i/-ka* and *-un/-nun*. Participants were provided with between 2 and 6 versions of each sentence (see (19) for an example). Participants were instructed to read the stimulus and then the 2-6 judgments that followed. They were asked to mark with a check mark any sentence that they would say naturally in casual speech. Any sentence that they might not say, but that they could imagine other Koreans saying, they were asked to mark with a question mark. An X would mark a sentence that no native speaker of Korean would say. If participants thought that more than one answer was possible they were allowed to make more than one choice. They were also asked to provide an alternative answer if they felt that there was a better alternative to the answers provided. The experiment lasted approximately 30 minutes.

(19) Elicitation Example

Chelswu-nun ce kemi ttaymwun-ey way hwakanan
ke-ci

Chelswu-TOP that spider because-LOC why upset
thing-INTER

‘Why is Chelswu so upset by that spider?’

- Chelswu-nun kemi-ka mwusep-ta
Chelswu-TOP spider-I/KA fearsome-DECL
- Chelswu-ka kemi-ka mwusep-ta
Chelswu-I/KA spider-I/KA fearsome-DECL
- Chelswu-nun kemi-nun mwusep-ta
Chelswu-TOP spider-TOP fearsome-DECL
- Chelswu-ka kemi-nun mwusep-ta
Chelswu-I/KA spider-TOP fearsome-DECL
‘Chelswu is afraid of spiders.’

4.2 Sample Questions

The target sentences that we asked our participants to judge fell into four categories: Introductory topic/presentational focus (cases where there was no stimulus and where the information was introduced for the first time and was non-contrastive), Contrastive topics/foci (cases where the topic/focus differed between the stimulus and target), and continuing topics (cases where the topic of the stimulus and the target were the same). Samples of these three types of elicitations are illustrated below in (20).

(20) a. *Introductory Topic/Presentational Focus***Stimulus:** None**Target:**

tosi-ka	phakoy-ka	toy-ess-ta
city-I/KA	destruction-I/KA	become-PST-DECL

‘The city was destroyed.’

b. *Contrast***Stimulus:**

Swunhui-ka	meli-ka	kil-ta
Swunhui-I/KA	hair-I/KA	long-DECL

‘Swunhui’s hair is long.’

Target:

Chelswu-ka	meli-ka	ccalp-ta
Chelswu-I/KA	hair-I/KA	long-DECL

‘Chelswu’s hair is short.’

c. *Continuing Topic***Stimulus:**

ne-ui	emeni-ka	tayhay-se	mal-hay-cwe
2sg-GEN	mother-I/KA	about-LOC	speaking-do-give

‘Please tell me about your mother.’

Target:

nay-ka	emeni-ka	uysa	i-si-ta
1sg-I/KA	mother-I/KA	doctor	COP-HON-DECL

‘My mother is a doctor.’

4.3 Results

In (21) we have a summary of the results. As we can see in the table, in all continuing topic and contrastive focus/topic contexts, double subjects are either rejected outright (60 cases) or judged to be odd (2 cases in continuing topic context and 1 case in contrastive context). In introductory topic/presentational focus contexts, double subjects were accepted in 4 cases, judged odd in 2 cases, and rejected in 4 cases.

(21) Results of acceptability task

Question type	✓ (accepted)	? (judged to be odd)	* (rejected)
Introductory topic/ Presentational focus	4	2	4
Contrastive	0	1	22
Continuing topic	0	2	28

4.4 Discussion

Overall, the pattern of the results is partially consistent with our analysis and predictions that *-i/-ka* may serve as an information structure marker as well as a

nominative case marker in Korean. If this is the case, it is apparently a marginal construction among our participants. Possible reasons for this could be dialectal differences or diachronic syntactic change among younger generations of speakers. Some of these issues may be solved by testing a larger sample size with more target sentences (especially those with information structure contexts) and by taking sociolinguistic factors such as age and geographic area into consideration.

5. Conclusions

We have demonstrated that analyses of Korean multiple-nominative constructions that do not take information structure into account have serious shortcomings, whether they rely upon multiple clausal Spec positions, default case mechanisms, or Case Agreement. Only an information-structure account explains the facts of Korean MNCs, while simultaneously leaving intact the model of sentence structure advanced under GB/Minimalism (and generative syntax in general).

In Section 2 we illustrated the shortcomings of non-information-structure analyses of MNCs, showing that multiple [Spec, TP] positions predict infinitely recursive case-stacking, contrary to fact; that positing a default nominative case also runs afoul of case-stacking facts, since we do find *-i/-ka* stacked with case markers; and that Case Agreement must be optional (an unmotivated result) if it is to fit the fact that case spreading does not always occur.

In Section 3 we proposed that *-i/-ka* may serve as a topic or presentational focus marker as well as a nominative-case marker; that is, that non-preverbal DPs in MNCs, when marked by *-i/-ka*, are introductory, non-contrastive, and backgrounded. We supported this proposal with evidence that *-i/-ka* occupies a similar position to the (contrastive or continuing) topic marker *-un/-nun*, and showing that both markers may stack with case. We showed that when *-i/-ka* is analysed in this way, MNCs become ordinary topic-comment clauses. We proposed further that information structure in an MNC occupies the Spec positions of recursive Topic Phrases.

In Section 4 we described the experimental methodology that we used to test our proposals, and the results of the experiment. We found that native-speaker participants rejected all uses of *-i/-ka* in MNCs except where the first DP was new information and was non-contrastive. The experimental data therefore lend support to our analysis of *-i/-ka* as a marker of presentational focus or topic.

There are a number of further issues that we hope to explore in future research. First, there is the fact that even in introductory backgrounding contexts, *-i/-ka* on the first DP of MNC was rejected by many participants, indicating either that our story is incomplete or that the construction itself is marginal, accepted by few speakers. Further work with a more diverse set of participants (all our speakers were students under twenty-five years old) might provide more illumination of this question. Secondly, there is the question of the internal structure of the Focus Phrase. This is a question that we have not yet examined. Thirdly, there is the relationship between information structure, MNCs and the Korean honorific agreement system. Additional theoretical structures and experimental verification may be necessary to explain the observed facts.

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