

The case marking strategy of second language Korean learners

Introduction The use of nominative case particle *i/ka* and accusative case particle *ul/lul* is one of the earliest grammar students learn in a Korean language class. However, errors in the use of the case particles persist into the highest level of proficiency (Ko 2002, Zhu 2018). We argue that Korean learners’ errors are not random but systematical. They utilize a case marking strategy similar to the dependent case model (cf. Marantz 1991) developed via learner’s input. The errors arise when the learners case marking strategy do not match the actual case marking strategy.

The data We focused on the substitution errors at the accusative case position (SE-Os), inappropriate use of *i/ka* at an accusative case position, position in which *ul/lul* is the appropriate particle, as in (1).

- (1) a. *cikum-kkaci palpyo-**ka** machi-keyss-supnita
 now-until presentation(ACC)-NOM will end
 ‘(We) will end the presentation now.’
 b. *ce-nun chinkwu-**ka** manna-ss-supnita
 I(Nom)-Top friend(ACC)-Nom met
 ‘I met a friend.’

Korean Learners’ Corpus Search Engine published by the National Institute of Korean Language (the corpus, hence forth) was used for this study. We examined all NPs that i) appear at the canonical accusative case position (object position), and ii) should be marked by *ul/lul*, but iii) are marked by *i/ka*. A total of 1,416 items were categorized as SE-Os. If an item at a canonical accusative position would be assigned nominative case due to an erroneous use of a predicate, the ungrammatical use of *i/ka* at the position was not considered an SE-O.

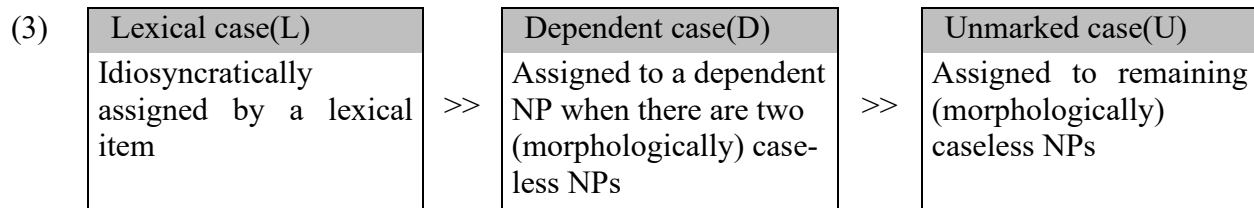
Previous studies have generally focused predicates of the sentences that include SE-Os (Yang 2010, Yu 2015, Zhu 2018). However, the focus of this study was on whether morphology of the subject NP has any effect on the case morphology of the object. We found that over 90% of SE-Os occur either i) when the subject is covert (65.96%), or ii) when the subject is overt but is not marked by the nominative case particle (24.08+1.48=25.56%). In other words, only 8.47% of 1,416 SE-Os occur when the subject is already marked by the canonical case particle *i/ka*.

(2)

Total	covert subject	overt subject		
		no particle	other particles	<i>i/ka</i>
1,416	934	21	341	120
100.00%	65.96%	1.48%	24.08%	8.47%

The Claim What the data suggests is that subject morphology has effect on the object morphology. The effect of subject morphology on the object morphology can be explained if Learners are utilizing dependent case model as their case marking strategy, perhaps to filled the gaps of, or to replace, explicit grammar taught in class.

The dependent case model According to the dependent case model (Marantz 1991), case (morphology) is assigned in three steps. First, lexical case is determined idiosyncratically by a lexical item. Second, when two *case-less* nominals are in a C-command relation, dependent case is assigned to the C-commanded nominal. Finally, unmarked case is assigned to any remaining caseless NPs. In a Nominative-Accusative language, accusative case is the dependent case and nominative case is the unmarked case.



The case morphology in Korean generally follows the dependent case model. In a canonical intransitive structure, Lexical case is not assigned, and the sole argument is unmarked (nominative) case (4). In a canonical transitive construction, no lexical case is assigned, and the c-commanded NP (the object) is assigned dependent (accusative) case and the remaining argument is assigned unmarked case (5). In a ditransitive construction, goal argument is assigned lexical (dative) case, and the c-commanded argument of the remaining arguments is assigned the dependent case (6).

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| (4) Mary-ka wassta
M.-NOM(U) came
‘Mary came.’ | | (5) Mary-ka sakwa-lul mekessta
M.-NOM(U) J.-ACC(D) ate
‘Mary ate an apple.’ |
| (6) John-i Mary-hanthey chayk-ul cwuesse
J.-NOM(U) M.-DAT(L) book-ACC(D) gave
‘John gave Mary the book.’ | | |

Analysis I argue that Learners are utilizing the same dependent case model. However, the SE-Os in (1) arise because the learners are i) only considering overt NPs, and ii) considering all non-case particles as Lexical case. Some languages do not allow covert subjects. If learners are not able to process covert subject, only overt subjects will be considered in their case morphology system. If so, transitive objects with covert subjects will not receive dependent case from the c-commanding subject, as there is only *one* overt caseless NP. Therefore, we would expect unmarked (nominative) case to appear with the object, as in (1a).

(1b) can be explained if Learners consider special particles as Lexical case. There are two types of Nominal particles in Korean; *case particles* mark case and *special particles* add meaning. Often times, case particles are omitted when special particles are present (8). If learners consider special particles as idiosyncratically assigned Lexical case, the topic maker *nun* in (1b) would be considered a Lexical case. Then, the remaining argument, the object, would become the sole caseless NP and will be assigned the Unmarked nominative case. Learners case marking strategy may be fortified by sentences like (8b), one of the earliest quirky structures Learners encounter in class, as canonical transitives.

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| (8) a. John-to khuta
John-also(L) big
‘John also is big’ | | b. John-un sakwa-ka cohta
John-TOP(L) apple-NOM(U) like
‘Speaking of John, he like apples’ |
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Consequences Previous researches have reported that there are far less SEs at the subject position (SE-S) than SE-Os. Our findings were consistent with previous results; there are far less SEs at the subject position (SE-S) than SE-Os (SE-S: 209 vs. SE-O:1416). If SE-Os are caused by the case marking strategy depicted above, it also explains why there are less SE-Ss than SE-Os. Since nominative case does not involve dependency, the subject will receive unmarked nominative regardless of whether the object is assigned Lexical case, or if the object is covert. Our analysis can also explain why SEOs are rare when the subject is already marked by *i/ka*. Because marking both argument of transitives with *i/ka* is blocked in dependent case model. If both the subject and the object remain morphologically caseless after the Lexical case assignment, the object will be assigned dependent accusative case and never unmarked *i/ka*.