

The Preference for *Wh*-Adjacency in Korean: An Empirical Study

1. Introduction

In Korean, a language that has no overt *wh*-movement and shows a free word order phenomena, *wh*-elements are expected not to show a particular distribution. However, this is not the case and, indeed, *wh*-elements do seem to have a particular distribution. Therefore, this study examines robust data of Korean *wh*-elements via experiments and explain them.

2. Experimental Design

The syntactic distribution of arguments is restricted by the semantic role hierarchy, while adjuncts are free from that kind of restriction. To capture the distributional characteristics of *wh*-elements, thus, it is efficient to look at adjuncts which are free from the restriction such as semantic role hierarchy. Therefore, this empirical study examines Korean *wh*-elements by comparing the distributions of [-*wh*] adjuncts, ‘time (e.g., *onul achim-ey* ‘in this morning’), ‘place (e.g., *hakkyo aph-eyse* ‘in front of school’), and ‘reason (e.g., *kwacey ttaymwun-ey* ‘because of homework’), with those of [+*wh*] adjuncts, *encey* ‘when’, *etise* ‘where’, and *way* ‘why’. To compare these two ([-*wh*] vs. [+*wh*]), this study conducts two different sentence completion experiments as summarized as follows.

Experiment 1 has two different sets. Set 1 is a sentence completion task, in which a declarative sentence is produced by adding a [-*wh*] adjunct into one of the three empty sites ([]₁-[]₂-[]₃) as illustrated in (1a). Here, the case in which *wh*-element appears after the predicate is ignored since *wh*-elements in Korean are not allowed to appear in the position. Set 2 is also a sentence completion task but adds a [+*wh*] adjunct to produce an interrogative sentence as in (1b). The data from Set 1 and Set 2 will enable to identify the distributional characteristics of adjuncts depending on [±*wh*].

- (1)a. []₁ Chelswu-ka []₂ Yengi-lul []₃ manna-ss-ta.
Chelswu-NOM Yengi-ACC meet-PST-DEC
‘Chelswu met Yengi {in this morning, in front of school, because of homework}.’
- b. []₁ Chelswu-ka []₂ Yengi-lul []₃ manna-ss-ni?
Chelswu-NOM Yengi-ACC meet-PST-Q
‘{when, where, why} did Chelswu meet Yengi?’

In Experiment 2, the sentence completion task is conducted with multiple *wh*-interrogatives to identify the distributional character of *wh*-elements. For instance, the second experiment examines which site will be selected as a position of [-*wh*] adjunct when it is added into the multiple *wh*-interrogatives as illustrated in (2).

- (2) []₁ nwu-ka []₂ nwukwu-lul []₃ manna-ss-ni?
who-NOM who-ACC meet-PST-Q
‘Who met whom {in this morning, in front of school, because of homework}?’

3. Results

The following distributional patterns of *wh*-elements are found. First, the data from Experiment 1 shows that [-*wh*] adjuncts are freely distributed, while [+*wh*] adjuncts tend to be adjacent to the predicate in the position []₃. The results are summarized in (3)-(4). The distribution ratio is put in parentheses and the highest proportions of them are shaded.

(3) [-*wh*] adjuncts

a. ‘onul achim-ey’ (in this morning):

[52.1%]₁ Chelswu-ka [36.4%]₂ Yengi-lul [11.5%]₃ manna-ss-ta.

b. ‘hakkyo aph-eyse’ (in front of school):

[17.0%]₁ Chelswu-ka [57.6%]₂ Yengi-lul [13.9%]₃ manna-ss-ta.

c. ‘kwacey ttaymwuney’ (because of homework):

[14.5%]₁ Chelswu-ka [71.5%]₂ Yengi-lul [13.9%]₃ manna-ss-ta.

(4) [+wh] adjuncts

a. ‘encey’ (when):

[18.2%]₁ Chelswu-ka [35.5%]₂ Yengi-lul [46.4%]₃ manna-ss-ni?

b. ‘etise’ (where):

[10.5%]₁ Chelswu-ka [24.5%]₂ Yengi-lul [65.0%]₃ manna-ss-ni?

c. ‘way’ (why):

[22.7%]₁ Chelswu-ka [17.7%]₂ Yengi-lul [59.5%]₃ manna-ss-ni?

The results from Experiment 2 are presented in (5), and it shows the pattern that *wh*-elements (‘who-NOM’ and ‘who-ACC’) tend to be adjacent to each other. To do this, [-wh] adjuncts change their positions; the preference for []₂ in (3b) and (3c) is decreased in the cases of (5b) and (5c). And this results in *wh*-adjacency.

(5) a. ‘onul achim-ey’ (in this morning):

[78.2%]₁ nwu-ka [13.3%]₂ nwukwu-lul [8.5%]₃ manna-ss-ni?

b. ‘hakkyo aph-eyse’ (in front of school):

[59.4%]₁ nwu-ka [23.6%]₂ nwukwu-lul [17.0%]₃ manna-ss-ni?

c. ‘kwacey ttaymwuney’ (because of homework):

[35.2%]₁ nwu-ka [27.9%]₂ nwukwu-lul [37.0%]₃ manna-ss-ni?

The *wh*-adjacency is also found between two [+wh] adjuncts, as presented in (6). That is, the ratio of the example (6b) which shows *wh*-adjacency is much higher than the ratio of the example (6a) which does not show *wh*-adjacency.

(6) a. [encey]₁ Chelswu-ka Yengi-lul [etise]₃ manna-ss-ni? [12.7%]
 when Chelswu-NOM Yengi-ACC where meet-PST-Q
 ‘When and where did Chelswu meet Yengi?’

b. Chelswu-ka Yengi-lul [encey]₃ [etise]₃ manna-ss-ni? [52.7%]
 Chelswu-NOM Yengi-ACC when where meet-PST-Q

‘When and where did Chelswu meet Yengi?’

In particular, the position []₃ (before predicate) is the most preferred position for the combination of ‘time-place’ [+wh] adjuncts (72.5% preferred in the position []₃ than in the other positions [20.0%]₁ and [7.5%]₂). This is also found in the other combinations of [+wh] adjuncts such as ‘time-reason’ [62.1%]₃ and ‘place-reason’ [80.0%]₃.

4. Discussion

How can the distributional patterns of *wh*-elements be explained? First, the *wh*-elements’ preference for adjacency to the predicate (position []₃) seems to stem from the consideration of the economy. When computing the sentence-final intonation which is rising tone in [+wh] interrogatives, the adjacency of a *wh*-element and predicate ensures the shortest distance between them. Second, the *wh*-adjacency observed in multiple *wh*-interrogatives can be explained in the same way. Furthermore, there seems to be an information-structural motivation. As can be seen in clefts or ellipsis, information-structurally identical constituents prefer to form a group. So, it is also natural for *wh*-elements to form a group. However, the grouping in the clefts is distinguished from that in the ellipsis or *wh*-elements, in that the former is a syntactic grouping(constituency) while the latter is a phonological grouping(adjacency).