

Multiple-subject and Multiple-object Sentences in Korean

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Abstract

The multiple-subject sentences in Korean can be explained as a direct consequence of the fact that Korean uses the same syntactic form for adjectives and relative clauses.

The multi-object sentences in Korean can be explained as cases of incomplete object incorporation; similarly, the multi-subject sentences can be viewed as cases of incomplete subject incorporation.

Keywords: Korean language; multiple-subject sentences; multiple-object sentences; object incorporation; subject incorporation

1 Introduction

Very few languages allow main sentences to have more than one subject, but Korean is one of them. Many authors of books on Korean acknowledge the phenomenon, and even the simple sentence

제가	김치가	좋아요.	
je+ga	gimchi+ga	joh+-a-yo	
I+subj	kimchi+subj	be_good+pres-informal_polite	(1)
'I like kimchi.'			

is an example.

1.1 Some examples

Sample sentences are presented in four lines:

1. Korean text in 한글 (Hangul);
2. transcription according to the Academic Romanization; endings are separated from their nouns or verbs by a +; hyphens are part of the romanization;
3. parallel word-by-word translation; the following abbreviations are used for the endings: +subj: subject; +focus: discourse subject; +obj: object; +hon.: honorific; +attr: attributive; +pres: present tense; +past: past tense;
4. '*English translation*'; the English translation is approximate and nuances may be lost.

The subject endings are +-i (after consonants) and +ga (after vowels).

Ho-min Sohn¹ gives these examples, among others:

와이키키가	경치가	좋다.	
wa-ikiki+ga	gyeongchi+ga	joh+da	
Waikiki+subj	scenery+subj	be_good+pres	(2)
'Waikiki has nice scenery.' (in answer to the question: "What place has good scenery?")			

¹Sohn Ho-min, "The Korean Language", p. 290.

이 집이 지붕이 위가 구멍이 났다.
i jib+-i jibung+-i wi+ga gumeong+-i na+ss-da
this house+subj roof+subj top+subj hole+subj appear+past
‘The top of the roof of this house has a hole.’ (with four subjects) (3)

Yeon & Brown² also give a few examples, with more explicit emphasis of the first subject:

제가 뱀이 싫어요.
je+ga baem+-i silh+-eo-yo
I+subj snakes+subj be_hateful+pres
‘It is I who hate snakes.’ (4)

유미가 동생이 예뻐요.
yumi+ga dongsang+-i ye-pp+-eo-yo
Yumi+subj younger_sister+subj be_pretty+pres
‘It is Yumi whose younger sister is pretty.’ (5)

Martin³ presents a few more natural sentences which feature a focus in addition to two subjects:

그는 성미가 신경질이 아니다.
geu+neun seongmi+ga singyeongjil+-i ani+da
he+focus temperament+subj nervousness+subj not_be+pres
‘He has nothing nervous about his temperament.’ (6)

어머니는 두메 생활이 아주 년덜머리가 났다.
eomeoni+neun dume saenghwal+-i aju neondeolmeoli+ga na+ss-da
mother+focus backwoods life+subj very disgust_head+subj appear+past
‘His mother came to hate the backwoods life.’ (7)

Martin also supplies an example with an action verb rather than a descriptive verb:

사과가 벌레가 먹는다.
sag-wa+ga beolle+ga meog+neun+da
apple+subj worm+subj eat+action+pres
‘The apple is worm-eaten.’ (8)

1.2 Some attempts at explanation

This unusual phenomenon is puzzling, and none of the above books provide a satisfactory explanation.

Sohn (p. 291) reports that some linguists claim that a multiple-subject sentence like sentence 5 derives from

유미의 동생이 예뻐요.
yumi+-ui dongsang+-i ye-pp+-eo-yo
Yumi+of younger_sister+subj be_pretty+pres
‘Yumi’s younger sister is pretty.’ (9)

in which the first subject ending (+i/+ga) is replaced by the possessive ending +ui. But no explanation of this derivation is given. Sohn rejects this “explanation” on the following grounds.

²Yeon Jaehoon & Lucien Brown, “Korean, A Comprehensive Grammar”, p. 97.

³S. E. Martin, “A Reference Grammar of Korean”, pg 284.

1. ‘*Yumi’s younger sister is pretty*’ is not the same as ‘*It is Yumi whose younger sister is pretty*’. The first is a statement about Yumi’s younger sister and the second is a statement about Yumi; it is the second statement that correctly represents the meaning of sentence 5.
2. There are multi-subject sentences which, if the first subject ending is replaced by the possessive ending, become gibberish.

An example of such a sentence is:

오늘	날씨가	눈이	내리겠다.	
oneul	nal-ssi+ga	nun+-i	naeli+gess-da	(10)
today	weather+subj	snow+subj	descend+may-pres	
‘ <i>Today’s weather may be snowy / may include snow.</i> ’				

which turns into⁴

*오늘	날씨의	눈이	내리겠다.	
oneul	nal-ssi+-ui	nun+-i	naeli+gess-da	(11)
today	weather+of	snow+subj	descend+may-pres	
‘?? <i>Today the snow of the weather may fall.</i> ’ /				
‘?? <i>The snow of today’s weather may fall.</i> ’				

This example in particular kills all possibility of the “similarity” between the subject ending and the possessive ending being the explanation of the multi-subject sentences in Korean.

Yeon & Brown do not delve into the problem, and simply state that it is “a complex argument that is still being debated by Korean linguists” (p. 97).

Martin gives several multi-subject sentences in which the subject ending *+-i/+ga* of the first subject *can* be replaced by the possessive ending *+ui*, supporting the explanation of sentence 9 above, but concedes that both sentences are not equivalent. Martin also observes that “certain combinations of subject + verb form close-knit idioms” (p. 284).

2 Adjectives and Relative Clauses

To find a satisfactory explanation we need to look into adjectives, and into Korean adjectives in particular. An adjective describes a property of a noun. It can be attached directly to the noun (“attributively”) or linked to a noun through a verb (“predicatively”). Examples, using the adjective ‘*pretty*’, are:

<i>a pretty flower:</i>	<i>pretty</i> is an attribute and the word <i>pretty</i> is used attributively
<i>the flower is pretty:</i>	<i>is pretty</i> is a predicate, and the word <i>pretty</i> is used predicatively

All adjectives in Korean are verbs, called “descriptive verbs”. For example, the descriptive verb stem 예쁘- *ye-ppeu+* means “to be pretty”. The stem can be extended into an attribute by the ending *+eun* or *+n*, and into a predicate by the endings *+eo-yo*, *+da*, and many others:

예쁜	꽃	꽃이	예쁘다	
ye-ppeu+-n	kkoch	kkoch+-i	ye-ppeu+da	
be.pretty+attr	flower	flower+subj	be.pretty+pres	
‘ <i>a pretty flower</i> ’ (used attributively)		‘ <i>the flower is pretty</i> ’ (used predicatively)		

The attributive form in Korean is also used to associate whole sentences with nouns, a task that is performed by relative clauses in English, as in ‘*the man who chased the rabbit*’, which associates ‘*he chased the rabbit*’ to ‘*the man*’. A simple example in Korean would be to associate the sentence

⁴Incorrect forms used for discussion are marked with an *.

마당에 있다
 madang+-e iss+da
 garden+in exist+pres
 ‘it is in the garden’

(12)

with the noun 꽃 kkoch – ‘flower’:

마당에 있는 꽃
 madang+-e iss+neun kkoch
 garden+in exist+attr flower
 ‘the flower that is in the garden’ = ‘the flower in the garden’

(13)

In sentence 12 the two-word stem 마당에 있+, madang+-e iss+, is extended into a predicate by adding -다, +da; in sentence 13 it is extended into an attribute by adding -는, +neun. (Sentence 13 is the only way to say ‘the flower(s) in the garden’ in Korean. One cannot just say *마당에 꽃, madang+-e kkoch, garden+in flower.)

3 Multiple-subject Sentences

Multiple-subject sentences can be explained by viewing the multi-word stems of descriptive sentences like 경치가 좋다 – ‘the scenery is nice’ (sentence 2) as descriptive stems (경치가 좋- – ‘is scenery-nice’), just as traditional descriptive stems like 예쁘- (‘is pretty’) are stems of simple sentences (예쁘다, ‘it is pretty’). It is likely that these multi-word descriptive stems are the “close-knit idioms” Martin was referring to.

	Adjective = Descriptive verb		Descriptive sentence = Descriptive verb	
Example verb	예쁘다 — ‘to be pretty’		경치가 좋다 — ‘to have nice scenery’	
as a descriptive verb stem	Stem 예쁘- ye-ppeu+ be pretty ‘be pretty’		—— Stem —— 경치가 좋- gyeongchi+ga joh+ scenery+subj be good ‘have nice scenery’	
used attributively	Attribute 예쁜 ye-ppeu+N be_pretty+attr ‘a pretty flower’	Noun 꽃 kkoch flower	—— Attribute —— 경치가 좋은 gyeongchi+ga joh+-EUN scenery+subj be_good+attr ‘a country having nice scenery’	Noun 나라 nara country
used predicatively	— Subject — 그 꽃이 geu kkoch+-i that flower+subj ‘That flower is pretty.’	Predicate 예쁘다. ye-ppeu+DA be_pretty +pres	— Subject — 그 나라가 geu nara+ga that country+subj ‘That country is “having nice scenery”.’ = ‘That country has nice scenery.’	—— Predicate —— 경치가 좋다. gyeongchi+ga joh+DA scenery+subj be_good +pres

Figure 1: Correspondence between adjectives and descriptive sentences

Figure 1 shows how close the correspondence is. We see the double subject develop in the bottom-right box in the figure.

Figure 2 shows the two sentences in tree form. Both sentences have the same structure: subject – descriptive stem – verb ending.

We are now in a position to tackle some of the more puzzling examples above. We start with:

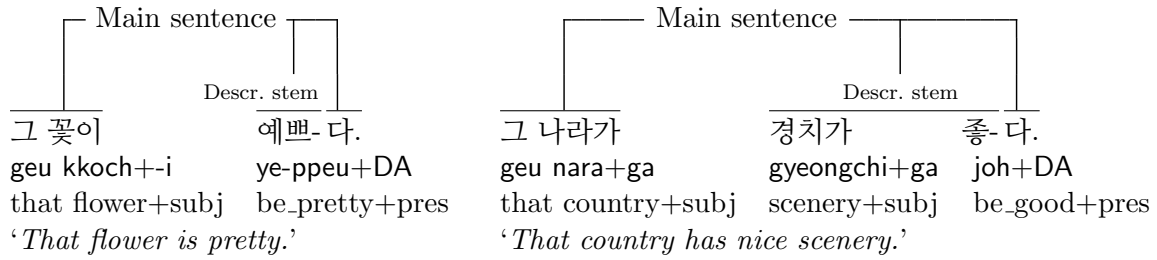


Figure 2: The trees for the adjective and the descriptive sentence

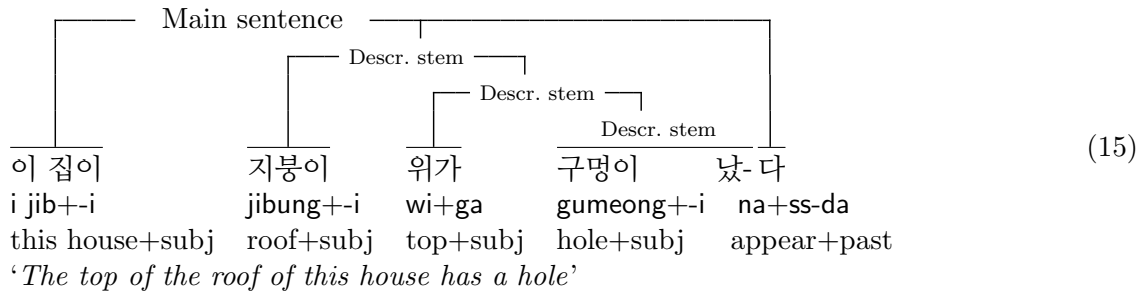
유미가 동생이 예쁘다.
yumi+ga dongsaeng+-i ye-ppeu+da
Yumi+subj younger_sister+subj be_pretty+pres
‘Yumi has a younger sister who is pretty.’ (14)

It says that Yumi (subj) is described by the descriptive stem ‘*younger sister(subj) pretty*’, just as ‘*that flower*’ is described by the descriptive stem ‘*pretty*’.

In grammatical terms, the (single) subject of the predicate 예쁘다 ye-ppeuda – ‘*is pretty*’ is 동생 dongsaeng – ‘*younger sibling*’, and the (single) subject of the predicate 동생이 예쁘다 dongsaeng+-i ye-ppeuda – ‘*is described by “a younger sister is pretty”*’ is 유미 yumi – ‘*Yumi*’. Yumi is not the subject of ‘*is pretty*’; sentence 14 tells us nothing about Yumi’s appearance.

The two verbs above allow different sets of subjects: the verb 예쁘- ye-ppeu- – ‘*to be pretty*’ can have almost anything as a subject, but the verb 동생이 예쁘- dongsaeng+-i ye-ppeu- – ‘*to be described by “a younger sister is pretty”*’ can only have a person who has a younger sister as a subject. They are two different verbs, each with its specific subject.

Constructing a (descriptive) verb stem out of another (descriptive) verb stem and a suitable subject can be repeated as often as needed. This brings us to:



This describes the house by a predicate
which describes the roof by a predicate
which describes the top by a predicate
which says that a hole has appeared.

The following two sentences show once more the close structural, morphological, and functional similarity between adjectives and relative clauses in Korean (and the very different ways they have to be expressed in English).

프랑스는 역사가 긴 나라입니다.
peulangseu+neun yeogsa+ga gi+n nala-i+bnida
France+focus history+subj being_long+attr country-is+formal.pres
‘France is a country with a long history.’ (16)

이것 제가 쓴 편지입니다.
igeos je+ga sseu+n pyeonji-i+bnida
this I+subj write+past letter-is+formal.pres
‘This is the letter that I wrote.’ (17)

It would be difficult to understand sentence 16 without realizing that *역사가 긴 yeogsaga gin* is an adjective, ‘*whose history is long*’, deriving from a descriptive stem *역사가 기-* *yeogsaga gi-* – ‘*to be described by “the history is long”*’: France is a history-long country.

Finally we have to explain sentence 8, involving an action verb. The argument is essentially the same as above: the sentence *벌레가 먹는다 beolle+ga meog+neun+da* means ‘*worms are eating it*’, and with removal of the ending +다 +*da* it can serve as a descriptive stem meaning ‘*being described by “worms are eating it.”*’ With the subject *악과가 sag-wa+ga* – ‘*the apple*’ we obtain ‘*The apple is described by “worms are eating it”*’.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that the ending -(으)ㄴ -(eu)n is used in sentence 16 to create an attributively used adjective, and in sentence 17 to create an attributively used past participle. This suggests that the basic function of -(으)ㄴ -(eu)n is to create attributes.

4 Additional Evidence

The explanation of multiple-subject sentences finds confirmation in at least two features of the language. The first is the placement of adjective intensifiers like *아주aju* – ‘very’ or *제일je-il* – ‘most’. These are placed just before the adjective, as in this predicative use of the adjective:

유미가	제일	예쁘다.	
yumi+ga	je-il	ye-ppeu+da	
Yumi+subj	most	be_pretty+pres	(18)
‘Yumi is the prettiest.’			

With a descriptive sentence we find:

누가	제일	나이가	많아요?	
nu+ga	je-il	na-i+ga	manh-a+-yo	
who+subj	most	age+subj	be_much+pres	(19)
‘Who is the oldest?’				

Assuming that *제일* is again placed before the adjective, this suggests that *나이가 많+다 nai+ga manh+da* is the predicate and not *많+다 manh+da*, conform our analysis. We saw the same effect in example 7.

The second corroborating feature is the way the subject honorific behaves in these constructions. The subject honorific is the particle -으시-, +*eusi+*, which appears just after the stem of the conjugated verb in sentences in which the subject is a respected person. It has no counterpart in English, but is comparable to the use of “Sie” in German or “vous” in French. Yeon & Brown (p. 189) give an example of a multiple-subject sentence with a respected person as a subject (the honorific subject ending is +께서, +*kkeseo*):

Main sentence			
	Descr. stem		
할아버지께서	수염이	많으시다	(20)
halabeoji+kkeseo	suyeom+-i	manh+-eusi+da	
grandfather+hon.subj	whiskers+subj	be_many+hon.+pres	
‘Grandfather has many whiskers’			

The authors express their mild surprise that although it is arguably ‘*the whiskers*’ that is the subject of ‘*to be many*’, the verb still takes the honorific particle. Our analysis has

‘grandfather’ squarely as the (honorific) subject of a predicate consisting of the descriptive stem 수염이 많-, *suyeom+~i manh+* extended with the honorific particle + ending +으시+다 +*-eusi+da*. In short, Grandfather is (honorably) many-whiskered.

5 Multi-object sentences and object incorporation

Next to multi-subject sentences Korean also allows multi-object sentences, although they are less frequent than the multi-subject ones. Some examples follow.

From Martin⁵ we have:

라디오를	병을	냈다.	
ladi-o+leul	byeong+-eul	nae+ss-da	
radio+obj	breakdown+obj	cause+past	(21)

‘He got the radio out of order.’

물고기를	배를	판다.	
mulgogi+leul	bae+leul	tta+n-da	
fish+obj	belly+obj	open+pres	(22)

‘He cleans the fish.’

A somewhat artificial example with more than two objects is supplied by Lee *et al.*⁶:

존이	매리를	팔을	왼쪽을	때렸다.
jon+-i	maeli+leul	pal+-eul	oen-jjog+-eul	ttaelyeo+ss-da
John+subj	Mary+obj	arm+obj	left_side+obj	hit+past

(23)

‘John hit the left side of the arm of Mary.’ =
‘John hit Mary on the left side of her arm.’

Usually the action is to the detriment of the first object, but not always (example again from Martin):

누이가	어린	아우를	옷을	입힌다.
nu-i+ga	eolin	a-u+leul	os+-eul	ibhi+n-da
sister+subj	younger	sibling+obj	clothes+obj	dress+pres

(24)

‘The sister dresses her little brother.’

The explanation is basically the same as for the multi-subject sentences: just as a descriptive stem can combine with its subject to form a new descriptive stem, a transitive stem can combine with its object to form a new transitive (or intransitive) stem. The transitive verb 입히다 *ibhida* – ‘to cause to wear’ combines with the object 옷 *os* – ‘clothes’ to form a new transitive verb, 옷을 입히다 *os-eul ibhida* – ‘to cause to wear clothes’ = ‘to dress’. And this transitive verb takes another object, 어린 아우 *eolin a-u* – ‘younger sibling’, yielding a now intransitive verb 어린 아우를 옷을 입히다 *eolin a-uleul os-eul ibhida* – ‘to dress a younger sibling’. Supplying a subject, 누이 *nu-i* – ‘sister’, and replacing the dictionary ending +다 +*da* by the present tense active ending +는다 +*n-da* gives us sentence 24 above.

If it is grandmother who does the dressing we obtain

할머니께서	손주를	옷을	입히신다.
halmeoni+kkeseo	sonju+leul	os+-eul	ibhi+si+n-da
grandmother+hon.subj	grandchild+obj	clothes+obj	dress+hon.+pres

(25)

‘Grandmother dresses her grandchild.’

⁵S. E. Martin, “A Reference Grammar of Korean”, pg 284.

⁶EunHee Lee, Sean Madigan, Mee-Jong Park, “An Introduction to Korean Linguistics”, Section 5.5.2, Routledge, 2016.

with the honorific particle + active ending +(으)신다 +(-eu)sin+da.

The transformation of a verb and its object into a new verb is a well-known phenomenon in linguistics and is called *object incorporation*. It occurs in a number of lesser known languages, for example Chukchi in Siberia and Oneida in the US and Canada, but, remarkably, English is in the process of developing the feature, and can provide examples. The similarity between *a welding shop* and *a woodworking shop* and between *a welder* and *a woodworker* suggests that next to the verb *to weld* there should be a verb *to woodwork*, incorporating the object (*wood*) into the verb. That verb is not (yet) in common use, but the verb *to babysit* can already be used in several forms: ‘*When I was babysitting at the neighbours ...*’ is normal English.

In most languages that exhibit object incorporation, the newly formed verb is a single word, as it is in English, but in Korean the object remains separate and the connection is less tight: Korean exhibits *incomplete* object incorporation.

6 Subject incorporation

In the light of seeing multi-object sentences in Korean as exhibiting (incomplete) object incorporation, multi-subject sentences in Korean can be seen as exhibiting (equally incomplete) *subject* incorporation, a notion not known in linguistics. Korean, and to a minimal degree Japanese, may be the only languages with this feature. Korean has at least two descriptive verbs that show *complete* subject incorporation: 맛있다 mas-iss+da – ‘*to be tasty*’, composed of 맛 mas – ‘*taste*’ and 있다 iss+da – ‘*there is*’; and 배고프다 baegopeu+da – ‘*to be hungry*’, composed of 배 bae – ‘*belly*’ and 고프다 gopeu+da – ‘*to hunger*’.

It is interesting to note that in the pronunciation of 맛있다 mas-iss+da the break between the subject and the verb has disappeared and that the s has moved to the next syllable, leading to the pronunciation [마싯다] [masiss+da]. The antonymic verb, 맛없다 mas-eobs+da – ‘*There is no taste*’ = ‘*It is not tasty*’ is, however, pronounced [만없다] [mad-eobs+da], with the s hardened to d as would happen at the end of a word. Complete subject incorporation in Korean is still an ongoing process.

The placement of manner adverbs outside the noun-verb complex rather than next to the verb is considered a sign of object incorporation by Mithun.⁷ In the same vein the placement of 제일 je-il – ‘*most*’ outside the noun-verb complex 나이가 많- na-i+ga manh- – ‘*age be_much*’ in sentence 19 can be taken as a sign of subject incorporation.

Although the effect of object incorporation can be expressed in English relatively easily (‘*to dragonslay*’ is not a word, but it is understood immediately), to express *subject* incorporation understandably in English we had to resort to linguistic acrobatics using “to be described by”, as amply shown in Section 3. Subject incorporation seems to be in a different complexity class than object incorporation.

7 Conclusion

The multiple-subject sentences in Korean can be explained as a direct consequence of the fact that Korean uses the same syntactic form for adjectives and relative clauses.

The multi-object sentences in Korean can be explained as cases of incomplete object incorporation; similarly the multi-subject sentences can be viewed as cases of incomplete subject incorporation.

⁷Marianne Mithun, “The evolution of noun incorporation”. *Language*, 60 (4), 847-895, (1984). In particular p. 851.

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