Korean Children’s Knowledge of Reciprocal Sentences with Active and Stative Verbs

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Meesook Kim. 2005. *Korean Children’s Knowledge of Reciprocal Sentences with Active and Stative Verbs*. *Language and Information* 9.2, 127–139. In this paper I investigate whether Korean-speaking children know the basic meaning of reciprocal anaphors like *each other*. I further examine whether they have knowledge of subtle differences in the interpretations of such anaphors depending on the two types of verbs. Fiengo and Lasnik (1973) pointed out a contrast between reciprocal sentences with active verbs and stative verbs. For example, a sentence with an active verb like *The men in the room are hitting each other*, has both a strong reciprocal reading (i.e., every one of them in the room is hitting every other one) and a weak reciprocal reading (i.e., certain pairs of men are not engaged in the action of hitting each other). In contrast, a sentence with a stative verb like *The men in the room know each other* allows only a strong reciprocal reading (i.e., every one of them know every other one). 16 Korean children and 15 Korean adults were tested using the Truth Value Judgment Task methodology. The results of the present study show that like English children, Korean children know the meaning of reciprocal anaphor, and that they also know the semantic difference of reciprocal sentences with active and stative verbs. Therefore, the present study strongly supports the claim that the semantic distinction of reciprocal sentences with active and stative verbs may be universal, and that children’s ability of this semantic distinction might be innately given. (*Sangji University*)

**Key words:** reciprocal anaphor, active verb, stative verb, strong/weak interpretations, UG

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† The current study was supported by Korea Research Foundation Grant (KRF-2004-003-A00077). I would like to thank three anonymous reviewers for their comments. I also thank the audience at 2005 Korean Linguistics Society Summer Conference for their interest in a reduced version of this paper.

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1. Introduction

A lot of research on language acquisition has been carried out to examine whether children have certain linguistic knowledge and whether that knowledge is part of innate universal grammar (UG)(Baker, 1979; Chomsky, 1981; Crain, 1991 etc.). In this paper, I primarily focus on the interpretation of reciprocal anaphor each other with active and stative verbs. More specifically, I investigate whether the subtle differences in semantic interpretations of reciprocal sentences with active and stative verbs are found cross-linguistically, and whether knowledge of the different interpretations in reciprocal sentences caused by different types of verbs is present in young children’s grammar.

Fiengo and Lasnik (1973) first observed the subtle differences in semantic interpretations of reciprocal sentences with active and stative verbs, as illustrated in (1) and (2).

(1) The men in the room are hitting each other.

(2) The men in the room know each other.

Example (1) with an active verb allows both weak and strong interpretations for reciprocity. That is, (1) is interpreted as meaning that every one of them in the room is hitting every other one (a strong interpretation). In addition, one more interpretation of example (1) with an active verb is that not every member is required to hit each other member (a weak interpretation). In other words, certain pairs of men are not engaged in the action of hitting each other member. In contrast, example (2) with a stative verb allows only a strong interpretation for reciprocity. For instance, (2) is only interpreted as meaning that every one of them in the room know every other one. In other words, example (2) with a stative verb does not allow a weak interpretation of “A knows B, B knows A, C knows D, and D knows C”.

Matsuo (2000) investigated whether English-speaking children aged 4 to 5 could understand the basic meaning of reciprocal anaphor each other, and whether they could distinguish two different types of verbs in the semantic interpretation of reciprocal sentences illustrated in (1) and (2). She found that English children know the different interpretations in reciprocal sentences caused by different types of verbs by an early age. In addition, she claimed that this contrast in interpretations of reciprocal sentences with stative and active verbs was found across languages. Therefore, she suggested that children’s ability of understanding this semantic distinction must be innate.

In order to confirm the universality and the innateness in the interpretations of reciprocal sentences, I present data from an experiment designed to investigate how both children and adult speakers of Korean interpret sentences containing reciprocal anaphors and two types of verbs. As in the experiment for English-speaking children by Matsuo (2000), this study also consists of two experiments. Experiment 1 examines whether Korean-speaking children understand the basic meaning of each other. Experiment 2 examines both adults and children’s interpretation of reciprocal sentences with the two different types of verbs.