Subject-Object Asymmetries of Morphological Case Realization

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Hee-Don Ahn and Sungeun Cho. 2007. Subject-Object Asymmetries of Morphological Case Realization. Language and Information 11.1, 53–76. Case markers in Korean are omissible in colloquial speech. Previous discourse studies of Caseless bare NPs in Korean show that the information structure of zero Nominative not only differs from that of overt Nominative but it also differs from that of zero Accusative in many respects. This paper aims to provide a basis for these semantic/pragmatic properties of Caseless NPs through the syntactic difference between bare subjects and bare objects: namely, the former are left-dislocated NPs, whereas the latter form complex predicates with the subcategorizing verbs. Our analysis will account for the facts that (i) the distribution of bare subject NPs are more restricted than that of bare object NPs; (ii) bare subject NPs must be specific or topical; (iii) Acc-marked NPs in canonical position tend to be focalized. (Konkuk University and Sungkyunkwan University)

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1. Introduction

Case in Korean is morphologically realized by Case markers, which attach to nouns as suffixes. It was held that Case markers are frequently omissible in colloquial contexts, as shown in (1).\textsuperscript{1}

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\textsuperscript{1} Ko (2000) observes a close correlation between the non-pronunciation of the Accusative Case marker and the style of the discourse:
\end{footnotesize}
(1) Chelswu–(ka) i chayk–(ul) sa-ss-e.  
Chelswu-Nom this book-Acc buy-Past-Dec  
‘Chelswu bought this book.’

In (1), two nominals, Chelswu ‘Chelswu’ and i chayk ‘this book’ can occur without Case markers. Given that a Case marker is pronounced in the head position of DP (Ahn, 1988), the absence of Case morpheme may result in a bare NP (instead of a DP with a null D put forward in Ahn and Cho (2006b)).

Many previous studies of bare NPs in Korean show that subject-object asymmetries are observed in various respects. For example, as observed in the wide range of conversational data (Lee, 2006c; Lee, 2006a), occurrence rate of bare NPs in complement positions is higher than that of bare NPs in subject positions. Thus, in (1), for instance, the absence of an accusative marker is more frequently found than that of a nominative marker in colloquial discourse. The grammatical contrast in (2) further shows that the distribution of bare NP subjects is not only less common but also severely restricted in certain structural environment, in contrast to the bare NP objects.²

(2) a. Chelswu-lul Mary–(ka) manna-ss-e.  
Chelswu-Acc Mary-(Nom) meet-Past-Dec  
‘Chelswu, Mary met.’

b. Chelswu–(lul) Mary-ka manna-ss-e.  
Chelswu-(Acc) Mary-Nom meet-Past-Dec  
‘Chelswu, Mary met.’

Another interesting asymmetry is found with specific/non-specific contexts.

(3) (Yeysnal-ey) han/etten namca–(ka) sal-ass-ta.  
long.time-at a/a.certain man-(Nom) live-Past-Dec  
‘(Long time ago) there was a man lived.’

In (3), the bare NP is not permitted with the non-specific modifier han/etten.³

Note, however, that this restriction does not apply to bare NP objects.

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² In Section 2.2 we will discuss the difference related to Case marker omissibility in (2) more precisely.

³ An anonymous reviewer points out that the bare subject modified by a nonspecific modifier etten ‘a certain’ in the following sentence is acceptable:

(i) Onul etten haksayng-∅ o-kilo ha-yess-ta-myense, anew a.certain student come-to do-Past-Dec-Quotative  
kulentey cikum naka-myen ettehkey hay? then now go.out-if how do  
‘I heard a certain student would come today, then how come you go out now?’