Ordering a Left-branching Language: 
Heaviness vs. Givenness

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Hye-Won Choi. 2009. Ordering a Left-branching Language: Heaviness vs. Givenness. Language and Information 13.1, 39–56. This paper investigates ordering alternation phenomena in Korean using the dative construction data from Sejong Corpus of Modern Korean (Kim, 2000). The paper first shows that syntactic weight and information structure are distinct and independent factors that influence word order in Korean. Moreover, it reveals that heaviness and givenness compete each other and exert diverging effects on word order, which contrasts the converging effects of these factors shown in word orders of right-branching languages like English. The typological variation of syntactic weight effect poses interesting theoretical and empirical questions, which are discussed in relation to processing efficiency in ordering. (Ewha Womans University)

Key words: Korean, word order, heaviness, syntactic weight, length, information structure, givenness, newness, corpus study, left-branching language

1. Introduction

Information structure and syntactic weight have been argued to be two major factors that influence constituent ordering in many languages (Collins, 1995; Givón, 1983; Givón, 1988; Gundel, 1988; Siewierska, 1993; Arnold et al., 2000; Dryer, 1980; Gibson, 1998; Gibson, 2000; Hawkins, 1994; Hawkins, 2004; Snyder, 2003; Wasow, 1997; Wasow, 2002). In a right-branching language like English, these two factors work toward the same direction of ordering: old or given information is placed before new information ("given before new" as in (1) below); a heavy or long constituent is placed after a light phrase ("short before long" as in (2)). As given information is usually shorter than new information (Givón, 1983), the two effects often converge

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to push the short and given leftward and the long and new rightward. Because of this reason, some have argued that ordering phenomena can be explained by one of the two factors, not needing both, although which one of the two is responsible has been in controversy: some argued for syntactic weight (Hawkins, 1994), others for information structure (Siewierska, 1993; Snyder, 2003).

(1) Given before new
   a. Nixon’s behavior gave Mailer an idea for a book.
   b. *Nixon’s behavior gave an idea for a book to Mailer.

(2) Short before long
   a. Nixon’s behavior gave Mailer an idea for a book.
   b. Nixon’s behavior gave an idea for a book to every journalist living in New York city in the 1970s. (Snyder, 2003, 35)

Left-branching and head-final languages such as Korean and Japanese pose a challenge to explaining ordering phenomena because the factors mentioned above diverge in their directional effects. While given information is placed before new information just like in English and many other languages (Choi, 2008; Ferreira and Yoshita, 2003), a heavy constituent is placed before a light one in these languages (Choi, 2007; Gibson, 2000; Hawkins, 1994; Temperley, 2007; Yamashita and Chang, 2001), which is just the opposite to what is happening in right-branching languages like English. If we assume again that given information is usually light and new information is usually heavy, a heavy and new phrase, for instance, would get mixed signals: its heaviness would urge it to go to the left while its newness would push it rightward; similarly with a light and given phrase, to reverse directions. The two factors, if both of them indeed are in effect, would work not in a converging manner, but rather in a competing way, canceling out the effects of each other (see also Wasow (2002, 82)). This is probably why Hawkins (1994, 144) notes that “overall success rate ... is lower” in left-branching languages with his syntactic-weight-based EIC theory.

By examining the ordering alternation of dative construction in Korean, this paper will investigate whether information structure and syntactic weight are indeed distinct and independent factors that influence word order in this left-branching language and if so, how they interact. Specifically, it will be examined whether the effects of information structure and syntactic weight diverge and compete each other. This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 displays basic facts about Korean dative construction based on the data collected from a million-word Sejong corpus. Section 3 analyzes the data according to the effects of information structure and syntactic weight. Section 4 discusses theoretical and empirical implications of the findings from section 3 and concludes the paper.