Processing and Language Acquisition: Reflexive Pronouns in English and Korean*

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O'Grady, William(2013), “Processing and Language Acquisition: Reflexive Pronouns in English and Korean,” Language & Information Society 19. This paper offers a new perspective on the interpretation of reflexive pronouns in Korean and English. Whereas most previous work has assumed a parameter-based grammatical contrast, I propose that the two languages differ from each other in terms of how they go about processing referential dependencies: whereas English relies primarily on sentence-based structural processing, Korean has recourse to a pragmatically oriented procedure. Evidence from language acquisition, in the form of on-line processing by children, is used to construct a new picture of how knowledge of reflexive pronouns unfolds in the course of development.

keywords: processing, language acquisition, reflexive pronouns, Universal Grammar

* This paper is based on a talk given to the Linguistics Program of the Department of English at Sogang University in November of 2012. I am grateful to the faculty in the program for inviting me to their campus and to the members of the audience for their comments and questions. I also benefited from comments by three anonymous referees and from discussions with Kum-Jeong Joo, Kamil Deen, and Miho Choo.

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1. Introduction

Two key questions arguably lie at the heart of contemporary research on language, awaiting answers if the field is to move forward: Why do languages have certain properties rather than others? How are the properties appropriate to a particular language acquired during the course of childhood?

Contemporary work in linguistics offers essentially two types of answers to these questions. On the one hand, there is the answer offered by classical Universal Grammar (UG): an inborn system of grammatical principles permits limited variation across languages via parametric options; language acquisition consists largely of parameter setting. On the other hand, there is what might be called the ‘emergentist’ answer:1) a simple processor lies at the heart of the language faculty; its interaction with factors such as working memory, pragmatics, and other aspects of cognition explains the design and acquisition of linguistic systems (e.g., O’Grady 2008). The purpose of this paper is to explore the latter type of answer by developing a suggestion about how a processing-based approach to language can shed light on the interpretation and acquisition of reflexive pronouns (‘binding’) in English and Korean.

I use the term ‘processing’ in the traditional broad sense to refer to a series of actions that brings about a result. In the context of cognitive science, these actions correspond to mental operations, as when a particular pattern of vibrations on the eardrum is interpreted by the auditory system as the sound of a piano, or a particular pattern of light on the retina is interpreted by the visual system as the image of a tree. More to the point, processing is also crucial for language, as when a sentence such as *Jerry accidentally cut himself* is interpreted by the linguistic system as a description of

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1) Emergentism is an approach to explanation that seeks to understand the properties of phenomena, including language, in terms of the interaction of more fundamental forces and propensities.