

Second language learners' comprehension of multiple nominative constructions in Korean

This study investigated how second language (L2) learners of Korean interpret multiple nominative constructions (MNCs) in Korean which have two subject nominals involving (in)alienability and case marking alternation. We argue that L2 learners' comprehension of MNCs may be guided more by case marking alternation than by (in)alienability between the two subjects, and that language-specific knowledge about the relationship between possession and case marking can be learned as proficiency increases.

Background Two types of MNCs exist in Korean with respect to (in)alienability of two subjects and case marking alternation (Cho, 2011; Sohn, 1999) (Table 1). In an Inalienable Possession MNC (IPMNC), two subjects form inalienable possession, and they become either subjects with functionally the same postposition (Subject-Subject IPMNC; SS-IPMNC) or the first subject becomes a possessor and the second subject becomes a possessee with different postpositions (Possessor-Subject IPMNC; PS-IPMNC). Contrastively, two subjects in a Psych-verb MNC (PsyMNC) are alienable (marked by the same postposition), the first subject being an experiencer. The first nominal in each MNC is not a typical subject, but sometimes it can have a postposition for denoting the subject, which must be learned by L2 learners of Korean.

Methods 50 Chinese-speaking learners of Korean and 30 native speakers of Korean (NSK), all of whom were university students, participated in an acceptability judgment task (AJT) with 6 test items for each MNC pattern. We also measured their reaction times (RTs) during the task. L2 learners were divided into two groups by proficiency: higher ($n=25$) and lower ($n=25$). The data from the AJT (raw) and those from the RTs (log-transformation, 2SD cut-off, and residualization) were submitted to a two-sample Mann-Whitney U Test and a linear mixed-effects model (Bates et al., 2015), respectively.

Prediction We predicted that L2 learners would show a stronger recourse to a structural cue (a possessive marker) than semantic relationship between two nouns ((in)alienability) in understanding possession, rating PS-IPMNCs higher than the other two MNC types. We also predicted that increased proficiency would allow L2 learners to accept the non-typical-yet-subject-marked first noun, leading high-proficiency L2 learners to rate SS-IPMNCs and PsyMNCs higher than low-proficiency L2 learners.

Results Whereas NSK preferred both IPMNCs, L2 learners preferred PS-IPMNC over SS-IPMNC ($W=8531, p<.001$) with more processing cost than NSK ($\beta=0.34, SE=0.04, p<.001$) (Figures 1&2). Within L2 learners, the high-proficiency group rated SS-IPMNCs higher than the low-proficiency group ($W=3662.5, p<.001$). The comparison between SS-IPMNCs and PsyMNCs (Figures 3&4) showed no within-group difference both in the AJT and in the RTs. However, L2 learners judged the two patterns to be worse ($W=18626, p<.001$) with more processing cost than NSK ($\beta=0.31, SE=0.04, p<.001$), and the high-proficiency group rated both patterns higher than the low-proficiency group ($W=12654, p<.001$).

Discussion Of the three legitimate MNC types in Korean, L2 learners judged PS-IPMNCs to be more acceptable than SS-IPMNCs and PsyMNCs in general, and that their judgment was improved as proficiency increased. The findings suggest that L2 learners may have a strong mapping between possession and the possessive marker, which in turn implies their reliance on the structural cue in the interpretation of the relationship between two subject nominals in MNCs. The findings also indicate the role of proficiency in acquiring language-specific knowledge involving the comprehension of MNCs.

Table 1. Schema of MNCs

Type		Example
IPMNC	Subject-Subject IPMNC (SS-IPMNC)	Na-nun khi-ka acwu kheyo. I-Subject ¹⁾ height-Subject very tall 'I am very tall.'
	Possessor-Subject IPMNC (PS-IPMNC)	Na-uy khi-ka acwu kheyo. I-Possessive height-Subject very tall 'I am very tall.'
PsyMNC		Na-nun Thomas-ka acwu mwuseweyo. I-Subject Thomas-Subject very scared 'I am very afraid of Thomas.'

1) A distinction between *-(n)un* (topic marker) and *-i/ka* (nominative case marker) in a subject position was not considered here due to their interchangeable nature (e.g., Sohn, 1999). We used *Subject* for the consistency of discussion.

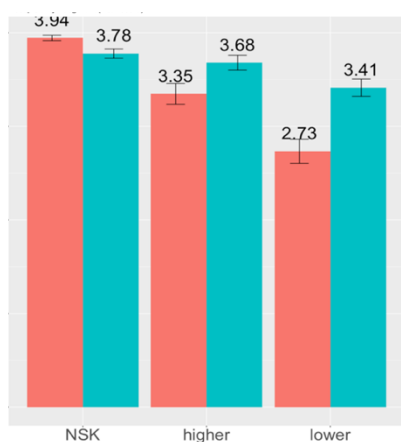


Figure 1. AJT (Study 1; raw data)²⁾
2) red = SS-IPMNC, green = PS-IPMNC

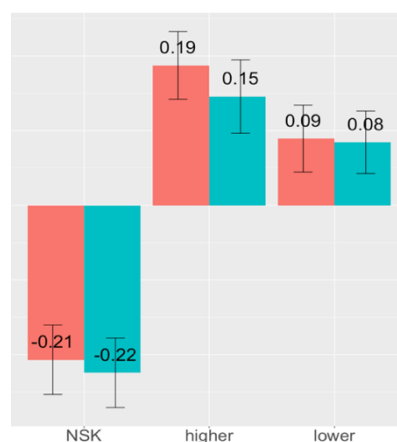


Figure 2. RT (Study 1; residualized data)²⁾

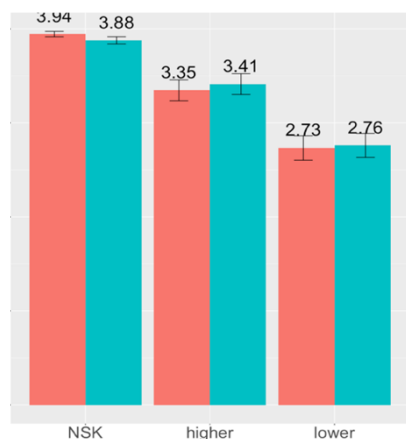


Figure 3. AJT (Study 2; raw data)³⁾
3) red = SS-IPMNC, green = PsyMNC

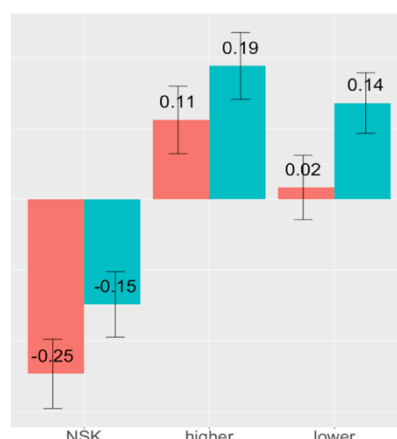


Figure 4. RT (Study 2; residualized data)³⁾

References

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