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## POSTPOSITIONS AND WORD ORDER VARIATION IN KOREAN

MINHUI CHOI AND EMILY SCHMIT

### ABSTRACT

*The syntax of postpositions in Korean is unique and worth analyzing for the purpose of teaching English to Korean speakers. Korean uses a variety of postpositions that affect the meaning and the structure of sentences. Postpositions function like prepositions in English in that they assign case to nouns. However, Korean postpositions are different from prepositions in English in that they call for a variety of word order changes. In this study, we examine how the use of postpositions results in word order variations in Korean and discuss its pedagogical implications in ESL settings.*

### 1.0 Introduction

According to the Minnesota Department of Education's recent report, 8.1% of K-12 students in the state are English language learners (Minnesota Report Card, 2014). At the college level, international students and ESL populations are growing each year. Minnesota currently has 9,890 international students (mainly originating from China, India, and South Korea) and 7,940 ESL students in its colleges and universities (Number of English Language Students in Minnesota, 2014). Of the major languages that these diverse students speak, Korean is an interesting subject of syntactic analysis. The Korean language shares few common characteristics with English. In Korean, the basic meaning and structure of sentences are established by employing a variety of postpositions, which are rare in English. Those postpositions result in significant word order variation issues in Korean. Not only do they designate cases to nouns, but they also function like English prepositions. These significant differences between Korean and English make it difficult for Korean ESL students to quickly acquire certain elements of the English language. This paper will provide an analysis of Korean postpositions, investigate how they may affect Korean language learners of English, and suggest pedagogical implications for teachers who work directly with these students on a regular basis.

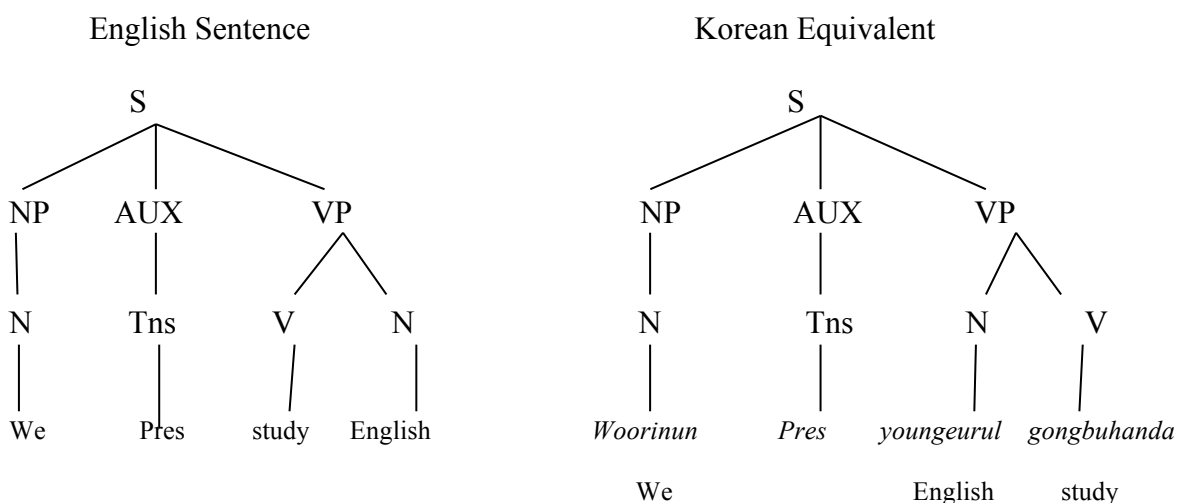
### 2.0 Syntactic Analysis

Korean belongs to the Ural-Altaic language family whereas English falls into the Indo-European language group (Suh, 2003). These two language families have many differences. According to Cho (2004), "the phonetic system, the syntactic structure, and semantics of the two languages are so different that the transition from one language to the other requires enormous efforts from the learner." As a result, it is not uncommon to observe a Korean student taking much time or speaking slowly while creating an English sentence in reply to the teacher in an ESL classroom. Among the differences mentioned by Cho (2004), the structural difference between Korean and English is considered to be the most challenging element that makes Korean learners of English feel English is difficult. The basic difference between

Korean and English comes from the use of postpositions in Korean. Through this research, we will show how those postpositions play a critical role in the Korean language system.

### 2.1 General Word Order in Korean

Korean is known to fall into the language group that has a Subject-Object-Verb word order, unlike English, which follows a Subject-Verb-Object word order. The following tree diagrams show the basic differences in Korean and English sentences:



As shown in the VPs in each diagram, the verb comes after the noun in Korean, whereas in English the verb appears before the noun. Most of the sentence components such as subjects, objects, adjectives, or even adverbs come before verbs in Korean. This allows a lot of elements to be positioned before the verb in a sentence. In Korean, verbs take the role of closing the sentence. Korean doesn't allow any other elements to be added after the verb. This is considered to be the main reason why the Korean language is classified into the SOV order language group even though the unique case-marking postpositions of Korean allow for a rather flexible word order in the Korean language system.

### 2.2 Word Order Variation in Korean

It is generally acknowledged that Korean sentences use a SOV word order, but the word order in Korean is fairly free. In English, except for a few modifying elements, most of the sentence components have fixed positions unless transformational rules are applied to alter the sentence structure. However, in Korean, most of the elements except the verb can move their position freely without changing the meaning of the sentence. Let us consider following sentences:

- (1) *Jisooka Minseykey Gonggeul Jueutda.*  
 Jisu to-Mina a ball gave  
 Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(2) *Jisooka Gonggeul Minseykey Jueutda.*

Jisu a ball to-Mina gave  
 Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(3) *Minseykey Jisooka Gonggeul Jueutda.*

to-Mina Jisu a ball gave  
 Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(4) *Minseykey Gonggeul Jisooka Jueutda.*

to-Mina a ball Jisu gave  
 Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(5) *Gonggeul Jisooka Minseykey Jueutda.*

a ball Jisu to-Mina gave  
 Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(6) *Gonggeul Minseykey Jisooka Jueutda.*

a ball to-Mina Jisu gave  
 Jisu gave a ball to Mina

In the above examples, all six sentences have the same meaning of ‘Jisu gave a ball to Mina’ even though they all show different word orders. The only element that doesn’t change its position is the verb, which comes at the end of the sentence. Korean is a verb final language in which word order is relatively free with verbs always fixed at the end of the sentence.

Then what makes a noun a subject or an object in Korean? Consider the following English sentence: *We study English hard at school.* We know that ‘we’ is the subject from its position in front, and ‘English’ is the object because it is right after the transitive verb ‘study.’ In English, the word order verifies the grammatical relationship in a sentence. In Korean, if nouns can change their position freely in a sentence, how can someone tell if a noun is a subject or an object? Instead of using word order to assign these roles, Korean has postpositions or case markers, which are attached to sentence components. Postpositions are case-marking morphemes that allocate the case to the independent words and make a flexible word order possible.

### 2.3. Postpositions in Korean

Postpositions are one of the main characteristics that make the Korean language quite different from other languages. According to Lee (2004), “[a] postposition is attached at the end of an independent word (without a space) and assigns the word a role in the sentence.” Although the way to classify postpositions in Korean is not clear cut, there are generally subject postpositions, object postpositions, complement postpositions, predicate postpositions, vocative postpositions, adverbial postpositions, connection postpositions, and supplement postpositions.

Postpositions assign cases to independent words and help them work as a subject, indirect object, or direct object. According to Koffi (2010), there used to be a morphological agreement of case in Old and Middle English, but only a few pronouns have overtly marked “case” in contemporary English. On the other hand, most components of a Korean sentence should have cases. These are marked by postpositions. Now, let us reconsider the sentence discussed in Part 2. In the following sentences, the underlined words are postpositions.

(7) *Jisooka Minseykey Gongeul Jueutda.*

Jisu to-Mina a ball gave  
Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(8) *Jisooka Gongeul Minseykey Jueutda.*

Jisu a ball to-Mina gave  
Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(9) *Minseykey Jisooka GongeulJueutda.*

to- Mina Jisu a ball gave  
Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(10) *Minseykey Gongeul Jisooka Jueutda.*

to-Mina a ball Jisu gave  
Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(11) *Gongeul Jisooka Minseykey Jueutda.*

a ball Jisu to-Mina gave  
Jisu gave a ball to Mina

(12) *Gongeul Minseykey Jisooka Jueutda.*

a ball to-Mina Jisu gave  
Jisu gave a ball to Mina

In the sentences above, ‘ka,’ ‘eykey,’ ‘eul,’ and ‘da’ are a subject postposition, an indirect object postposition, a direct postposition, and a predicate postposition respectively. By virtue of these case markers, or postpositions, Korean word order is incredibly flexible and sometimes called “scrambling.” Except the verb, which should appear at the end of the sentence, all the other components can move to any position in a sentence. The following table shows a few examples of Korean postpositions and their usage in a sentence along with their English equivalents.

Postposition	Role	Sentence
i/ka	Subject	<i>Jisuka gongeul chamnida.</i> Jisu the ball kicks Jisu kicks the ball
eul/leul	Direct object	<i>Jisuka gongeul chamnida.</i> Jisu <b>the ball</b> kicks Jisu kicks the ball

eykey	Indirect object	<i>Jisuka Minnieeykey gongeul joomnida.</i> Jisu Minnie the ball gives Jisu gives the ball to Minnie
(u)ro	Destination	<i>Jisuka hackyoro gamnida.</i> Jisu <b>to school</b> goes Jisu goes to school
eyseo	Source/origin	<i>Jisuka hakyoyeyseo watseumsnda.</i> Jisu <b>from- the-school</b> came Jisu came from the school
uy	Possession	<i>Yiguseun Jisuuy gongimnida.</i> This <b>Jisu's</b> ball-is This is Jisu's ball
Kwa/wa	Conjunction	<i>Jisuwawa Minnieka chookguleul hamnida.</i> <b>Jisu- and</b> Minnie soccer play Jisu and Minnie play soccer

Table 1: Examples of Korean Postpositions

Note: Korean does not have singular/plural nor use of articles in Korean, so no singular/plural markers or articles are found in the sentences in the chart.

#### 2.4. Predicate Postpositions

So far, we have discussed how postpositions can make word order change without influencing the meaning of a sentence. Another unique characteristic of the Korean language is that a declarative sentence can transform into an interrogative or imperative sentence without word order changes. What makes this possible is the use of predicate postpositions in Korean. In Korean, adjectives and verbs become predicates with the help of postpositions. These are the ending part of a verb or an adjective in predicates and are sometimes called tail-suffixes, or closing suffixes. According to Lee (2004), “[s]uffixes for a predicate assign the attitude class (politeness and formality) and the tense (past-present-future), and indicate the type of the sentence (interrogative sentence, imperative sentence, etc)” (p. 22). We will briefly discuss the predicate postpositions indicating interrogatives and imperatives here because they are comparable to English, in which those sentences are made through the transformational movement or deletion rules. Let us consider the following examples:

- (13) *Jisuka naeil hojuro teonamnida.*  
Jisu tomorrow for-Australia leaves  
Jisu leaves for Australia tomorrow.
- (14) *Jisuka naeil hojuro teonamnika?*  
Jisu tomorrow for-Australia does-Jisu  
Does Jisu leave for Australia tomorrow?
- (15) *Jisuka naeil hojuro teonara.*  
Jisu tomorrow for-Australia leave  
Jisu, leave for Australia tomorrow.

‘Mnida’ in (14) indicates that the sentence is a demonstrative sentence. ‘Mnika’ and ‘ra’ change the sentence (15) into an interrogative sentence and an imperative sentence respectively without any word order change or help from auxiliary verbs. In English, the Subject-Auxiliary inversion rule and the Do-Insertion rule are necessary to make a Yes-No question and Deletion of the Subject to make an Imperative sentence. However, none of these rules are required in Korean, only a postposition attached to the base form of a verb. When Korean students learn English, they often struggle to acquire syntactic rules of English such as Subject-Auxiliary movement or DO-Insertion, which they do not have in their native language. This underscores the fact that it is very important for an ESL teacher to come up with effective grammar teaching methods for Korean learners of English.

### **3.0 Pedagogical Implications**

The above discussion and analysis highlight a few of the major points of comparison between the syntax of the Korean and English languages in order to heighten grammatical awareness for teachers who work with Korean ELLs. Kellenberger (2011) clearly articulates why ESL instructors must have a firm grasp of grammar:

Your active understanding of what grammar is and how it works will allow you to better understand the errors and challenges that your students face. ESL students don’t learn grammar the same way that native English speakers do...Your job is to help students understand where they’ve made mistakes, when to use specific grammar forms, and the difference between written grammar and spoken grammar.

Clearly, educators need to understand grammar, both that of the students’ own languages and the target language, in order to help maximize student success in English language use. The challenge is for ESL instructors to utilize methods that best meet the needs of the students in their classroom, such as Korean ELLs whose native grammar differs so drastically from English.

The language analysis and comparison provided earlier in this paper offers some insight into the major syntactic differences between English and Korean that may result in language learning issues. Primarily, Korean language learners will find stark differences between the location of the verb in English sentences, and the less fluid word order due to the absence of postpositions. ESL instructors working with Korean ELLs will need to help students realize that word order is very important in the English language, in contrast with Korean, and that it in fact helps determine the meaning of the sentence in most cases. In addition, higher order meaning-making issues such as verb and preposition use will have to be addressed with English language learners, as these are items that other readers will use to judge sentence correctness more critically. For example, Korean ELLs may experience some difficulty in adjusting to the English use of prepositions instead of postpositions. Therefore, thoughtful instruction of sentence structure, verb forms, word order, and

prepositions, as well as the exceptions and transformations to the English grammatical rules will be important in helping Korean ELL students master the English language.

To help English language learners meet these challenges, Kellenberger (2011) advises that grammar should be taught overtly in the ESL classroom to help “students acquire the target language more efficiently.” Students learn best from a combination of direct instruction, observation, and practice; thus, breaking class time down into sections in which the grammar lesson is explained, the rule is demonstrated, and is put into practical use in the classroom will help reinforce grammar rules (Kellenberger, 2011).

#### 4.0 Conclusion

This paper has provided an analysis of Korean postpositions, investigated how they may affect Korean language learners of English, and suggested pedagogical implications for teachers who work directly with these students on a regular basis. The use of postpositions and word order variation constitute a great difference between English and Korean. English language teachers may benefit from an awareness of the different grammatical structures that their students already have knowledge of, and which may make learning English challenging. Teachers may make the learning process much easier, however, if they are aware of such differing syntactic elements as those discussed in this paper. Ultimately, a thorough understanding of grammar, both on the part of the instructor and the language learner, and careful planning of grammar instruction will help students create grammatically correct sentences in written and spoken English.

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