THEME AND SUBJECT IN KOREAN NARRATIVE

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Abstract: The purpose of the present paper is to examine experimentally the extent to which `global theme' of the discourse, `local theme' at the local level, and `previous theme' affect the speaker's selection of the referent of the syntactic subject in Korean narrative. Two groups of forty Korean speakers were asked to tell a story in accordance with a given title while looking at a set of pictures. The results show that all three factors significantly affect subject assignment in Korean and that local theme is the most powerful and consistent factor of all.

Keywords: global theme, local theme, previous theme, syntactic subject

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of how a speaker selects a referent as the syntactic subject for a clause has been one of the most widely-discussed issues among linguists and psychologists alike. There have been mainly three explanations about this problem floating around. One is that the most important or salient referent in the event (`local theme') will be selected as the syntactic subject of the clause associated with the event. A second explanation is that the most important referent of the whole discourse (`global theme') is more likely to be selected as the subject of the lower-level clauses. A third explanation is that the referent of the previous subject (`previous theme') will affect the selection of the current subject.

My earlier studies (1993, 1996) have verified a fourth explanation that local, global, and previous themes together contribute to a speaker's selection of subject in English. The purpose of the present study is to test the same hypothesis in Korean and consider its universality. The organization of this paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews the linguistic and psychological literature on subject assignment and presents the theoretical background on which this study is based. Section 3 describes the experiment conducted for this study and discusses its results. Section 4 concludes the discussion and suggests implications for future research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Thematic Structure of Discourse

In the 1970s, there was strong realization among some linguists and psychologists of how vacuous it was to study language forms without their functions (Clark and Haviland, 1974; Givón, 1979). Researchers began to view language in the context of its communicative, social, and cognitive functions. Once language was viewed in connection with its functions, it became evident that context-free sentential analysis was in some respects meaningless. Givón (1979) and several significant others claimed that discourse-pragmatics play a decisive role in explaining the syntax of human language. For functionalists, discourse rather than sentence became the basic unit of language.

As soon as they began looking beyond the sentence boundary, they appreciated that discourse is not just a collection of unrelated sentences but a unified whole (Halliday and Hasan 1976). It has been found that coherence among sentences is maintained by the recurrence of some elements, or by their grounding to previous or upcoming discourse (Givón 1995). Typically, a speaker unifies the discourse by repeatedly referring to the same referent. A number of studies have examined markers of text continuity via anaphoric devices (Clark and Sengul, 1979; Garrod and Sanford, 1977; McKoon and Ratcliff, 1980; Tyler and Marslen-Wilson, 1982; for example). Givón's (1983) linear topic continuity is one example. Using a quantitative method, he found a strong correlation between the distance of mention of referents and coding devices.

In addition to the linear continuity, the hierarchical nature of discourse structure also has been extensively studied by various linguists (Chafe, 1977; Clancy 1980; Fox 1986; Hinds 1977, 1979; Longacre 1976). Units such as conceptual paragraphs and episodes with corresponding structural reflexes, as well as phrases and sentences, are well-established as linguistic units. The hierarchical structure of discourse is a manifestation of the speaker's thematic structure. That is, every clause, episode, and discourse is organized around a particular theme that is taken as its point of departure.

Some of the earliest discussions on theme go back to von der Gabelentz (1869), and Paul (1880/1975), and etc., but members of the Prague School were the first linguists to fully entertain the idea that syntactic variations such as word order or voice constructions are influenced by pragmatic factors. Their theory of `Functional Sentence Perspective' claims that each utterance has an element that functions as a point of departure (`theme'), onto which further information is added (`rheme') (Dane , 1974; Firbas, 1964; Mathesius, 1939; among others). Their functional point of view is further developed by Halliday (1967), Chafe (1976), Jones (1977), Tomlin (1983), and many others.

Most studies on the notion of theme have been concerned with clause-level theme. The theme of a clause is its point of departure, or what the speaker is talking about. In English, it is usually the first constituent of the clause or the syntactic subject. Although not as strong as the claims on local-level themes, there has been a recognition of the importance

of global theme. For instance, it has been noted that referring to a previously mentioned concept does not guarantee that the discourse is globally coherent. Consider the following example:

> (1) This morning I had a toothache. I went to the dentist. The dentist has a big car. The car was bought in New York. New York has had serious financial troubles.
>
> (from van Dijk, 1985)

Although each sentence refers to a concept that is mentioned in the preceding sentence, this passage lacks coherence because it lacks a global theme. Related to global theme is the notion of `macrostructure' formulated by van Dijk and Kintsch (van Dijk 1977, 1980, 1985; Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Macrostructure is the global semantic structure of a discourse and may be expressed by its title or headline, or by thematic or summarizing sentences.

Although it has been commonly assumed that the global theme has the form of a proposition (Keenan Schieffelin 1976; Jones 1977; van Dijk 1985), it is not too difficult to think of a narrative as organized around a specific referent of the discourse. In particular, those who view the organization of a discourse based on a theatrical or dramatic metaphor exploit the concept of `staging', whereby a particular character takes on more prominence than the other characters. To quote Grimes (1975):

> (2) Clearly the marking of thematization is related to a semantic factor of PROMINENCE. It is as though stage directions were given to the spotlight handler in a theater to single out a particular individual or action, or as though one actor were placed close to the audience and another off to the side (327).

So far, we have examined briefly the history of discourse studies and the hierarchical nature of the thematic structure of discourse. In the next section, we will look at some empirical studies that have attempted to explain the assignment of syntactic subject.

2.2. Attentional focus and subject assignment

The speaker's perspective on what is being said is superimposed on the entire discourse and ultimately reflected in its surface structure. Languages might utilize case marking, word order, verb agreement, or a combination of these strategies. Numerous studies have argued well that the cognitive theme structure is grammatically coded as the syntactic subject in English.

A number of cognition-oriented studies have shown that the referent in the speaker's focus of attention is likely to be selected as the syntactic subject of the given clause in English (Carroll, 1958; Forrest, 1992; Tannenbaum and Williams, 1968; Tomlin, 1991; Turner and Rommetveit, 1967, 1968). The assignment of a referent to attentional focus basically has to do with the importance or salience of the referent. The more salient the referent is, the more likely it is that the referent falls within the speaker's focus of attention and shows up as syntactic subject.

Three competing referents have been suggested for the assignment to attentional focus at any moment during discourse production: (1) the locally salient referent at that particular moment (`local theme'), (2) the globally salient referent in the whole discourse (`global theme'), and (3) the previously salient referent (`previous theme'). However, the three competing themes are all expected to have positive correlations with subject assignment. Thus our general hypothesis is summarized as follows:

(3) HYPOTHESIS:
`Local theme', `global theme', and `previous theme' all positively and significantly influence the assignment of syntactic subject.

Kim (1993, 1996) tested this hypothesis in English by experimentally manipulating the three themes while a speaker performs a spontaneous, on-line narrative production task. They have shown that local, global, and previous themes have significant influence on the speaker's
selection of syntactic subject in English.

In verifying this hypothesis, cross-linguistic comparison is important, since it is expected that all languages will use quite analogous strategies, with some variation depending on the available syntactic devices or social conventions in each language. The present study further tests this hypothesis in Korean, whose syntactic structure is quite different from English. English is a typical subject-prominent language whereas Korean shares with topic-prominent languages such characteristics as double subject constructions, null elements, and no "dummy" subjects. The notion of subject has long been considered a basic, universal grammatical category in the structure of a language. Recently, however, it was discovered that a language could be viewed in terms of topic and comment (Li and Thompson, 1976). The results of this study is expected to shed some light on how languages differ in coding thematic information.

In particular, our interest in this study lies in how the so-called topic marker *nun* and the subject marker *ka* interact with the thematic structure of discourse. The functions of these markers have been extensively studied among Korean linguists and abroad, but it is not yet clear how they are used in discourse. One problem with this study is, however, whether we can call all the instances of *un/nun* or *i/ka* as syntactic subjects. In most cases, the answer is yes, but consider the following examples:

(4) Mary 11/M
tetekwuna con-un ton-i eps-ese
moreover John-TOPIC money-SUB not;exist-NF
`Moreover John didn't have money, and'

(5) John 4/F
con-i tto ton-i eps-ekaciko
John-SUB and money-SUB not-exist-NF
`And John didn't have money, so'

These so-called double subject constructions pose some problems for our analysis. In a number of studies, the second NP has been assigned as the syntactic subject and the first

NP as the topic of the sentence. However, this study counts the first NP as the subject of the sentence because of some semantic considerations. That is, *ton-i epta* `not have money' or *hwa-ka nata* `be angry' is not complete semantically. It immediately raises the question `Who?' if there is no assumed one. It is just like that *sathang-ul cwuta* `give a candy' raises the same question. It is hard to resolve the syntactic and semantic complexities these markers have, but this seems to be the right track considering the continuity of discourse, too.

3. THE EXPERIMENT

3.1. Method

Materials. The experimental materials consisted of a set of twelve simple line drawings depicting a man and a woman on a blind date. In each picture, one of the characters was depicted more prominently, so that he or she could be perceived as the local theme of the picture. The male character was assigned as the local theme in half of the pictures, and the female character in the other half. Thus, the overall story could be viewed from the perspective of either of the characters. Table 1 shows a rough outline of the pictures with the intended local theme (underlined):

<u>Table 1. Descriptions of the experimental pictures</u>

Picture	Event
1	A woman arrives when a man is waiting in a restaurant
2	The man waves to her
3	The woman walks toward the table
4	The man hands the flowers to the woman
5	The man accidently spills water on her
6	The woman wipes up the water
7	The man talks to the woman while they eat dinner
8	The man shows his empty pockets after they finish dinner
9	The woman rises from her chair
10	The woman pays the bill
11	The man tries to stop her
12	The woman walks out

Two biasing titles for the story were prepared to bias the speakers. They were identical except that each included one of the two characters, so that he or she could be the main character or the global theme of the story. The female character, Mary, was the global theme in the Title 1 condition whereas the male character, John, was the global theme in the Title 2 condition. The English version of Title 1 with its introduction is as follows:

(6) TITLE 1: How Mary's blind date ended in a total disaster

(7) INTRODUCTION: Imagine that you are a good buddy of Mary's. You knew that she went on a blind date with a man named John last night. Later, you heard all about it and could imagine it all happening.

Subjects and Procedure. The experiment followed roughly the same procedure that Kim (1993, 1996) employed for English. Forty Kangwon National University students participated in the experiment for homework credit. They were all native Korean speakers and had no linguistics background. Each speaker was randomly assigned to one of the two title conditions and asked to produce a spontaneous, on-line narrative in accordance with the given title while looking at the pictures.

3.2. Results

General Characteristics of the Data. All the narratives that the speakers produced were carefully transcribed in Korean orthography, including pauses and false starts. Then, all the utterances were broken up into clauses. The syntactic subject of each clause and its referent were identified and recorded. Overall, 1648 clauses were produced by the 40 Korean speakers. Each speaker produced an average of 41.2 clauses, or 3.4 clauses per picture. Of the 1648 clauses, 1389 clauses were used for further analyses. The remaining 259 clauses (15.7%) were excluded because i) the syntactic subjects did not specifically refer to either of the characters (239), or ii) they had case markers other than *nun* or *ka* (20).

As the next step, all subject referents were cross-classified by the variables of global theme and local theme. Table 2 presents the results:

Table 2. Total number of syntactic subjects produced under each condition

Syntactic Subject	Title 1 (GT=Mary)		Title 2 (GT=John)	
	LT=Mary	LT=John	LT=Mary	LT=John
MARY	298 (43.0%)	82 (11.8%)	222 (31.9%)	57 (8.2%)
JOHN	97 (14.0%)	216 (31.2%)	151 (21.7%)	266 (38.2%)

Notes: 1. GT stands for `global theme', LT for `local theme'. 2. The numbers in the parentheses are the percentage of the mention within the condition. 3. The total number of observations is 1389 (with 693 in Title 1 and 696 in Title 2 condition).

Table 2 suggests that local and global themes indeed affect the number of mention of the characters as syntactic subjects in Korean. When the local theme is Mary, there are more instances of subjects referring to Mary than to John under both conditions (43.0 vs. 14.0% in Title 1 and 31.9 vs. 21.7% in Title 2). Also, if we compare those cases in the two conditions whose local theme is Mary, we find more instances of subjects referring to Mary when the global theme is Mary than when it is John (43.0 vs. 31.9%). This suggests that global and local theme might be positively associated with subject assignment in Korean just as in English. In order to see whether the results are statistically significant, the next

section will test their statistical significance using the logit analysis.

Logit Analysis. Among the various statistical tools available, the present study employs the logit analysis, a kind of `qualitative response model', since it has a non-linear, categorical dependent variable (See Kim (1994) for further information). In this study, the dependent variable is the referent of the syntactic subject of each clause (SUBJECT) and the explanatory variables are the local theme of each picture (LOCAL), the global theme of the story (GLOBAL), and the referent of the previous subject (PREVIOUS). They are all categorical variables, that is, either Mary or John. They are assigned zero (0) if they refer to Mary, and one (1) if they refer to John. The summary of the dependent and explanatory variables in this experiment is as follows:

Dependent Variable:

(SYNTACTIC) SUBJECT   = 0, if the subject of the clause refers to Mary.
                             = 1, otherwise (i.e., if it refers to John).

Explanatory Variables:

LOCAL (THEME)   = 0, if the local theme of the picture is Mary.
                             = 1, otherwise (i.e., if it is John).

GLOBAL (THEME)   = 0, under Title 1 (Mary-theme) condition.
                             = 1, otherwise (under Title 2 (John-theme) condition.)

PREVIOUS (THEME)   = 0, if the previous subject refers to Mary.
                             = 0, otherwise (if it refers to John.)

Results and Discussion. The estimates resulting from the logit analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Estimation of syntactic subjects with all observations

	Constant	LOCAL	GLOBAL	PREVIOUS	Obs.	Cases Correct
(1) All speakers						
	-1.352**	1.893**	0.571**	0.698**	1389	1002
	(11.623)	(14.847)	(4.563)	(5.588)		
(2) Female speakers						
	-1.539**	1.856**	0.714**	0.940**	709	512

| (-9.268) | (10.038) | (4.030) | (5.350) | | |

(3) Male speakers
| -1.148** | 2.004** | 0.409* | 0.427* | 680 | 497 |
| (-7.009) | (10.976) | (2.304) | (2.381) | | |

Notes: 1. Estimates are made by the logit analysis. 2. The first row of each equation presents
the estimated coefficients of the explanatory variables and the numbers in the parentheses the
t-statistics. 3. * and ** denote coefficients that are significant at the 5 percent and 1 percent levels respectively. 4. Obs. represents the number of observations, and Cases Correct represents the number of observations predicted correctly by the model.

Equation (1) for all speakers shows that LOCAL, GLOBAL, and PREVIOUS all predict positive coefficients which are significant at the 1 percent level. Although all three explanatory variables have highly significant coefficients, LOCAL has an estimated coefficient which is much larger and more significant than the other two variables, implying that subject assignment is most significantly affected by local theme.
If we compare Equation (2) for female speakers with Equation (3) for male speakers, we find that female speakers performed more consistently with the general hypothesis. In Equation (3), the coefficients of GLOBAL and PREVIOUS are significant at the 5 percent level. It seems, however, that there is not much difference in general between female and male speakers.

4. CONCLUSION

By employing experimental methodology, this study has shown that Korean speakers use roughly the same strategy as English speakers for selecting a referent as the syntactic subject of a clause. Like English speakers, Korean speakers are sensitive to the local theme,
global theme, and the previous theme when they tell a story. It is also shown that although the three variables are all responsible for the selection of subject, local theme is the most powerful and consistent variable in explaining subject assignment in Korean just as in English. Considering that Korean is in contrast to English in many ways typologically, it is quite interesting that the category subject is used the roughly the same way for coding thematic information in both languages.

Although this study is a starting point, it has some implications for future research. First of all, the subject in Korean is a composite category of NPs with *nun* and those with *ka*. Future research will have to examine what the exact functions of case markers *nun* and *ka* are in this problem. Second, another characteristic of Korean data is that about a half of the subject NPs are zero anaphor. The discourse functions of zero anaphor as well as case-marked NPs should be investigated further. Lastly, the results have some implications for English teaching. Our common belief has been that Korean subject is very different from English subject, partly because of its case marking system and relative free word order.

Now that we have the roughly same results on subject assignment for both languages, we will need to examine the second language data and see if our intuitions are warranted.

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