Korean as an information structure prominent language

There have been various ideas about the linguistic realization of information structure in the Korean language. While Li & Thompson (1976) viewed Korean as a topic-prominent and subject-prominent language, Sohn (1980) perceived it just as a topic-prominent language. Expanding Sohn’s (1980) perspective, this study suggests a new idea that Korean is an information structure prominent language because Korean information structure is usually marked morpho-syntactically. In general, information structure is considered as the grammatical way of representing new and old information. This study discusses new and old information in terms of two kinds of givenness, referential givenness or relational givenness (Gundel and Fretheim 2004 among others).

As for referential givenness, linguistic expressions are considered old if their referents are already within the discourse domain of the interlocutors at the time of utterance and new otherwise. It has been assumed that referential givenness is usually applied to entity only. This study argues that referential givenness can also be applied to proposition (Choi 2016). (1) shows some examples of referentially old or new proposition, which are marked by verbal endings -CANH- or -KETUN respectively:

(1) a. ecey cal cass-CANH-a. yesterday well slept-CANH-Decl 'I slept well yesterday (as you know).'</n
b. ecey cal cass-KETUN. yesterday well slept-KETUN. 'I slept well yesterday (and you don’t know it).'</n
As seen in the above examples, Korean has many verbal endings which mark referentially old or new proposition: for examples, -TANIKKA, -TAKO, -CANH-, -TAMYE for referentially old proposition, and -KETUN, -TANTA for referentially old one.

Regarding relational givenness, new information updates the stored knowledge of the listener whereas old information does not. This study shows that Korean has morpho-syntactic markers for relational givenness as in the example below.

(2) Q: Minho-ka ecey nwukwu-lul manna-ss-ni? Nom yesterday who-Acc meet-Pst-Int 'Who did Minho meet yesterday?'
A: Minho-NUN ecey Tongho-LUL manna-ss-ta. Top yesterday meet-Pst-Decl
'As for Minho, he met Tongho yesterday.'

In (2A), the underlined Tongho-LUL is relationally new information, i.e. focus, and the rest is relationally old one. But the relationally old information is not homogeneous. (2A) makes a predication about Minho, which can be considered as topic in terms of aboutness. Relationally old information is divided into topic and the remainder. Korean has special morpho-syntactic markers for topic and focus, like -NUN for topic and -LUL for focus as in (2A).

In sum, Korean has a rich morpho-syntactic marker system for the new and old information in terms of two kinds of givenness, referential givenness or relational givenness. Korean can be an information structure prominent language.
References


