

The ambiguity puzzle of KO ISS imperfective in Korean

In Korean, progressive meaning is expressed by the periphrastic imperfective marker *-ko iss-* (KO ISS), as illustrated in (1): KO is a connective (Conn) meaning ‘and’ and ISS means ‘be’ or ‘exist’. A puzzle surrounding this marker is that, with the so-called ‘put on’ type verbs, it can produce not only a progressive state reading but also what is called a result state reading, as shown in (2) (Kim 1986, Kim 1990, Lee 1991, Kim 1993, Ahn 1995).

The ambiguity of KO ISS is problematic to existing analyses: it poses a challenge to Lee’s (2008) analysis, for instance, which argues that the imperfective marker invariably selects for a VP that takes an actor subject. This problem is exemplified by (3), where the subject snowman passively receives the action described by the VP, since somebody else must have put the clothes on the snowman. Son (2004) offers a way to circumvent this problem. She claims that when KO ISS yields a progressive state meaning for ‘put on’ type verbs, the subject bears the Agentive as well as the Locative thematic role, but when a result state reading comes about, it only bears the Locative role; in (3), the snowman merely designates the location of the clothes and hence the unambiguity of the sentence. While attractive, this analysis also cannot capture the full array of facts. For example, it cannot explain why (4) receives a result state interpretation, even though the subject does not bear the Locative role.

This paper aims to solve this problem by arguing for a non-uniform analysis of KO ISS. The central claim is that while the KO ISS that produces a progressive reading is an imperfective marker, the one that produces a so-called result state reading is not. More specifically, on a progressive reading, KO ISS indicates the existence of the progressive state described by the VP in some possible world, just like English *be + -ing* does under Dowty’s (1979) and Landman’s (1992) analyses; on a result state reading, KO means ‘with’, a concomitant variant of ‘and’, and ISS literally means ‘exist’, and together they indicate the existence of the subject under some circumstances described by the VP, such as ‘with clothes on’ or ‘with the door open’. Support for this analysis comes from the fact that sentences like (3) and (4) can be best translated as ‘Subject has/had X Y’, a paraphrase of ‘Subject exists with X Y’, where X is a nominal and Y a predicative expression such as a participial or a PP.

The ambiguity of KO ISS correlates with different syntactic structures: on a progressive reading, ISS behaves like a true auxiliary. Thus the VP combines with KO ISS first and then with the subject next, that is, [DP_{Subj} [[VP] KO ISS]]. On a circumstantial reading, ISS behaves like a main verb and the VP like a secondary predicate which selects for a PRO co-indexed with the subject. Hence the VP combines with the PRO first and then with KO ISS next, i.e., [DP_i [[PRO_i VP] KO ISS]]. Despite the syntactic differences, however, the two types of KO ISS are similar in that, in both cases, the VP and ISS are connected by KO and, furthermore, ISS is predicated of some entity, be it an eventuality or an individual, in some possible world or salient location.

The proposed analysis can readily extend to the other imperfective marker E ISS in Korean, which exclusively selects for an intransitive verb and usually describes a result state, as illustrated in (5) (Y. Kim 1990, Ahn 1995, H. Lee 1991, E. Lee 2008). This extension is possible, because, just like KO, E behaves like the connective ‘and’ and thus the state it describes can be recast as a circumstantial state of the subject, with E meaning ‘with’ and ISS meaning ‘exist’ there too. This analysis also provides further evidence for the deep connection between the copular verb, the verb of existence, the verb of possession, and locative constructions, which is widely attested across languages. In so doing, it incorporates the insight of the previous analyses, in particular, that of Son (2004) (and also Lee 1991), which makes connection between the ambiguity of KO ISS and the possibility of assigning the Locative thematic role to the subject.

Data

- (1) a. Nongpwu-ka **pat-ul** **kal-ko** **iss-ta.**
farmer-Nom **field-Acc** **plow-Conn** **be-Decl**
'A/The farmer is plowing the field.'
- b. Yeonghi-ka **sosechayk-ul** **ilk-ko** **iss-ta.**
Y.-Nom **novel.book-Acc** **read-Conn** **be-Decl**
'Yeonghi is reading a novel.'
- c. John-i **ppali** **ket-ko** **iss-ta.**
J.-Nom **quickly** **walk-Conn** **be-Decl**
'John is walking fast.'
- (Son 2004: ex. (1))

- (2) Ku-ka **os-ul** **ip-ko** **iss-ta.**
he-Nom **clothes-Acc** **wear-Conn** **be-Decl**
'He is putting on clothes' or
'He is wearing clothes.'
- (Lee 2008: ex. (4a))

- (3) **Nwunsalam-i** os-ul ip-ko **iss-ta.**
snowman-Nom clothes-Acc wear-Conn exist-Decl
*‘A/the snowman is putting on clothes.
√‘A/the snowman is wearing clothes.’ or ‘A/the snowman has clothes on.’

- (4) Yenghuy-ka **mwun-ul** **yel-ko** **iss-ta.**
Y.-Nom **door-Acc** **open-Conn** **be-Decl**
'Yenghuy is opening the door' or
'Yenghuy has the door open'
- (adapted from Kim 2006: ex. (11))

- (5) Yenghuy-ka kangaci-ka byengtul-e **iss-ta.**
Y.-Nom puppy-Nom get.sick-Conn **be-Decl**
*‘Yenghuy’s puppy is getting sick.’
√‘Yenghuy is the one whose puppy is sick’

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