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Kim, Min-Joo

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Sources of Variability in the ACC-marked External Possession in Korean*

MIN-JOO KIM

Texas Tech University

1 Introduction

Consider the sentences in (1) and (2). The prevailing view in the Korean linguistics literature is that (1a) is grammatical and that it instantiates an external possession construction (EPC). (1a) also exemplifies a multiple accusative construction (MAC) in which a monotransitive verb (V) co-occurs with more than one accusative (ACC) marked NP.¹ Yet it has been treated differently from sentences like (2a) because, while it has a grammatical internal possession (IP) counterpart (1b), sentences like (2a) do not. More specifically, in (1a), the first and the second ACC-marked NPs are construed as standing in a possessor (PR)-possessum (PM) relation, but in (2a), they are construed as standing in a set-to-subset relation (SR). As a result, (1a) and (2a) are given different syntactic analyses, as schematically represented in (3a) and (3b), respectively: in (1a), the first NP occurs in some object position, i.e., Spec,XP, where XP can be VP (see, e.g., Yoon 1997; Sim 2004); in (2a), it occurs in some sentence-internal topic position, i.e., Spec,TopicP (Sim 2004).

* I'd like to thank the Korean speakers who participated in the grammaticality judgment task I report in this paper. I am also thankful to the audience at JK 32 for comments and discussion. All remaining errors are my own.

¹ In this paper, I do not differentiate between NP and DP, nor between grammaticality and acceptability.

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- (1) a. Yumi-ka **Inho-lul** **son-ul** cap-ass-ta. (EP-encoding MAC)
 Y.-NOM I.-ACC hand-ACC hold-PST-DECL
 ‘Yumi held Inho by the hand.’ (Kim 1989: (3a))
- b. Yumi-ka **Inho-uy** **son-ul** cap-ass-ta.
 Y.-NOM I.-GEN hand-ACC hold-PST-DECL
 Intended: ‘Yumi held Inho’s hand.’
- (2) a. Kim-i **kwail-ul** **sakwa-lul** cohaha-n-ta. (SR-encoding MAC)
 Kim-NOM fruit-ACC apple-ACC like-IMPRF-DECL
 ‘Kim likes fruits, apples.’ (Kim 2023: (1))
- b. *Kim-i **kwail-uy** **sakwa-lul** cohaha-n-ta.
 Kim-NOM fruit-GEN apple-ACC like-IMPRF-DECL
 Intended: ‘Kim likes fruits, apples.’
- (3) a. Prevailing view about the syntax of (1a)
 [XP/VP NP1-ACC [NP2-ACC V]]
- b. Prevailing view about the syntax of (2a)
 [TopicP NP1-ACC [VP NP2-ACC V]]

The EP-encoding MAC in Korean has been extensively studied. However, its syntax and semantics remain outstanding problems because consensus has not been reached among authors as to exactly what licenses it. The licensing condition for this construction holds the key to resolving all the other problems it presents—such as the sources for the multiple ACCs, and the non-constituency of the PR and the PM nominals, which is evidenced by the grammaticality of (1a’) in contrast with the ungrammaticality of (1b’)—because its construction-specific semantics has to be reflected in its syntax.

- (1’) a. Yumi-ka Inho-lul **mollay** son-ul cap-ass-ta.
 Y.-NOM I.-ACC secretly hand-ACC hold-PST-DECL
 ‘Yumi held Inho by the hand secretly.’
- b. *Yumi-ka Inho-uy **mollay** son-ul cap-ass-ta.
 Y.-NOM I.-GEN secretly hand-ACC hold-PST-DECL
 Intended: ‘Yumi held Inho’s hand secretly.’

Identifying the precise licensing condition for the ACC-marked EPC has proven difficult, however, because there is a great deal of variability among Korean speakers regarding the acceptability of sentences that instantiate it. To illustrate, while Yoon (2001) claims that (4a) is an acceptable sentence, authors like Tomioka and Sim (2007) report that it is judged unacceptable.

- (4) a. Cheli-ka **John-ul** **tongsayng-ul** pwutcap-ass-ta.
 C.-NOM J.-ACC brother-ACC catch-PST-DECL

Intended: ‘Cheli caught John’s brother.’ (Tomioka and Sim 2007: footnote 4, (i))

- b. Cheli-ka **John-uy** **tongsayng-ul** pwutcap-ass-ta.
 C.-NOM J.-GEN brother-ACC catch-PST-DECL
 ‘Cheli caught John’s brother.’

Another difficulty in identifying the licensing condition for the ACC-marked EPC is that authors disagree on which data should count as examples of it. To illustrate, while Shin (2022) considers (5a) an ACC-marked EP sentence as it has a grammatical IP counterpart (5b), Tomioka and Sim (2007) claim that it shouldn’t be treated as such because the PR is not an *affected theme* in the sense of Yoon (1989). The rationale that Tomioka and Sim have for treating sentences like (5a) is important to verify because if *affectedness* is not a necessary condition for the EPC, then data like (5a) should also count as ACC-marked EP sentences as authors like Vermeulen (2005) and Shin (2022) would claim; and this will in turn lead us to look for a different licensing condition than *affectedness*, such as *physical/cognitive contiguity* (Yeon 1999, 2019), *material part-whole relation* (Sim 2004; Tomioka and Sim 2005, 2007), and *pragmatically licensed part-of relation* (Shin 2022), or something new.

- (5) a. John-i **ku ai-lul** **ilum-ul** al-n-ta.
 J.-NOM that kid-ACC name-ACC know-IMPRF-DECL
 ‘John knows that kid’s name.’
- b. John-i **ku ai-uy** **ilum-ul** al-n-ta.
 J.-NOM that kid-GEN name-ACC know-IMPRF-DECL
 ‘John knows that kid’s name.’

Given this state of affairs, the present paper seeks to provide an answer to why there is so much disagreement among authors and speakers regarding data instantiating the ACC-marked EPC in Korean. Along the way, it also provides answers to when ACC-marked EP sentences in Korean are licensed; and why EP data like (1a) and non-EP data like (2a) have the same surface form, even though the latter do not have a grammatical IP counterpart, as shown in (2b).

By conducting a carefully-constructed grammaticality judgment task, I argue that (i) speakers have variable acceptability judgments for the EPC because of the pragmatically marked nature of the construction; (ii) a uniform analysis of the construction is not possible, but it can be classified into three subtypes depending on the semantics of the V and the *Part-to-Whole Spread* possibility in the sense of Dowty (2001); and (iii) in all grammatical cases, the PR functions as what I call a Topic-Focus, and this explains why data like (1a) and (2a) have the same surface form (compare Sim 2004; Tomioka and Sim 2005, 2007; Yoon 2015; Kim 2023).

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reports the grammaticality judgment task I have conducted and the results. Section 3 discusses what to make of the results, and presents a new analysis of the ACC-marked EPC in Korean. Section 4 summarizes and concludes the paper.

2 The Grammaticality Judgment Task

To identify sources of variability in the ACC-marked ECP in Korean, I conducted a grammaticality judgment task with 24 native speakers of Korean who were born and raised in the Republic of Korea (i.e., South Korea) using 23 tokens that potentially instantiate the construction, such as variants of (1a), (4a), (5a), and (6a).² This means that all tokens had a grammatical IP counterpart, as exemplified in (1b), (4b), (5b), and (6b).

- (6) a. Yumi-ka **Inho-lul** **sonthop-ul** kkakk-ass-ta.
 Y.-NOM I.-ACC finger.nail-ACC cut-PST-DECL
 Intended: ‘Yumi cut Inho’s fingernails.’
- b. Yumi-ka **Inho-uy** **sonthop-ul** kkakk-ass-ta. (IP)
 Y.-NOM I.-GEN finger.nail-ACC cut-PST-DECL
 ‘Yumi cut Inho’s fingernails.’

All participants were college-educated, and at the time of the grammaticality judgment task, their ages ranged between 26 and 64, with the majority in their 40s. Of the 24 participants, 11 were male and 13 were female, and 17 were linguists and seven were non-linguists who had not received any linguistic training. Some of the participants had exposure to English or had high proficiency in English, but they all learned English after puberty and as a foreign language.

The grammaticality judgment task was conducted via email using a 5-point Likert scale survey form, where 5 means ‘perfectly grammatical’, 4 means ‘not perfect but close to being perfect’, 3 means ‘not perfect but not ungrammatical’, 2 means ‘close to being ungrammatical’, and 1 means ‘absolutely ungrammatical’. There was a follow-up post-survey communication when needed and if offered by the participant. During the post-survey interview, which was also conducted via email, participants were asked why they judged the token at issue to be ungrammatical or marginal and how it can be made grammatical.

All 23 tokens were simple declarative sentences which fit the ‘Subject PR-ACC PM-ACC V_{mono-transitive}’ template, and they were presented without contextualization to minimize the role of pragmatic factors. Every token had a perfectly grammatical IP counterpart, as mentioned above, and they were predicted to be judged grammatical by at least one existing analysis of the ACC-marked ECP in Korean, i.e., Yoon’s (1989) *affectedness* based analysis, Yeon’s (1999, 2019) *physical/cognitive contiguity* based analysis, Tomioka and Sim’s (2005, 2007) *material part-whole relation* based analysis, and Shin’s (2022) *pragmatically licensed part-of relation* based analysis.

² I have included sentences like (6a) in the grammaticality judgment task because their grammaticality has not been fully agreed upon by authors. For example, Kim (2000) reports that speakers do not find (6a) to be grammatical; on the other hand, Tomioka and Sim (2007) state that (i), which is comparable to (6a), is grammatical.

- (i) a. Jinhwa-ka **Youngmee-lul** **meli-lul** ppop-ass-ta.
 J.-NOM Y.-ACC hair-ACC pull.out-PST-DECL
 ‘Jinhwa pulled out Youngmee’s hair.’ (Tomioka and Sim 2007: (22a))
- b. Jinhwa-ka **Youngmee-uy** **meli-lul** ppop-ass-ta. (IP)
 J.-NOM Y.-GEN hair-ACC pull.out-PST-DECL
 ‘Jinhwa pulled out Youngmee’s hair.’

Additionally, in creating the tokens, the following factors were taken into account to incorporate not only what has been said about the ACC-marked EPC in Korean but also what has been claimed about comparable EP constructions in other languages, such as English, German, Spanish, and Russian (see, e.g., Choe 1986; Cho 1998, 2000; Dowty 2001; Levina 2024; and references there).

- (7) Variables taken into account in creating the tokens
- (i) +/- animacy of PR (e.g., a person vs. a car or a movie)
 - (ii) +/- physical or +/- action property of V (e.g., ‘to hit or grab’ vs. ‘to know or like’)
 - (iii) +/- pragmatically inalienable (IA) relation between PR and PM
 - (iv) +/- body-part (BP) property of PM
 - (v) whether V-ing PM entails (→) V-ing PR (i.e., *Part-to-Whole Spread* possibility):
e.g., in (1a), it holds, but in (4a), it does not.

The survey results show that there was not only inter- but also intra-speaker variation in the grammaticality judgments, and that no existing licensing condition can capture all judgment patterns.

First, for every token, there was at least one participant who judged it to be perfectly grammatical (i.e., as a 5) and there was at least one participant who judged it to be absolutely ungrammatical (i.e., as a 1).

Second, one participant judged all tokens to be perfectly grammatical, and two participants judged all tokens to be absolutely ungrammatical.

Third, several participants showed fluctuating judgments by providing fractions rather than whole numbers in their ratings (e.g., 3.5) or by indicating that they’d judge the same token as a 3 in written contexts but as a 4 in spoken contexts.

Fourth, there was no correlation between the participants’ age or gender and their response patterns.

Fifth, linguistic training did not have much impact on the grammaticality judgments.³

Finally, the animacy of PR did not play a significant role, suggesting that *affectedness* does not license all grammatically judged cases.

Upon closer inspection, however, some patterns emerged from the survey results.

First, tokens similar to (1a) (e.g., #1, 2, 11) received high average ratings (ARs), whereas tokens similar to (4a) (e.g., #19) did not, and the standard deviation (SD) for the latter type of tokens was much lower, meaning that there was a convergence among the participants about the ungrammaticality of such data. Some of these results are summarized in Table 1, and they show that there is a correlation between the *Part-to-Whole Spread* possibility in the sense of Dowty (2001) (i.e., V-ing PM entails V-ing PR) and the grammaticality of the token.

³ One participant who judged all tokens to be 5s was a linguist and the two participants who judged all tokens to be 1s were non-linguists. However, even some linguists judged most tokens to be ungrammatical, and some non-linguists judged many tokens to be grammatical. Moreover, the two non-linguists who judged all tokens to be 1s were high school teachers working in South Korea, so it is possible that they adopted a prescriptive approach to grammar when taking the survey, although I could not verify this, as they did not offer to participate in a post-survey interview.

Tokens in Korean and Token Numbers (#)		PR	PM	V	V-ing PM → V-ing PR	AR	SD
1	준이가 미나를 팔을 때렸다. 'Cwuni hit Mina on the arm.'	+animate	IA-BP	+action +physical	√	3.96	1.37
2	준이가 미나를 팔을 잡았다. 'Cwuni grabbed Mina by the arm.'	+animate	IA-BP	+action +physical	√	3.81	1.41
11	준이가 차를 문을 고장냈다. 'Cwuni broke the car's door.'	-animate	IA-BP	+action +physical	√	3.23	1.48
19	준이가 미나를 동생을 야단쳤다. 'Cwuni scolded Mina's younger sibling.'	+animate	A/Kinship	+action -physical	*	1.43	0.95

Table 1. Correlation between *Part-to-Whole Spread* and grammaticality of the token

Second, tokens similar to (5a) (e.g., #13, 17) received high ARs, though less so than tokens #1 and 2, and their SDs were also rather high, similar to tokens #2 and 11, suggesting that the survey participants showed varied grammaticality judgments about them as well. These results are given in Table 2, and they further show that there is a correlation between the *Part-to-Whole Spread* possibility in the sense of Dowty (2001) and the grammaticality of the token.

Tokens in Korean and Token #		PR	PM	V	V-ing PM → V-ing PR	AR	SD
13	준이가 그 소년을 이름을 안다. 'Cwuni knows the boy's name.'	+animate	IA-non-BP	-action -physical	?/√	3.19	1.52
17	준이가 그 영화를 제목을 안다. 'Cwuni knows the movie's title.'	-animate	IA-Non-BP	-action -physical	?/√	3.35	1.40

Table 2. Additional correlation between *Part-to-Whole Spread* and grammaticality of the token

Third, tokens similar to (6a) (i.e., #21, 22, and 23) did not receive high ARs, though much higher than tokens similar to #19, and their SDs were much higher too, as given in Table 3, suggesting that the survey participants showed varied grammaticality judgments about such data, analogously to tokens #1 and 2. In addition, these results suggest that if a *Part-to-Whole Spread* possibility is not available for a token, then it is likely to be judged ungrammatical even if the PM stands in an IA or BP relation to the PR.

Tokens in Korean and Token #		PR	PM	V	V-ing PM → V-ing PR	AR	SD
21	준이가 미나를 손톱을 깎았다. 'Cwuni clipped Mina's fingernails.'	+animate	IA-BP	+action +physical	*	2.73	1.38
22	준이가 미나를 머리를 잘랐다. 'Cwuni cut Mina's hair.'	+animate	IA-BP	+action +physical	*	2.83	1.36
23	준이가 시계를 배터리를 갈았다. 'Cwuni changed the watch's batteries.'	-animate	IA-BP	+action +physical	??/*	2.90	1.42

Table 3. Yet additional correlation between *Part-to-Whole Spread* and grammaticality of the token

3 A New Analysis of the ACC-marked EPC in Korean

I take the grammaticality judgment task results summarized in the previous section to mean that, for an ACC-marked EP sentence in Korean to be judged grammatical, the PR must bear *some* discourse-salient semantic relation to the situation under description. I further hypothesize that for some speakers, this relation can only be *Object*, but for others, it can also be *Object-like*, and for still others, it can also be what I call *Topic-Focus*, which I define as the ‘topic in focus in the discourse context for pragmatically determined reasons’. In addition, I posit that if the speaker can assign Topic-Focus to the ACC-marked PR at issue without any contextualization, then they’ll be permissive in their grammaticality judgment; if they can find a way to assign Object to the PR, by re-interpreting the V+PM cluster, for example, then they’ll also be relatively permissive in their grammaticality judgment; if the speaker does not see that the PR functions as Object or what I call Topic-Focus in the situation under description, then they’ll be non-permissive in their grammaticality judgment.

Support for these ideas comes from several sources. First, in the tokens that received high ARs, e.g., #1, 2, 11, 13, and 17, the PM can be omitted, and the PR can be construed as the Object of the V in the event that’s described by the sentence. This is exemplified in (8). In this sentence, V-ing PM entails V-ing PR (that is, hitting Mina’s arm entails hitting Mina) and this explains why the PM can be omitted without affecting the grammaticality of the sentence.

- (8) Cwuni-ka **Mina-lul** (**phal-ul**) ttayli-ess-ta. (Token #1)
 C.-NOM M.-ACC arm-ACC hit-PST-DECL
 ‘Cwuni hit Mina (on the arm).’

Second, in the tokens that received not so high but not so low ARs, e.g., #21, 22, and 23, the PM cannot be omitted, but the PR *can* be construed as bearing an Object-like relation depending on how one interprets the PM+V cluster. To see this, consider (9). This sentence differs from (8) in that, here, V-ing PM does not necessarily entail V-ing PR. However, the PM+V cluster can be parsed as a complex predicate that takes the PR as its Object, as suggested by O’Grady (2002). Therefore, under the analysis offered by O’Grady and in light of what I have suggested above, (9) is predicted to be judged grammatical by some Korean speakers.

- (9) Cwuni-ka **Mina-lul** */??(**sonthop-ul**) kkakk-ass-ta. (Token #21)
 C.-NOM M.-ACC finger.nail-ACC cut-PST-DECL
 Intended: ‘Cwuni cut Mary(’s fingernails).’

Third, in the tokens that received low ARs, e.g., #19, the PM cannot be omitted, because doing so would completely change the meaning of the sentence. For example, by uttering (10), what the speaker intends to convey is that the person that Cwuni scolded was Mina’s younger sibling, not Mina. Furthermore, unlike in (9), in sentences like (10), the PM+V cluster cannot be parsed as a complex predicate that takes the PR as Object: Korean does not have a complex predicate that literally means ‘to scold one’s younger sibling’, though it does have a complex predicate that literally means ‘to cut one’s fingernail’ (i.e., *sonthop-ul kkak-ta*). Therefore, while the PM+V meaning in (9) can be applied to Mina, taking the PR as its Object, it cannot be in (10).

- (10)*/??Cwuni-ka **Mina-lul** **tongsayng-ul** yatanchi-ess-ta. (Token #19)
 C.-NOM M.-ACC younger.sibling-ACC scold-PST-DECL
 Intended: ‘Cwuni scolded Mina’s younger sibling.’

Given the ungrammaticality of (10), one may conclude that, for an ACC-marked EP sentence in Korean to be judged grammatical, either the *Part-to-Whole Spread* possibility in the sense of Dowty (2001) or the ability for the V and the PM to form a complex monotransitive V must be available in the grammar and the lexicon of the Korean speaker who makes the grammaticality judgment. However, one thing I must point out here is that (10) *can* be uttered in answer to a question which means ‘Who was it that Cwuni scolded their younger sibling?’, as shown in (11) (cf. Kim 2025). (Here, capitalization indicates focal stress.)

- (11) A: Cwuni-ka **NWUKWU-lul** **tongsayng-ul** yatanchi-ess-ni?
 C.-NOM who-ACC younger.sibling-ACC scold-PST-Q.INFML
 ‘Who_i was it that Cwuni scolded their_i younger sibling?’
- B: Cwuni-ka **MINA-lul** **tongsayng-ul** yatanchi-ess-e.
 C.-NOM M.-ACC younger.sibling-ACC scold-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘It was Mina_i that Cwuni scolded her_i younger sibling.’

The goodness of (11) shows that an ACC-marked EP sentence which would be judged ungrammatical in an out-of-the-blue context can be judged fine if the PR is construed as what I call a Topic-Focus—a presupposed topic whose value is unknown at the time of speech and has alternatives, in the case of (11A), and a presupposed topic which answers the Question under Discussion in the case of (11B) (cf. Kim 2025). The PR functioning as some sort of Topic-Focus is not sufficient, however; the sentence’s content must be *out of the ordinary* as well. Support for this idea comes from the fact that when occurring as part of a discourse whose content is *not* out of the ordinary, an ACC-marked EP sentence may *not* be judged good even though it may be judged fine when occurring by itself. To see this, compare (12) and (13): (12) contains token #1 that was used in the survey, and is judged fine. (13) contains token #2 that was used in the survey, and it is *not* judged fine even though token #2 received the second highest AR next to token #1 and it is also one of the most frequently cited examples in the existing analyses of the ACC-marked EPC in Korean (see (1a)). Since in both token #1 and token #2 V-ing PM entails V-ing PR, I submit that the contrast between (12) and (13) is due to the pragmatic markedness versus pragmatic *unmarkedness* of the content of the discourse: when a child is playing with two other children, and accidentally hits one of them on the arm, it can constitute an out-of-the-ordinary situation. On the other hand, when a child is about to fall, grabbing a friend’s hand, if they’re near them, is a natural thing to do. So, while the content of (12) is pragmatically marked, that of (13) is not.

- (12) Ecey Cwuni-ka Mina-lang Yenghi-lang nol-ass-e.
 Yesterday C.-NOM M.-with Y.-with play-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘Yesterday Cwuni_i played with Mina_j and Yenghi.’
- Kuletaka silswulo **Mina-lul phal-ul** ttayli-ess-e. (Token #1)
 And *pro* accidentally M.-ACC arm-ACC hit-PST-DECL.INFML

‘During the play, accidentally, she_i hit Mina_j on the_j arm.’

- (13) Ecey Cwuni-ka Mina-lang Yenghi-lang nol-ass-e.
 Yesterday C.-NOM M.-with Y.-with play-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘Yesterday Cwuni_i played with Mina_j and Yenghi.’
 #/??Kuletaka — nemecilppenhay-se **Mina-lul phal-ul cap-ass-e.** (Token #2)
 And *pro* about.to.fall-because M.-ACC arm-ACC grab-PST-DECL.INFML
 Intended: ‘And because she_i was about to fall, she_i grabbed Mina_j by the_j arm.’

At this juncture, I should note that both (12) and (13) are judged fine if the PR NP in their second sentences occurs bearing genitive case (GEN), as shown in (12’) and (13’), respectively. This shows that the pragmatic markedness constraint that I argue to govern the ACC-marked EPC in Korean does not apply to the IP construction (IPC).

- (12’) Ecey Cwuni-ka Mina-lang Yenghi-lang nol-ass-e.
 Yesterday C.-NOM M.-with Y.-with play-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘Yesterday Cwuni_i played with Mina and Yenghi.’
 Kuletaka — silswulo **Mina-uy phal-ul ttayli-ess-e.** (IPC)
 And *pro* accidentally M.-GEN arm-ACC hit-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘During the play, accidentally, she_i hit Mina’s arm.’
- (13’) Ecey Cwuni-ka Mina-lang Yenghi-lang nol-ass-e.
 Yesterday C.-NOM M.-with Y.-with play-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘Yesterday Cwuni_i played with Mina and Yenghi.’
 Kuletaka — nemecilppenhay-se **Mina-uy phal-ul cap-ass-e.** (IPC)
 And *pro* about.to.fall-because M.-GEN arm-ACC grab-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘And because she_i was about to fall, she_i grabbed Mina’s arm.’

I should also point out here that if the entity denoted by the ACC-marked PR is not contrasted with another entity in the given discourse context, then the sentence may not be judged good even if it is uttered in an out-of-the-ordinary context. To see this, compare (14) with (12). (14) contains token #1, just like (12), but it is judged less felicitous. This is because, here, the first sentence introduces just one object, i.e., Mina, and as a result, in the second sentence, Mina cannot be as readily construed as a Focus; in (12), Mina can be construed as being contrasted with Yenghi, unlike in (14). Some speakers may find (14) to be acceptable, but it is definitely marked compared to (15), whose second sentence contains a GEN-marked PR and thus instantiates the IPC.

- (14) Ecey Cwuni-ka Mina-lang nol-ass-e.
 Yesterday C.-NOM M.-with play-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘Yesterday Cwuni_i played with Mina.’
 #Kuletaka — silswulo **Mina-lul phal-ul ttayli-ess-e.** (Token #1)
 And *pro* accidentally M.-ACC arm-ACC hit-PST-DECL.INFML
 Intended: ‘During the play, accidentally, she_i hit Mina_j on the_j arm.’
- (15) Ecey Cwuni-ka Mina-lang nol-ass-e.

Yesterday C.-NOM M.-with play-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘Yesterday Cwuni_i played with Mina.’
 Kuletaka — silswulo **Mina-uy** **phal-ul** **ttayli-ess-e.** (IPC)
 And *pro* accidentally M.-GEN arm-ACC hit-PST-DECL.INFML
 ‘During the play, accidentally, she_i hit Mina’s arm.’

Finally, I should note that, of the 24 Korean speakers who participated in the survey, seven rated token #22 given in (16a) as a 5 or a 4, and two participants remarked that this sentence seems to describe a situation where Mina was “forced to” get a haircut by Cwuni; that is, what is being described here is *not* a typical situation where a hair stylist cuts someone’s hair. Furthermore, these two participants added that even though they judge this token to be grammatical, they’d strongly prefer using the IP counterpart given in (16b).

- (16) a. Cwuni-ka **Mina-lul** **meli-lul** calu-ess-ta. (Token #22)
 C.-NOM M.-ACC hair-ACC cut-PST-DECL
 Intended: ‘Cwuni cut Mary’s hair.’
 b. Cwuni-ka **Mina-uy** **meli-lul** calu-ess-ta. (IPC)
 C.-NOM M.-GEN hair-ACC cut-PST-DECL
 ‘Cwuni cut Mary’s hair.’

Taken together, this set of facts shows that, for a sentence that instantiates the ACC-marked EPC in Korean to be judged grammatical, the ACC-marked PR must function as what I call a Topic-Focus *and* the discourse context must be *out of the ordinary*, regardless of the V type. Importantly, this differs from the analysis suggested by Yoon (2015): Yoon claims that, for an ACC-marked EP sentence in Korean to be judged good, its content must be *newsworthy*. However, the difference between (12) and (14) clearly shows that making the discourse context newsworthy does not sufficiently license an ACC-marked EP sentence. Moreover, the fact that the grammaticality of (10) improves dramatically when it occurs in contexts like (11) shows that meeting the pragmatic constraints I have identified above is crucial for an ACC-marked EP sentence in Korean to be licensed.

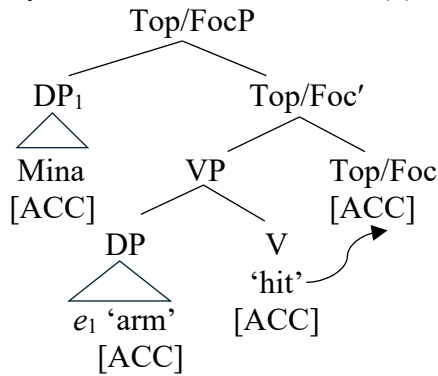
Why is the ACC-marked EPC in Korean subject to such pragmatic constraints? My answer is that that’s because, between the EPC and the IPC, the latter is the unmarked form, so in “ordinary” contexts, using the unmarked form better complies with the Gricean Maxim of Manner (Grice 1975; Levinson 2000). In other words, the EPC is morpho-syntactically marked and as such it can only be used felicitously to convey a pragmatically marked meaning. As a corollary, unless the relevance of using an ACC-marked EP sentence to the discourse is made clear in the course of the conversation, the hearer will find its use odd or even ungrammatical.

How do we implement these ideas within a formal syntactic framework? Given what we have learned from the survey results and what I have presented above, a uniform analysis of the ACC-marked EPC in Korean does not seem possible. However, I’d like to suggest that in all grammatically judged cases, the PR occurs at the specifier (Spec) position of a Topic-Focus Phrase (Top/FocP) that is projected above VP, though the V may occur in different positions depending on whether V raising is possible or not. More concretely, in sentences like (1a) or token

#1, the V raises all the way up to the head position of Top/FocP, i.e., Top/Foc; in sentences like (6a) or token #21, the PM incorporates into V, and the PM+V cluster raises to Top/Foc; and in sentences like (4a) or token #19, the V does not raise to Top/Foc (though it may raise to Spec,AgrOP for ACC-licensing for the PM). Below, I explain each case in more detail.

First, in the “good” cases like token #1 or sentence (8), the V raises all the way up Top/Foc and as a result, the PR, which occurs at Spec,Top/FocP, receives ACC from the V+Topic/Foc complex. I submit that V raising is licensed in such cases because, due to the lexical semantics of the V and the inherently IA relation that holds between the PR and the PM, V-ing PM entails V-ing PR, and thus, the resulting layered VP *syntactically* encodes the *Part-to-Whole Spread* in the sense of Dowty (2001) (compare Cho 1992; Cho 1998, 2000; Sim 2004). As for the ACC on the PM, I assume that it is licensed by the V since the PM occurs within the VP domain and in Korean, any NP that occurs within the maximal projection of a monotransitive V may receive ACC, as commonly held in the literature (Maling and Kim 1992; Wechsler and Lee 1996). Putting these ideas together, I present (17) as the Top/FocP level structure of token #1/sentence (8). (Here and below, *e* stands for an empty category that bears the same index as the PR.⁴)

(17) Syntax of token #1/sentence (8)

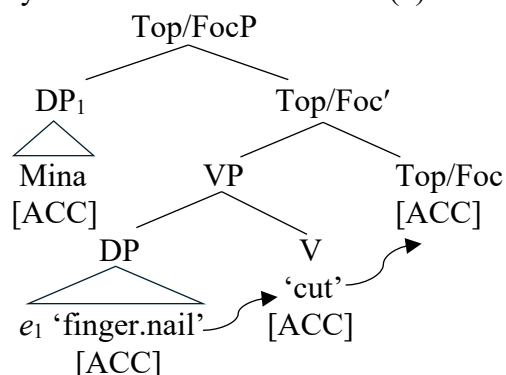


Second, in the “okay” cases like token #21 or sentence (9), if the pragmatic conditions I have proposed above are met *and* if the speaker can treat the PM+V as forming a complex monotransitive V which can be used independently (e.g., if it exists as a separate expression in

⁴ In this paper, I assume that the PR and the PM NPs are semantically related due to the presence of this empty category, but I remain agnostic as to whether this empty category is a trace, a PRO, or a *pro*; if it is a trace, then that means that the PR has undergone possessor raising (Chun 1985; Choe 1986; Ura 1996). If it is a PRO or a *pro*, then that means that the PR is base-generated at Spec,Top/FocP. I cannot take up this issue here because there is a bulk of literature on this topic which I cannot do justice to in this limited space (see Yoon 2015 for discussion and additional references). Moreover, in my other work (Kim 2025), I have shown that when it comes to environments like token #1/sentence (8), this empty category can be a trace, a PRO, or a *pro*, but when occurring in environments like token #19/sentence (10), it can only be a *pro*. Therefore, for the sake of simplicity, treating this empty category as a theoretically neutral entity as I have done here will allow me to focus on the main points I wish to make in this paper, namely that the ACC-marked PR that occurs in a grammatically judged EP sentence in Korean merges at Spec,Top/FocP, and that it can be construed as Object only if the V raises to Top/Foc, thereby assigning ACC to it, in conjunction with the head of Top/FocP.

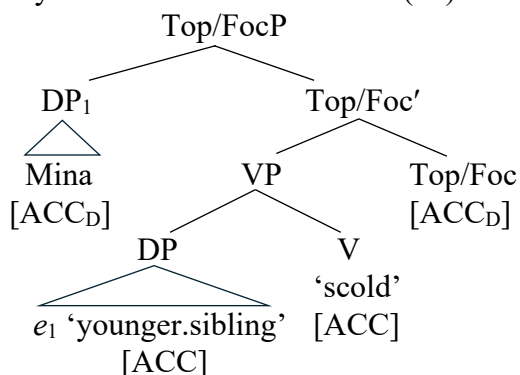
their lexicon), then the PM+V cluster raises to Top/Foc; consequently, the PR which occurs at Spec,Top/FocP receives ACC from the PM+V+Topic/Foc complex and thus functions not only as Object but also as Topic-Focus. As for the PM, again, I assume that it receives ACC from the V by virtue of the fact that it occurs within the VP domain.⁵

(18) Syntax of token #21/sentence (9)



Third, in cases like token #19 or sentence (10), the V does not raise to Top/Foc because its only Object is the PM. Therefore, in the absence of any direct semantic relation between the V and the PR, the sentence cannot be judged grammatical unless the Topic-Focus status of the PR is made clear in the discourse context. This also means that, in sentences like (10), the ACC on the PR is not a structural case (Case); it is better analyzed as a discourse marker (ACC_D), as suggested by authors like Schütze (1996, 2001) and Kim (2000).

(19) Syntax of token #19/sentence (10)



⁵ Given the way so-called weak definites in English and other languages have been treated in the literature, e.g., *the market* in sentences like *On Saturdays, I go to the market*, when occurring in environments like token #21/sentence (9), the PM can be treated as a weak definite which helps *name* an activity (see Carlson and Sussman 2005; Carlson et al. 2006; Klein et al. 2013; Levina 2024). If such an analysis of some of the ACC-marked EP sentences in Korean turns out to be correct, then the syntax and the semantics of sentences like (9) need to be far more elaborated than what I have presented in this paper; and this will involve discussing various types of definiteness and NP-internal syntax for bare noun languages like Korean. I leave further exploring this possibility to future research.

Under the present analysis, then, while the PR NPs that occur in sentences like (8) and (9) merge at a *derived semi-A-position*, the PR NPs that occur in sentences like (10) merge at a *strictly A-bar position* (compare, a.o., Yoon 2007; Kitaoka 2017; Kim 2025).⁶ Importantly, this clarifies the status of the PR and the PM NPs that occur in ACC-marked EP sentences in Korean, and also sheds light on why some of the PM NPs have been reported to exhibit mixed properties of being both an argument and an adjunct (see Kim 2000 and references there); in sentences like (8), they are secondary objects but their presence is not syntactically required, so they act like adjuncts.

The proposed analysis yields additional welcome results. First, it explains why sentences like (1a) and (2a) have the same surface form: in both types of MAC, the first ACC-marked NP is construed as some sort of Topic (compare Sim 2004; Kim 2023). Second, it accounts for the non-constituency of the PR and the PM NPs exemplified in (1a'): the ACC-marked PR merges at Spec,Top/FocP, and therefore, it does not form a syntactic constituent with the PM. Third, it provides an account for the sources of the multiple ACCs in sentences like (1a), (2a), and (5a): in all such sentences, the ACC originates from the V but the highest ACC comes from the V+Topic/Focus complex. Additionally, the present analysis implicates that what appears to be an ACC marker in human language may encode not only a grammatical relation (i.e., Object) but also a discourse relation (e.g., Topic-Focus), and in the case of the ACC-marked EPC at hand, this is possible because of the construction-specific semantics/pragmatics that licenses V raising (compare Schütze 1996, 2001; Kim 2000; Sim 2004). Finally, if it turns out that some ACC-marked EP sentences in Korean exemplify possessor raising and therefore some of the occurrences of the empty category that's inside the PM's projection are traces, then it implicates that NP raising is a semantically-pragmatically triggered phenomenon, as independently argued by Aissen and Polian (2024) and Law and Hirschberg (2025) for languages like Tsel'talan and Mandarin Chinese.

4 Conclusion

The primary goal of this paper has been to provide an answer to why there has been so much disagreement among authors and speakers regarding data instantiating the ACC-marked EPC in Korean. By conducting a grammaticality judgment task and by looking at additional data, I have argued that such disagreement is due largely to the pragmatic markedness of the construction.

Although the grammaticality judgment results I have obtained show a great deal of variation both within and across the survey participants, I have proposed that ACC-marked EP sentences in Korean can be classified into three subtypes depending on the semantics of the V and the *Part-to-Whole Spread* possibility in the sense of Dowty (2001) but that in all cases, the PR must function as what I call a Topic-Focus and thus merge at Spec,Top/FocP.

One of the most notable consequences of the proposed analysis is that it offers an explanation for why the EPC has the surface form that it does, similar to SR-encoding sentences like (2a) (compare, a.o. Sim 2004; Tomioka and Sim 2005, 2007; Kim 2023).

This paper also demonstrates that even though Korean is a discourse-oriented language (Sohn 1999), lexical semantics and the entailment relation that holds between VP meanings matter in structure building, in particular in V-raising contexts (compare, a.o., Cho 1992; Cho 1998, 2000).

The present paper leaves several questions for future research, and these include but are not limited to: (i) how conducting a different kind of grammaticality judgment task with a larger

⁶ I thank James Yoon for asking a question about this.

number of participants may yield different results than what is reported here; (ii) whether the proposed analysis of the ACC-marked EPC in Korean extends to the EPCs in other languages as well as to other types of NP raising; and (iii) what the exact status of ACC in human language is. About the last issue, previous research has shown that ACC encodes aspectual meanings such as telicity (see Kratzer 2004 and references there); this study has shown that it can mark what I call a Topic-Focus *if* it is linked to another ACC-marked NP in a monotransitive VP structure via an empty category that carries the same index. If correct, this suggests that Case in human language is not only a morpho-syntactic device but also a semantico-pragmatic device.

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