

NOTE

**Word order preferences for direct and indirect objects
in children learning Korean***

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ABSTRACT

Pre-school Korean children typically manifest higher comprehension rates on the 'unmarked' SOV sentences of their language than on the 'scrambled' OSV patterns. To date, however, scant attention has been paid to children's ordering preferences with respect to direct and

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indirect objects. The results of an act-out comprehension experiment involving 40 subjects (aged 4;0 to 7;0) show a strong, statistically significant preference for the accusative–dative order, despite evidence that the reverse order is more common in mother-to-child speech. Two hypotheses are considered, one involving the relationship between word order and grammatical relations and the other involving the relationship between word order and the types of situations denoted by the sentences in question. The results of a follow-up study involving transitive verbs with instrument arguments provide strong evidence in favour of the latter hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

Korean is often called a ‘free word order’ language because of the variation that it permits in the ordering of a verb’s arguments. For example, thanks to the presence of case markers, the (a) and (b) versions of (1) have the same interpretation, with *yeca* ‘woman’ as the subject and *namca* ‘man’ as the direct object. (All Korean examples are transliterated using the Yale system of romanization.)

(1) a. *Subject–direct object–verb (SOV) order*:

Yeca-ka namca-lul po-ass-ta.
 woman-Nom man -Ac see-Pst-Decl
 ‘The woman saw the man.’

b. *Direct object–subject–verb (OSV) order*:

Namca-lul yeca-ka po-ass-ta.
 man -Ac woman-Nom see-Pst-Decl
 ‘The woman saw the man.’

Work by Cho (1981), Chung (1994), and Kim, O’Grady & Cho (1995) suggests that children are able to use case markers to interpret OSV sentences by age four or so. Prior to that time, there is a tendency to interpret the first NP as the subject and the second NP as the direct object. This gives the correct interpretation for SOV sentences such as (1a), but yields the wrong result for the OSV pattern in (1b), which is incorrectly taken to mean ‘The man saw the woman’.

The purpose of this paper is to extend this research to the relative ordering of direct and indirect objects. As shown in the following examples, these elements can also be freely ordered with respect to each other, thanks to the presence of the dative and accusative markers.

(2) a. *Indirect object–direct object order*

Ai-ka KAY-HANTHEY TOL-UL tenci-ess-ta.
 child-Nom dog-Dat stone-Ac throw-Pst-Decl
 ‘The child threw a stone to the dog.’

b. *Direct object–indirect object order*

Ai-ka TOL-UL KAY-HANTHEY tenci-ess-ta.
 child-Nom stone-Ac dog-Dat throw-Pst-Decl
 ‘The child threw a stone to the dog.’

Our paper considers the question of whether children prefer one or the other of these orders as well as the factors that might be responsible for any such preference.

We begin our consideration of these matters by reporting on a comprehension experiment that reveals an initial preference for the direct object–indirect object (accusative–dative) order – a surprising result given that the reverse order is more common in maternal speech to children. The third section of our paper describes a follow-up experiment that was conducted in order to assist in identifying the factors responsible for this preference. We present a general discussion and conclusion in the fourth section.

EXPERIMENT 1

SUBJECTS

Forty Korean-speaking subjects participated in this experiment – 10 four-year-olds¹ (mean age 4;4), 10 five-year-olds (mean age 5;7), 10 six-year-olds (mean age 6;5), and 10 seven-year-olds (mean age 7;6), all of whom lived in Seoul and Chollabukto, Korea. The socio-economic status of all families places them in the middle class in Korea.

METHOD

The children were asked to respond to requests with the help of stuffed toys and other props provided by the experimenter. All subjects were tested individually in a quiet place.

Sentence types

There were twenty test sentences, with five tokens of each of the four types exemplified below. In order to ensure the relevance of case markers to the sentence’s interpretation, all test items were semantically reversible with either animate or inanimate referents for both the direct object and the indirect object.² The test sentences were presented in random order. (A complete list of test sentences can be found in the appendix.)

[1] A pilot study suggested that children under age 4;0 were not appropriate subjects for this study.

[2] Although this ruled out use of such frequently heard dative verbs as ‘give’ and ‘feed’, which typically have an inanimate direct object and an animate indirect object, we were nonetheless able to employ items that are familiar to pre-school children.

(3) a. *Animate direct object; animate indirect object*

Dative–accusative order:

So-hanthey kom-ul mile-cwu-llyay-yo?

cow-Dat bear-Ac push-Ben-Fut-SentEnde

‘Will you push the bear to the cow?’

Accusative–dative order:

Kom-ul so-hanthey mile-cwu-llyay-yo?

bear-Ac cow-Dat push-Ben-Fut-SentEnde

‘Will you push the bear to the cow?’

b. *Inanimate direct object; inanimate indirect object*

Dative–accusative order:

Moca-ey sonswuken-ul tencye-cwu-llyay-yo?

cap-Dat handkerchief-Ac throw-Ben-Fut-SentEnde

‘Will you throw the handkerchief at the cap?’

Accusative–dative order:

Sonswuken-ul moca-ey tencye-cwu-llyay-yo?

handkerchief-Ac cap-Dat throw-Ben-Fut-SentEnde

‘Will you throw the handkerchief at the cap?’

Two variants of the dative marker are found in these sentences – *hanthey*, which is used for NPs with animate referents, and *-ey*, which occurs with NPs with inanimate referents.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the children did far better on the accusative–dative pattern than on the reverse word order, with a success rate as high as 100 % on the former pattern (for the seven-year-olds) compared to as low as 20 %

TABLE 1. *Results from the comprehension task (percentage correct)*

Age group	Animate–animate		Inanimate–inanimate	
	acc–dat	dat–acc	acc–dat	dat–acc
4;0	88 %	20 %	88 %	44 %
5;0	90 %	66 %	96 %	64 %
6;0	94 %	70 %	96 %	72 %
7;0	100 %	88 %	100 %	90 %
overall	93 %	61 %	95 %	67.5 %

on the latter pattern (among the four-year-olds). Moreover, errors on the dative–accusative pattern invariably involved reversals – i.e. interpreting it as if it were an accusative–dative pattern.

Preliminary statistical analysis revealed no effect for the animacy of the verb’s arguments ($p = 0.111$), so the results of the animate and inanimate

conditions were combined for subsequent analysis. A repeated measures 3-way ANOVA (age, order, and animacy) revealed a significant effect for age ($F(3, 36) = 15.139, p = 0.0001$). More crucially in light of the focus of our study, tests of within-subject effects revealed that children's performance was significantly better on the accusative-dative order than on the dative-accusative order ($F(1, 36) = 59.617, p = 0.0001$).

In addition, there was a significant interaction between order and age ($F(3, 36) = 6.167, p = 0.0017$). That is, as figures 1 and 2 help illustrate, the

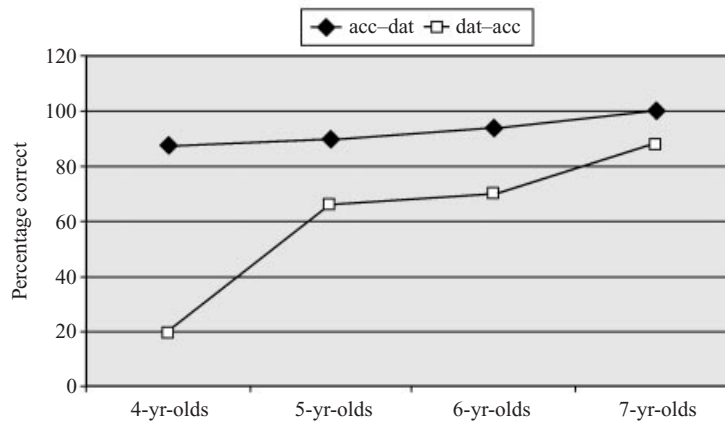


Fig. 1. Comprehension of the animate-animate pattern.

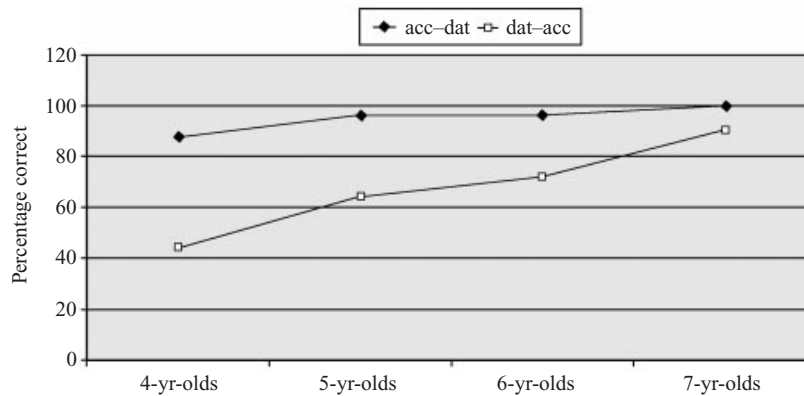


Fig. 2. Comprehension of the inanimate-inanimate pattern.

older the children were, the better was their performance on the dative-accusative pattern. On the other hand, there was no large difference among age groups in terms of their performance on the accusative-dative order: they did well on this pattern regardless of age.

DISCUSSION

As just reported, the results of our comprehension experiment reveal that Korean children do far better on accusative–dative patterns than on dative–accusative constructions, whose interpretation they tend to reverse. Interestingly, there seems to be nothing in maternal speech to children that could account for this. In fact, in the course of examining eighteen hours of transcripts of mother-to-child speech for three Korean dyads over a six-month period (beginning when the child's age was 3;2 to 3;10), we found 240 examples of sentences containing both an overt direct object and an overt indirect object in maternal speech. (Because Korean is a pro-drop language, at least one object argument is often left unexpressed in clauses built around a triadic verb.) Of these, 168 (70 %) employed the dative–accusative order. Moreover, of the seven verbs that were used more than twice with both a direct object and an indirect object, all but one occurred more frequently in the dative–accusative order. (The one exception, *kactacwuta* 'take-and-give', occurred twice in the accusative–dative order and once in the dative–accusative order.)

Why then do children prefer the accusative–dative order? We will focus here on two possibilities, one involving the relationship between word order and grammatical roles and the other involving the relationship between word order and the situations denoted by sentences.

The literature on syntactic typology makes frequent reference to the existence of a relational hierarchy that helps define the accessibility of NPs to a variety of syntactic processes such as relativization, topicalization, agreement, anaphor binding, and so forth (Keenan & Comrie, 1977; Johnston, 1977; Croft, 1990; Pollard & Sag, 1992).

(4) *The relational hierarchy*

subject > direct object > indirect object > oblique > ...

It is sometimes suggested (e.g. Kayne 1994) that the relative structural prominence of arguments is reflected in their relative order, and it is conceivable that children initially exhibit a preference for this principle – hence direct object before indirect object. Let us refer to this as THE HIERARCHY HYPOTHESIS.

(5) *The Hierarchy Hypothesis:*

Children prefer sentences whose word order reflects the relative prominence of grammatical relations.

The second possibility that we wish to consider is that children favour patterns whose constituent order is aligned in a particular way with the corresponding situation. Sentences that contain a direct object and an indirect object typically denote situations in which the referent of the subject

acts on the referent of the direct object, thereby causing its transfer to the referent of the indirect object (e.g. Talmy, 1988; Van Voorst, 1988: 27; Pinker, 1989: 193; Dik, 1989; Croft, 1991: 262; Langacker, 1995: 18–20; Ritter & Rosen, 1998). Thus, in the case of a sentence such as *Yeca-ka tol-ul kay-hanthey tenci-ess-ta* ‘The girl threw a stone to the dog’, the girl acts on the stone causing it to go to the dog. This yields the following ‘action chain’, to use Langacker’s term.

- (6) agent → patient → goal

It is conceivable that children exhibit an initial preference for sentences whose word order is iconic with the corresponding situation, presenting the agent/subject first, then the patient/direct object, and then the goal/indirect object. Let us refer to this as the *ICONICITY HYPOTHESIS*. (For a general discussion of iconicity, see Haiman, 1985a, b.)

- (7) *The Iconicity Hypothesis:*

Children prefer sentences whose word order is iconic with the corresponding situation.

EXPERIMENT 2

How can we choose between these two hypotheses? Nothing can be inferred from the investigation of the sentence types we have been considering, since both hypotheses make the same prediction for such patterns – namely that the accusative-dative (patient-goal) order will be preferred. The key lies in considering patterns such as the following, in which the two hypotheses can be teased apart.

- (8) Yenghi-ka pheyn-ulo yenphil-ul kentuli-ess-ta.
Yenghi-Nom pen-Instr pencil-Ac touch-Pst-Decl
‘Yenghi touched the pencil with the pen.’

Here the referent of the subject acts on the referent of the instrumental phrase, using it to act on the referent of the direct object. (Thus, Yenghi acts on the pen using it to touch the pencil.) Although both the instrumental–accusative and accusative–instrumental orders are acceptable in Korean, the Iconicity Hypothesis predicts a preference for the instrumental–accusative order since only it aligns the structure of the sentence with the structure of the corresponding situation.

- (9) *The instrumental–accusative order (iconic order):*

subject instrument dir. obj.
Yenghi-ka pheyn-ulo yenphil-ul kentuli-ess-ta.
Yenghi-Nom pen-Instr pencil-Ac touch-Pst-Decl
‘Yenghi touched the pencil with the pen.’

In contrast, the Hierarchy Hypothesis predicts the opposite preference, since the accusative–instrumental order reflects the relative prominence of the elements in the relational hierarchy.

- (10) *The accusative–instrumental order (subject > direct object > oblique):*
 subject dir. obj. instrument
 Yenghi-ka yenphil-ul pheyn-ulo kentuli-ess-ta.
 Yenghi-Nom pencil-Ac pen-Instr touch-Pst-Decl
 ‘Yenghi touched the pencil with the pen.’

We thus have the desired state of affairs, with the two hypotheses making different predictions for the instrumental pattern.

TABLE 2. *Predicted word order preferences*

Hypothesis	Dative pattern	Instrumental pattern
Isomorphism Hypothesis	accusative–dative	INSTRUMENTAL–ACCUSATIVE
Hierarchy Hypothesis	accusative–dative	ACCUSATIVE–INSTRUMENTAL

In order to determine which of the two hypotheses makes the correct prediction, we carried out the comprehension experiment described below.

SUBJECTS

We decided to focus for this experiment on four-year-olds, as they had shown the strongest contrast in word order preferences in our first experiment. Twenty four-year-old Korean-speaking children living in Chöllabukto, Korea served as subjects.

METHOD

The experiment made use of the same act-out task employed in the second experiment described above: children were asked to respond to requests with the help of stuffed toys and other props provided by the experimenter. All subjects were tested individually in a quiet place. The test sentences (described below) were presented in random order.

Sentence types

There were twenty test sentences, with five tokens of each of the following four types. In order to guard against an interpretation based on semantic clues, all test sentences were semantically reversible with inanimate referents for both the direct object and the indirect object/instrument.

(11) a. *Dative sentences*

Dative-accusative order:

Moca-ey sonswuken-ul tencye-cwu-llyay-yo?
 cap-dat handkerchief-Ac throw-Ben-Fut-sentEndEr
 'Will you throw the handkerchief at the cap?'

Accusative-dative order:

Sonswuken-ul moca-ey tencye-cwu-llyay-yo?
 handkerchief-Ac cap-dat throw-Ben-Fut-sentEndEr
 'Will you throw the handkerchief at the cap?'

b. *Instrumental sentences*

Instrument-accusative order:

Pheyn-ulo yenphil-ul mancye-cwu-llyay-yo?
 pen-Instr pencil-Ac touch-Ben-Fut-sentEndEr
 'Will you touch the pencil with the pen?'

Accusative-instrument order:

Yenphil-ul pheyn-ulo mancye-cwu-llyay-yo?
 pencil-Ac pen-Instr touch-Ben-Fut-sentEndEr
 'Will you touch the pencil with the pen?'

A complete list of test sentence can be found in the appendix.

RESULTS

Table 3 presents the results of our second experiment. Errors on both patterns consisted entirely of 'reversals' (i.e. interpreting a dative/instrumental-accusative pattern as if it were an accusative-dative/instrumental pattern and vice versa).

TABLE 3. *Results from the second experiment* (percentage correct)

	Dative pattern	Instrumental pattern
accusative-first	97 %	15 %
accusative-second	42 %	83 %

As in our previous experiment, the children showed a preference for the accusative-first order in the dative sentences. This preference was reversed in the instrumental sentences, however, where the children favoured the instrumental-accusative order. A repeated measures 2-way ANOVA revealed that the effect of the situation-word order relationship (iconic or not) was significant both for the dative pattern ($F(1, 19) = 86.03$, $p = 0.0001$) and for the instrumental pattern ($F(1, 1) = 1.03E2$, $p = 0.0001$). That is, the

preference for accusative–dative order in the dative patterns and for instrumental–accusative order in instrumental patterns was highly significant.

DISCUSSION

It is unlikely that anything in experience could be responsible for the strong bias in favour of the instrumental–accusative order that we observed. Although this order is considered to be basic in Korean (e.g. Sohn, 1994: 232), very few sentences in the spoken language contain both an overt instrument and an overt direct object since argument drop is widespread, as already observed. Indeed, an examination of our corpus of maternal speech revealed only two such sentences, both with the non-iconic direct object–instrument order.

In sum, then, our results provide strong evidence for the Iconicity Hypothesis since, independent of experience, the children consistently preferred the pattern that presented referents in an order iconic with the corresponding situation. Crucially, this preference was manifested even in instrumental patterns, where it conflicts with the order that respects the relational hierarchy.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

It is a well established fact that Korean children exhibit a strong preference for nominative–accusative (subject–object) order over the reverse pattern. This is not particularly surprising, since the former order is far more frequent in the input. (For example, in Cho's 1981 study of three Korean children, mothers produced five to ten times as many nominative–accusative patterns as accusative–nominative patterns.)

However, matters are quite different when it comes to the relative order of accusative and dative nominals (direct and indirect objects) in plain transitive patterns. Here, children exhibit a strong preference for the accusative–dative order even though the dative–accusative order appears to be dominant in experience and is generally considered to be the basic pattern (e.g. Sohn, 1994: 232).

Two hypotheses are compatible with this preference – one linking word order to the relative prominence of NPs in the relational hierarchy (the Hierarchy Hypothesis) and the other associating it with how the event described by the sentence unfolds in the real world (the Iconicity Hypothesis). In order to determine which of these hypotheses is correct, it is necessary to investigate patterns in which the two hypotheses make different predictions. Instrumental constructions are a case in point, since the Hierarchy Hypothesis favours the accusative–instrumental order (consistent with the relative prominence of direct objects over obliques in the relational hierarchy) while the Iconicity Hypothesis predicts a preference for the

instrumental–accusative order (since the agent acts first on the referent of the instrumental phrase). The results of our comprehension task show a strong preference for the instrumental–accusative order in these structures, which points toward the correctness of the Iconicity Hypothesis.

This in turn underlines the relevance of pragmatic factors (particularly the structure of situations) for determining children’s word order preferences, a finding with a variety of implications. One such implication has to do with acquisition of English, where the Iconicity Hypothesis predicts a contrast between the following two patterns.

- (12) a. *Locative pattern (iconic)*
Mary dropped the crayon on the pencil.

- b. *Instrumental pattern (non-iconic)*
Mary pushed the crayon with the pencil.

The locative pattern is iconic since the agent acts on the patient in such a way that it ends up in a particular location, matching the word order. However, the instrumental pattern is not, since the agent must first act on the instrument and then use it to carry out an action involving the patient. If the Iconicity Hypothesis is right, then children learning English should find the locative pattern easier to comprehend. We look forward to testing this prediction in future work.

Word order is a fundamental part of human language, contributing to the expression of both grammatical relations and pragmatic contrasts involving new versus old information. Yet, as the data considered here illustrates, there is still much to learn. As noted above, for instance, relative frequency provides a perfectly reasonable explanation for why subject–object order is preferred to object–subject order in the acquisition of Korean. However, it turns out that this may not be the crucial factor after all, or at least not the only crucial factor. Iconicity too predicts the preference for subject–object (i.e. agent–patient) ordering in canonical transitive sentences. Moreover, and more importantly, where iconicity and relative frequency make different predictions, as happens in the case of patterns involving direct and indirect objects, iconicity wins out. Whether this turns out to be true in general remains to be seen, of course, but it seems clear that iconicity effects will have a role to play in any general explanation for word order development.

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APPENDIX

TEST SENTENCES

I. *Accusative–Dative/Dative–Accusative*

A. Animate–animate

1. Saca-lul kom-hanthey milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the lion to the bear?'
2. Kom-ul wenswungi-hanthey milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the bear to the monkey?'
3. Kay-lul kom-hanthey poyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you show the dog to the bear?'
4. Thokki-lul talamcwi-hanthey milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the rabbit to the sqwuirrel?'
5. Wenswungi-lul so-hanthey poyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you show the monkey to the cow?'
6. So-hanthey kay-lul milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the dog to the cow?'
7. Wenswungi-hanthey thokki-lul poyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you show the rabbit to the monkey?'
8. Wenswungi-hanthey saca-lul poyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you show the lion to the monkey?'
9. Saca-hanthey kom-ul poyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you show the bear to the lion?'
10. Talamcwi-hanthey kay-lul milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the dog to the squirrel?'

B. Inanimate–inanimate

1. Sonswuken-ul moca-ey tencyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you throw the handkerchief at the hat?'
2. Meliphin-ul khullip-ey tencyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you throw the hair pin at the clip?'
3. Ciwukay-lul kong-ey tencyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you throw the eraser at the ball?'
4. Cha-lul thulek-ey milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the car to the truck?'
5. Moca-lul sinmwun-ey tencyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you throw the hat at the newspaper?'
6. Sangca-ey kapang-ul nehecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you put the bag in the box?'
7. Suthikhe-ey phosuthuis-ul pwuchyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you stick the post-it on the sticker?'
8. Pesu-ey thulek-ul milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the truck to the bus?'
9. Kongchayk-ey sinmwun-ul kkiwecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you insert the newspaper in the notebook?'
10. Meliphin-ey ciwukay-lul tencyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you throw the eraser at the hair pin?'

II. *Accusative–Instrumental/Instrumental–Accusative*

1. Ppalkan ceskalak-ul phalan ceskalak-ulo cipecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you hold the red chopsticks with the blue chopsticks?'
2. Pesu-lul thulek-ulo pwutichyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you bump the bus with the truck?'
3. Polpheyn-ul yenphil-lo ttaylyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you hit the ball-point pen with the pencil?'
4. Pay-lul pihayngki-lo milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the ship with the airplane?'
5. Moca-lul sonswuken-ulo tephecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you cover the hat with the handkerchief?'
6. Ceskalak-ulo swuskalak-ul ttaylyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you hit the spoon with the chopsticks?'
7. Yenphil-lo khulayyong-ul kentulyecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you touch the crayon with the pencil?'
8. Ppalkan ceskalak-ulo nolan ceskalak-ul cipecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you hold the yellow chopsticks with the red chopsticks?'
9. Pesu-lo pihayngki-lul milecwu-llay-yo?
'Will you push the airplane with the bus?'
10. Sonswuken-ulo swuken-ul ssacwu-llay-yo?
'Will you wrap the towel with the handkerchief?'