

# Functional Projections in Korean ESL Learners' Interlanguage Syntax

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## *Abstract*

*This paper reviews and assesses some of the most recent advances made in the study of early Korean ESL learners' interlanguage syntax. The paper focuses on the inflectional layers of the so-called S-be-X construction, and shows that functional heads and their projections flourish vigorously at the commencement of second language acquisition.*

*Key Words: second language acquisition, syntactic development, Korean ESL learner, functional category*

## 1. Introduction

In the recent literature on Korean ESL learners' interlanguage syntax, it has often been noted that early Korean learners produce the so-called S-be-X utterances. The following examples are from Hahn (2000):

- (1) a. Mommy is make 'Mom makes breakfast'
- b. Cat is big 'This cat is big'
- c. Sally is brei 'Sally eats bread'

There have been at least two different proposals

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for the syntactic configurational details of this interlanguage construction. One is the functional head analysis in Yang (2001, 2002), and the other is the topic-comment analysis in Hahn (2000), Shin (2000), and Ahn (2003).

In the functional head analysis, the inflected form of 'be' in the S-be-X construction is an (underdeveloped) functional category. In this analysis, sentence (1a) has the configuration in (2).

(2) [<sub>FP</sub> Mommy [<sub>F</sub> is [<sub>VP</sub> make]]]

In (2) the verbal constituent 'is' is the head of the functional projection FP, and takes the VP as its complement.

The topic-comment analysis was first delineated in Hahn (2000) and Shin (2000). Substantiating the claim in Shin (2000) that 'be' in the S-be-X is a topic marker, Ahn (2003) proposed the following configuration:

(3) [<sub>FP</sub> [<sub>KP</sub> Mommy [<sub>K</sub> is]] [<sub>F</sub> [<sub>VP</sub> make][<sub>F</sub> ]]]

In (3), the verbal constituent 'is' is a topic/case marker and the entire sentence is headed by F which has no surface morpho-phonological realization.

In performing this task, Ahn (2003) put forward a critical view on the functional head analysis. He contended that such an utterance as in (4) (double NP-be construction, hereafter) poses a serious problem to the functional head analysis.

(4) He is friend is many

According to Ahn (2003), this interlanguage utterance "must" have the representation (5) in the functional head analysis:

(5) [<sub>FP</sub> He [<sub>F</sub> is [<sub>FP</sub> friend [<sub>F</sub> is [<sub>VP</sub> many]]]]]

Assuming the correctness of this reinterpretation, he observed that the representation as in (5) "will impose not a small burden" on the functional head analysis of 'be'. The following is from Ahn (2003: 379):

"Since verbal agreement shows up under it in this analysis, the F must be analyzed as a category related to Infl. The problem at this point, however, is that as far as we know, no natural language, seems to have an inflectional functional category taking the same type of functional projection as its complement. In other words, no homogeneous inflectional information is realized on separate verbal heads. If this is a genuine property of the Universal Grammar, then the verbal functional head analysis significantly loses its force."

This paper addresses the criticism levelled against the functional head analysis, and explores a way to resolve the problem raised in Ahn (2003). This, we hope, enriches our understanding not only of configurational properties of the S-be-X construction but also of the second language syntax of early Korean ESL learners. The following section presents a brief description of the relevant properties of Korean clause structure, adopting the extended X-bar schema in Chomsky (1982). In Section 3, the paper proposes the following configuration for the double NP-be construction:

(6) [<sub>CP</sub> [<sub>C</sub> [<sub>C</sub> be] [<sub>IP</sub> [<sub>I</sub> [<sub>I</sub> be] [<sub>VP</sub> ]]]]

In (6), there are two different functional categories, I and C. The lower functional category heads the IP and the upper one the CP. Underlying this proposal is the

central idea of the functional head analysis (i) that 'be' of S-be-X is a functional category and (ii) that inflectional categories and projections are readily available to early second language learners. This is harmonious with the so-called Strong Continuity Hypothesis: second language learners begin syntactic acquisition with the full-fledged phrase structures. Finally, Section 4 considers broader theoretical implications and underscores what this paper observes as its main points.

## 2. Clausal architecture of double NP-be construction

### 2.1 X-bar schema and Korean clausal projection

According to the standard analysis of clausal configuration, phrases are hierarchical projections of their heads:

- (7) X-bar format  
 a.  $XP \rightarrow \text{Spec}; X'$   
 b.  $X' \rightarrow X; ZP$

This standard format, known as the X-bar theory, is extended to the clausal constituents in Chomsky (1982).

- (8) IP and CP  
 a.  $IP \rightarrow XP; I'$   
 b.  $I' \rightarrow I; YP$   
 c.  $CP \rightarrow XP; C'$   
 d.  $C' \rightarrow C; YP$

(8) shows that S is a projection of I (that is, IP), and S' is a projection of C (that is, CP).

In this extended format, an English clause has the following configuration:

$$(9) [_{CP} C [_{IP} I [_{VP} V]]]$$

In (9), I and C project their own head and form the maximal projection of IP and CP, in accordance with the X-bar theory.

The extended X-bar schema has been introduced in the inquiries into the Korean phrase structure configuration, and it has been proposed that the Korean clausal constituents are projections of functional categories of I and C. The following is from Yang (1990):

$$(10) [_{CP} \text{Topic} [_{IP} \text{Subject} [_{VP} V] I] C]$$

In (10), IP is a projection of I, with the subject in its specifier position, and CP is a projection of C, with the topic in its specifier position.

## 2.2 Double NP-be construction revisited

This paper, assuming the mother tongue influence in second language learning, proposes that the configurational hierarchy of the double NP-be construction is not substantially different from that of the Korean clauses. In particular, the paper suggests (11) for the double NP-be construction:

$$(11) [_{CP} [C' \text{be} [_{IP} [I' \text{be} [_{VP} ]]]]$$

In (11), the clausal configuration involves two different functional projections. One is the projection of C and the other is that of I. In this configuration, the higher 'be' heads the projection CP, and the lower 'be' heads the projection of IP. If we assume that the configurational relations (10) in Korean hold in the

interlanguage clausal representation of the double NP-be construction, the higher specifier is the topic and the lower is the subject.

(12) [<sub>CP</sub> Topic [<sub>C</sub> be [<sub>IP</sub> Subject [<sub>I</sub> be [<sub>VP</sub> ]]]]

An independent support for the configurational relations in (12) comes from an observation in Ahn (2003) about the two NPs in the double NP-be construction. In his discussion of the construction, Ahn (2003: 377), following Shin (2000), observed that the first NP is the topic and the second one the subject.

(13) He(Topic) is friend(Subject) is many

Now note that the relations represented in (12) are not different from what Ahn (2003) observed about the two NPs in the double NP-be construction: the first NP is the topic and the second one the subject.

In sum, in our view, the double NP-be construction is best accounted for by assuming that 'be' in the S-be-X construction is a functional head. The skeletal representation of the double NP-be construction is repeated here for convenience:

(11) [<sub>CP</sub> [<sub>C</sub> be [<sub>IP</sub> [<sub>I</sub> be [<sub>VP</sub> ]]]]

In this configuration the two be's are two different functional heads: the higher 'be' is C and the lower 'be' is I.

Turning to the criticism in Ahn (2003) against the functional head analysis, the main point of his supposition is that the double NP-be construction has the configuration (14) in the functional head analysis,

(14) [<sub>FP</sub> [<sub>F</sub> be [<sub>FP</sub> [<sub>F</sub> be [<sub>VP</sub> ]]]]]

and this, according to him, "will impose not a small burden on the functional head view of *be* because no natural language seems to have an inflectional functional category taking the same type of functional projection as its complement. (Ahn 2003: 379)"

This paper, in the foregoing discussion, has proposed that the two *be*'s of the double NP-*be* construction are not identical but different functional categories. In this account, the criticism in Ahn (2003) against the functional head analysis loses its force.

In the interlanguage representations (11) and (12), there is a debatable point which deserves a special remark. The headedness of the projections in the proposed representation is different from that in the learner's mother tongue. The head of a phrase is positioned finally in Korean, but it is not in the proposed representation of the interlanguage clausal structure. If the learners, as we have assumed, are under the positive influence of their mother tongue, then the head of a phrase is expected to be positioned finally. But in (11) and (12), it is not.

We suggest that the learners at the stage of the S-*be*-X construction already reset the so-called head-parameter to the value of the target language. This is consistent with the observation in the literature that the resetting of the headedness of functional projections is accomplished very early and is guided and elaborated upon by the interaction of input and universal principles such as the X-bar theory. Supporting evidence for the early resetting of the headedness is found in the interlanguage data of the learners at the stage of the S-*be*-X construction. The following S-*be*-X constructions are from Shin (2000):

- (15) She is like strawberry.  
(16) He is live Lucky Apartment.

The verb phrase of the above examples has the following configuration:

- (17) [<sub>VP</sub> V NP]

In (17), the head is positioned initially, not finally. This indicates that the headedness of the learner's phrases at the stage of the S-be-X construction has switched to the head-initial value of English.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed acquisition data from Korean children learning English, concentrating on syntactic configurational properties of the double NP-be construction. The paper shows that the seemingly problematic data discussed in Ahn (2003) can be accounted for in terms of the functional head analysis. It also reveals that early Korean ESL learners transfer their L1 knowledge of configurational projections and straightforwardly acquire functional categories and projections. Underlying this endeavor is the idea that the 'be' forms found in the S-be-X construction head their own functional projections.

The idea that 'be' is one of the first functional categories to be acquired is not difficult to find in the literature on second language syntax acquisition. For instance, Lakshmanan (1993/1994) showed that the copula often functioned as a placeholder for the features of INFL in second language acquisition. Similar observations are found in Hawkins (2001) and Ionin and Wexler (2002). What appears to be rather special about



our interlanguage clausal configuration (11) is the suggestion that (not only I but also) C can be realized as 'be':

(11) [<sub>CP</sub> [<sub>C</sub> be [<sub>IP</sub> [<sub>I</sub> be [<sub>VP</sub> ]]]]

This proposal is not without empirical support. In many languages, C can be realized as a form of the copula. For instance, in English, 'be' is employed for not only I but also C.

(18) [<sub>IP</sub> he [<sub>I</sub> is [<sub>VP</sub> going there]]]

(19) [<sub>CP</sub> [<sub>C</sub> is [<sub>IP</sub> he going there]]]

In (18), 'is' heads IP, and in (19), 'is' serves as the head of CP. It may be also noted that 'be' is often employed for C in Korean EFL learners' interlanguage: See Hahn (2000), Shin (2000), and Lee (2006):

(20) Is she drive car?

(21) Is she is Bobby?

The "developing inflection be" idea is closely related to an intriguing issue in second language syntax acquisition research. The issue at hand is whether the full range of functional categories and their maximal projections are available in developing grammars from the very beginning or some functional categories are initially absent and only emerge at a later stage. This paper, supporting the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis, has proposed that second language learners transfer their native language clausal projections and have full access to functional categories and projection.

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