

Rare Plural Marking and Ubiquitous Plural Marker in Korean*

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In this paper I intend to discuss two disparate aspects of plural marking in Korean. First, I will make an attempt to show that the traditional belief that marking plural nouns in Korean is optional—whatever is implied by this term—is misleading and in some cases flatly conflicts with the facts. More importantly, a systematic investigation reveals that, contrary to the popular belief, plural nouns, under specifiable conditions, must be marked. It turns out that the phenomenon under discussion is intricately related with much broader questions of specificity of reference, generic vs. non-generic use of nouns, and the type of plurality split that the Korean language exhibits. Secondly, I will treat a language-specific syntactic process which may be unique to Korean. I will tentatively call it ‘Plural Marker Copying’. A postulation of a rule for the process not only simplifies the description of grammar in general, but also provides plausible explanations for apparent syntactic and semantic irregularities that they have puzzled many grammarians as well as students of Korean for a longtime.

It has been widely believed that a number distinction is entirely irrelevant in Korean grammar. Nouns are never consistently marked for plurality and there is no rule of subject-verb agreement that reflects the number distinction of the subject NP. Not only naive and unsophisticated native speakers voice such an opinion but also respectable grammarians express an essentially similar view, which I will examine directly. Before reviewing previous descriptions, let us consider a few example sentences from Korean which will provide us with some clues as to how plural nouns are marked or unmarked.

- (1) haksayng-tul i ecey teymo lul hay-ss-ta¹
student-PL NM yesterday demonstration did
‘Students staged a demonstration yesterday.’
- (2) salam-tul i ku kwangkyeng ul mokto hay-ss-ta

* I would like to thank my colleagues Rachel Costa and David Lockwood for taking their time to read and discuss some problematic topics in this paper with me. All errors are mine only.

¹ The Yale Romanization is adopted in transcribing Korean sentences. No attempt has been made to identify each morpheme with a gloss separately. Following abbreviations are used as

man-Pl that scene ACC witness did
 'People witnessed that scene.'

In sentences (1) and (2), the particle *tul* which is added to the preceding nouns indicates that more than one student or man is involved. The particle is comparable to *s* in English words like *finks*, *crooks*, *fakes*, and *phonies* and, as such, can be called a 'Plural Marker'. If the occurrence of the plural marker is regular, consistent, and therefore predictable to a large extent as in English, there will be very little reason to expect that anything interesting can be said about the plural marking. A cursory glance at Korean data will reveal at once that, at least on the surface, it is highly irregular, inconsistent and quite arbitrary. Plural nouns are sometimes marked with the particle *tul* as we have seen in the examples cited, but nouns which are clearly plural are not always so marked as the following examples demonstrate.

- (3) Detroit ey nun silepca ka manh-ta
 in Top unemployed many
 'There are many unemployed in Detroit.'
- (4) ku cip ey nun ai ka nemu manh-ta
 that house child too
 'They have too many kids in that family.'
- (5) teymo ha-ten haksayng i manhi cap-hi-ess-ta
 Ret arrest-Pass-Past

'Students who were demonstrating got arrested in large numbers.'

There is little doubt that nouns like *silepca* 'unemployed', *ai* 'child', and *haksayng* 'student' in the sentences above refer to more than a single person. This can be easily corroborated by the cooccurrence of a predicate *manh-ta* 'are many' and an adverbial expression *manhi* 'lots, in large numbers'. Unlike earlier examples, none of these nouns are marked despite the fact that they are plural in meaning. There is a conflict between the form which is 'singular' or unmarked and the meaning which expresses 'plural'. How can a linguist reconcile an apparent contradiction of this sort in grammar? Is the unmarked noun a case of neutralization? Then under what conditions does such a neutralization take place? Obviously, the simplest way out of this difficulty is to confirm the traditional popular notion that marking plural in Korean is optional. Precisely, this is a kind of descriptions we find in Korean grammars.

labels for grammatical morphemes.

Pl	Plural	Prop	Propositive
NM	Nominative Marker	Pass	Passive
ACC	Accusative Marker	Ind	Indicative
Top	Topic Marker	Ret	Retrospective
Dec	Declarative	Hon	Honorific
Q	Question	Inf	Infinitive
Imp	Imperative	Prosp	Prospective

The most comprehensive grammar of Korean by Choe Hyun-Pae (1961) contains the following categorical statement, denying that there exists a grammatical category 'number' for nouns and pronouns.

In Korean, there is no grammatical 'number' for a noun...If we want to indicate plurality in our language, either we reduplicate the form or add a suffix that expresses plurality of number. For instance,

salam salam, cip cip, phoki phoki

salam-tul, cip-tul, phoki-tul.

'men' 'houses' 'heads (of cabbage, lettuce, etc.)' (p. 210)

Although the reduplicated forms indicate that referents involved are more than one, they are typically associated with the particle *mata* 'each, every' and should be distinguished from the regular plural formation by means of the plural marker *tul*. The following examples clearly show that the two forms are not interchangeable.

(6) a. *salam salam i manh-ta

b. salam-tul i manh-ta

'There are many people.'

(7) a. *yele cip cip ul po-ass-ta

b. yele cip-tul ul po-ass-ta

'(We) saw several houses.'

The particle *mata* is also used with a single noun, i.e. nonreduplicated form and the only difference between the single and reduplicated forms with *mata* seems to be that the latter is more emphatic, stressing each and every member of an entire set. Since the reduplicated forms are plural of a different nature, I will not discuss it any further.

One of the early works on Korean grammar by Westerners is that of an eminent Altaicist G.J. Ramstedt (1939). His observation on the plural marking is quite accurate and detailed but again confirms the popular notion I have referred to earlier.

The Korean noun 2 expresses the universal or general idea of the corresponding thing; i.e. it has no articles and no numbers, e.g. *salam* 'a man, men, the man, the men,' *i salam* 'this (particular) man, these men.' By constructing a compound, the Korean language expresses the plural if stress is laid on the idea of plurality. Thus one can add as the last word the noun *tul* 'all, several, together', and speaking of human beings, also *ney*. Thus *salam* 'man' or 'men' has the plural *salamtul* 'men-all', *salam-ney*, and more strongly stressing, *salam-neytul* or *salam-tulney*. Used this way, *tul* and *ney* may be called "plural signs", ... (p. 35)²

Ramstedt also noted the reduplicated forms of nouns and made the following pertinent

² For interesting and illuminating discussions of question of reference, see Donnellan (1971), Partee (1972), and McCawley (1970).

remarks on their use.

To express the idea of variety very often a reduplication is used, e.g. *cip cip* 'every house, from house to house', *sayk sayk* 'all colours, every sort of colour, all kinds', *kot kot kokkot* 'all places, every place, everywhere', *nanal* (for *nal nal*) 'day by day, everyday', *tatal* (for *tal tal*) 'every month, monthly' Many such reduplications are used only as adverbs. (p. 35)

Ramstedt's interpretation of this phenomenon seems to make much more sense than Choe's promiscuous treatment of it as another mode of expressing plurality. It also renders support to my decision not to treat them together.

A more up-to-date description of Korean in Martin(1969) offers no new information on the question.

Korean nouns ...are not specific with respect to number...But if it is really necessary, or if he feels like it, a Korean speaker can make his nouns specifically plural... He does this by placing *tul* a word meaning something like 'group', after them: *sensayng* 'teacher or teachers' *sensayng tul* 'teachers'. (p. 32)

Most native grammarians do not even mention the grammatical process involved in pluralizing nouns and it is usually Westerners who studied or described the language that note the existence of the plural marker. Despite an almost complete disregard and neglect of the question on the part of native grammarians, the plural marking is far from being a trivial or uninteresting topic. A critical reexamination of the process reveals that it is an extremely important and enormously complex question which seems to have bearing on other aspects of grammar. And linguists are beginning to realize the magnitude of the question which probably will have a far-reaching consequences on our understanding of nature and use of human language.

Let us first examine the notion of optionality. Does this mean that the plural marking is a stylistic variation? Or is it a matter of emphasis that speakers of Korean use the plural marker as Ramstedt and Martin suggest? Is it always the case that marked and unmarked plural are synonymous? Can one freely add or drop the plural marker when a noun refers to more than a single object without changing meaning? None of these questions have ever been raised, not to mention answering them. Now consider the following.

- (8) ku nun ecey pam ey nuckey tolao-ass-ta
 he last night late returned
 'He came home late last night.'

- (9) ku-tul un ecey pam ey nuckey tolao-ass-ta
 'They came home late last night.'

The two sentences above are entirely identical except for the plural marker which is present after the subject NP in (9) but absent from (8). If the plural marking is totally

optional as has been claimed, these two sentences should be synonymous. To be more precise, at least one reading of (8) which is supposed to be ambiguous between singular and plural reading, must be identical with (9). But this is not the case and (8) and (9) are never synonymous. The choice of the plural marker in this case crucially contributes in differentiating the meaning between them. Furthermore, if we drop the plural marker from the subject NP of (9), it simply cannot retain the plurality and becomes synonymous with (8). Thus the notion of optional plural marking is at best suspicious.

It must be noted, however, that the subject NPs in (8) and (9) are pronouns and, indeed, pronouns in many languages exhibit peculiarity of their own in plural marking. It is a well known fact that pronominal forms retain in many languages, including English, grammatical distinctions that have long disappeared in nouns. Korean is no exception to this rule and they maintain person and number distinctions. Let us take a brief look at pronominal forms in Korean.

Number	Singular	Plural
Person		
1st	na/ce (Humble)	uli (tul)/cehi(tul)
2nd	ne	nehi(tul)
3rd	ku	ku-tul

In the first and second persons, they have distinct forms for singular and plural. The plural marker, therefore, becomes dispensable. In the third person where no such distinction is made, the plural marker is obligatory for 'they' as exemplified in (9). Since singular and plural pronouns are formally distinct in all cases, including the third person with the obligatory marker, we must conclude that number distinction is maintained without exception in pronouns.

There is no reason to expect, however, that the same would be true with all nouns. If there is no a priori reason to believe that nouns should behave like pronouns in every respect, in which case their classification into noun and pronoun would be unmotivated and totally redundant, there is no more reason to expect that they should be entirely different, for in this case "pronoun" would be a misnomer and it would not constitute a proper subset of noun as the nomenclature implicitly suggests. It is an empirical question to what extent and in what respect the two categories are similar or dissimilar and should be decided by observing language-specific traits rather than appealing to an a priori universal abstract characterization of noun and pronoun.

Before proceeding any further, a question should be raised as to what particular feature of pronoun uniquely demands obligatory plural marking. My speculation is that Korean pronouns seem to have always specific reference; in other words, they do not seem to permit non-referential use. It should also be noted that the third person singular pronoun in Korean has the same phonological realization as one of the demonstratives. Indeed, it is reasonable to view that the demonstrative *ku* 'that' is, in fact, used as the

third person singular pronoun. It is no coincidence then that not only the first and second person pronouns have specific reference but also the third person pronoun, [because one of the functions of the demonstrative is to make reference specific. This leads us to another speculation that a noun preceded by a demonstrative will have a specific reference. This fact, if true, will also entail an interesting consequence that NPs with specific reference have to mark plurality obligatorily. This is a testable proposition and its validity can be confirmed by empirical data. Consider the following.

- (10) ku cangkwn i tomang ul chi-ess-ta
 that general run away Past
 'That general ran away.'
- (11) i kwukhoy uywen un kecismal cayngi i-ta
 this congressman liar be
 'This congressman is a liar.'
- (12) ce kay ka cwuin uy son ul mul-ess-ta
 that dog master of hand bite-Past
 'That dog (over there) bit its master's hand.'

All the subject NPs in the examples above have specific reference. As expected, they are all singular and cannot be understood to have plural reference. Here we have a clear and incontestable case in which unmarked nouns are always singular and do not and cannot refer to the plural. In other words, plural. In other words, plurality must be marked when the reference of nouns is specific. This conclusion, I believe, is a valid generalization governing the process of pluralizing nouns and pronouns in Korean. The real problem, however, is not showing that plurality of noun must be marked in some cases but accounting for numerous counterexamples that threatens to undermine its validity. In what follows, I will try to systematically account for most of the counterexamples I have noted. Now examine the following examples.

- (13) i manhun salam i eti-se o-ass-ul-kka
 many where-from come-Past-Prosp
 'Where could all these men come from?'³
- (14) ce yele kwen uy chayk ul ta ilk-ess-n-i
 many volume of book all read-Past-Ind-O
 (Lit. 'Have you read all those many volumes of books?')

The NPs in (13) and (14) are preceded by a demonstrative and they are all plural as we can easily tell from cooccurring quantifiers. They are without the plural marker, contrary to our expectation, thus constitute first counterexamples to the generalization. Note,

³ The other possible interpretation of this sentence is: 'Where could this many men come from?' The demonstrative in this case is not deictic but an intensifier modifying the following quantifier. Thus the question of specific reference does not arise and these examples do not constitute counterexamples.

however, that these sentences contain quantifiers which indisputably indicate plurality of nouns they modify. Since the plurality is marked by other means than the plural marker itself, it may not be a matter of coincidence that the latter becomes dispensable and its overt presence is not necessary. The plural marker is genuinely optional when numerals, quantifiers, and other semantic elements explicitly indicating plurality cooccur in the same sentence. In other Ural-Altaic languages, either their cooccurrence restriction is severer or they are simply not permitted to cooccur at all. Sentences (13) and (14) turn out to be not genuine counterexamples but typical ones displaying a common and widespread feature of these supposedly related languages.

The second counterexamples involve the case where reference of nouns is specific but no quantifiers occur. Consider the following.

(15) i sakwa ka ce sakwa pota te mas i iss-ta

apple than more tasty

{ This } apple(s) taste(s) better than { that } one(s).
 { These } { those }

(16) ku syassu ka ce syassu pota pissa-ta

expensive

{ That } { shirt(s) } { is } more expensive than { that } ones over there.'
 { Tose } { are } { those }

A typical interpretation of sentences (16) and (17) out of context would involve a comparison between two single objects. But it is not unusual for someone to say (15), for instance, in a market, pointing to a pile of apples, or (16), pointing to a stack of shirts in a store. I have argued earlier that nouns preceded by a demonstrative are always singular and cannot refer to the plural. Thus, (15-16) seem to be genuine counterexamples and the generalization, as it stands, is inadequate. Before giving up the generalization or modifying it, let us compare subject NPs in (15-16) with those in (10-12). We at once realize that the former are all inanimate whereas the latter, all animate. In his illuminating discussion of plurality split, Smith-Stark shows language after language in which plural marking is often split between animate and/or human nouns or kinship terms on the one hand and others on the other. In Korean, plurality split is not discrete but a squish. Human and animate nouns are, comparatively speaking, highly marked, whereas mass and abstract nouns are practically never marked. Other nouns fall in between and are seemingly irregular. Random sampling of written materials (59 pages in total) by ten different authors reveals a significant pattern shown below.

Plural Marker Occurring With	Animate Noun	Inanimate Noun	Others	Total
Number of Occurrence	94 (83%)	15 (13%)	5 (4%)	113 (2/page)

The rare occurrence of the plural marker is unquestionable and it is even rarer after the inanimate nouns. I believe it is not unreasonable to assume that this pattern of plurality split is responsible for unmarked plural nouns with specific reference only when they possess the feature [—animate].

The third counterexamples are truly unique to Korean and at the same time provides an interesting and convincing demonstration of inadequacy and futility of linguistic description based solely on distributional features of surface structure without taking into account the semantic relationship of elements which may not have overt surface realization. Consider the following sentences.

- (17) ese-tul tuleo-key
 quickly-Pl come in-Imp
 ‘Come right in.’
- (18) mul-tul ul manhi masi-teni ocwum ul ssa-ass-ta
 water-Pl much drink-and wet the bed Past
 ‘(Kids) were drinking lots of water and now they have wet the beds.’
- (19) cha-na-tul masi-p-si-ta
 tea-DeEmp-Pl drink-Prop
 ‘Let’s have tea or something.’
- (20) twulle anc-ese-tul yayki lul ha-n-ta
 around sit-and-Pl story tell-Ind-Dec
 ‘(They) sit around and are talking.’
- (21) ku chayk ul ilk-e-tul po-ass-n-i
 book read-Inf-Pl try-Past-Ind-Q
 ‘Have you tried reading that book?’

In (17), the plural marker occurs after an adverb and in (18) after a mass noun. Its occurrence after an adverb is not only unusual but would be semantically absurd if it is to pluralize the preceding adverb. Mass and abstract nouns normally do not pluralize and (18) is a strange case of aberration. In (19), the plural marker follows the deemphasis marker which is the reverse of a normal order. Since the order of permissible sequence of suffixes and particles after a noun is fairly rigidly fixed, (19) is a puzzling incidence of violation of syntax. In (20), the plural marker is attached to a conjunct between two conjuncts and the same occurs between a compound verb in (21). Finally, none of these sentences have an overt subject NP on the surface.

The question of ubiquitous appearance of the plural marker can be approached only through a careful investigation of semantic relationship between the plural marker and the plural noun phrase from which it originates. Once the semantic relationship is established, it can be shown that apparent irregularity is a result of a regular and uniform process of plural marker copying.

The versatile appearance of the plural marker seems to have generally escaped native

grammarian's notice except Choe, whose accurate observation I will directly examine. Ramstedt, for reasons which will be made clear shortly, treats the plural marker as a noun.

...but they (plural signs) can as well be considered independent words, The fact is that the Korean says *ellun tul onela* 'come quickly' when speaking to many or meaning to call all. (p. 35)

Since *tul* clearly refers to addressees consisting of more than one person, his insightful analysis leaves him no alternative but to treat it as a noun. Martin also correctly observes its versatility and semantic relationship with elements other than the one to which it is attached. He leaves the question open to which particular element it is related.

The word *tul* is uniquely versatile; it may pop up just about anywhere in a Korean sentence and it need not always refer to the words near it. (p. 32)

Choe provides the following examples and remarks in unequivocal terms that *tul* indicates the plurality of subject noun phrases.

- (a) etey-tul ka-si-o
where-Pl go-Hon-Q
'Where are you going?'
- (b) ili-tul o-si-o
this way-Pl come
'Come this way please!'

Although *tul* is attached to words indicating place and direction, the real meaning expresses plurality of the subject. (p. 232)

The correctness of Choe's observation can be confirmed by incompatibility of his own example sentences as well as mine (17-21) with a singular subject. In imperative and propositive sentences in which the ubiquitous plural marker frequently occurs, the subject noun phrase is usually deleted. I assume, therefore, that before the application of subject noun phrase deletion rule, the plural marker is copied after other constituents outside the subject noun phrase. The subject noun phrases are also subject to an optional deletion in statement and question as well. Again, we can safely assume that the exact same operation has attached the plural marker originating from the subject noun phrase after various elements in the verb phrase. I do not propose to formulate a precise rule for this operation, but one possible candidate that suggests itself is the type of *wa-* attachment rule in Kuroda (1969). It is no coincidence, then, that the distributions of *nun* (the Korean counterpart of Japanese *wa*) and *tul* largely overlap. Once we realize that all the strange occurrences of *tul* in counterexamples that seem to violate grammatical constraints of various sorts are results of the 'Plural Marker Copying,' it is possible to account for the apparently confusing irregular behavior of the plural marker in a systematic and uniform manner.

Now that all counterexamples have been taken care of, I would like to conclude this paper raising one final nagging question: Is plural marking really optional when reference of nouns is non-specific? This is truly a momentous question and I do not have a ready answer. But if my native intuition is to be trusted, I feel that the answer should be in the negative. Let me try and explicate a subtle, nevertheless real difference that seems to exist between the two sentence below which are identical except the plural marker.

(22) *phathi-ey haksayng ul chotay hay-ss-ta*

party-to student invite Past

'(We) invited a student/students to the party.'

(23) *phathi-ey haksayng-tul ul chotay hay-ss-ta*

'(We) invited students to the party.'

Haksayng 'student' in sentence (22) does not refer to a particular student but rather a category of status. It contrasts with faculty or staff, for instance. Here the number distinction is irrelevant. On the other hand, *haksayng-tul* 'student' in (23) refers to a group of young people we know who are going to college. At the moment I am not certain this distinction is consistently made by speakers at all times. But if the choice of the plural marker is not entirely arbitrary, it would be natural to expect that it will make some semantic contribution and all that I am suggesting is that the use of the plural marker makes the reference less abstract and more concrete. Plural nouns in Korean, unlike in English, cannot be used generically whereas unmarked nouns, as Ramstedt has observed, often "express the universal or general idea." This fact, if true, can also account for, at least partially, the reason why the plural marker is predominantly used with animate, more specifically, human nouns.

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