

# AGAINST THE CASE TIER: EVIDENCE FROM KOREAN\*

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This paper deals with the nature of the morphological case conventions in Korean. A recent proposal concerning case marking in transformational grammar is outlined and then applied to Korean. A number of difficulties are noted and an alternative view of case marking is put forward based on the claim that case suffixes encode the combinatorial relations into which NPs enter in surface structure.

## 1. The Case Tier

In a recent article, Yip, Maling and Jackendoff (1987) (hereafter YMJ) outline a theory of case assignment for natural language that parallels the association of tones with melodic segments in autosegmental phonology. The basic idea underlying their theory is that case assignment involves the association of elements in a 'Case tier' (the case categories themselves) with phrases in the syntactic representation. Association of case with NPs is from left to right in nominative-accusative languages such as English.

(1)         N   A <—Case Tier  
           |   |  
           She disappointed him. <—S-structure

(2)         N             A             <—Case Tier  
           |             |             |  
           She left late. <—S-structure

In example (1), the nominative is associated with the first NP (counting from left to right and the accusative with the second. In (2), where there is only one NP, only the nominative case is assigned. English thus exhibits the properties of a straightforward nominative-accusative language, with the nominative being associated with the subject and the accusative with the direct object.

In ergative languages such as West Greenlandic, in contrast, association is

\* I would like to express my gratitude to Young-Seok Choi and Sung-Ock Shin for their help with the data and arguments upon which this paper is based. Remaining flaws are my responsibility.

from right to left, so that the 'accusative' (absolute) is assigned to the direct object in a transitive clause and the 'nominative' (ergative) to the subject.

- (3) N            A  
 |            |  
 Kaal-ip Hans-i takuaa.  
 Karl-Erg Hans-Abs sees  
 'Karl sees Hans.'

In intransitive clauses, right-to-left association ensures that only the accusative (absolute) case is assigned.

- (4) N    A  
 |    |  
 Kaal-i pisuppoq.  
 Karl-Abs walk  
 'Karl is walking'

This gives the case marking pattern typical of ergative languages—with the subject of an intransitive verb and the direct object being treated alike and distinguished from the subject of a transitive verb.

In this short paper, I intend to evaluate the adequacy of this proposal with respect to a small sampling of the case marking patterns employing nominative and accusative suffixes in Korean. I will show that YMJ's case tier approach encounters serious empirical and conceptual problems and that it probably cannot be maintained. Drawing on the treatment of Korean case in O'Grady (forthcoming), I will then make an alternate proposal about how case suffixes are assigned in that language.

## 2. Case Assignment in Korean

Like English, Korean is a 'nominative-accusative' language and therefore exhibits left-to-right association of cases with NPs in YMJ's system. In simple sentences such as (5) and (6), then, the nominative is associated with the subject and the accusative with the direct object, if there is one. (It is, of course, necessary to assume that case association precedes scrambling.)

- (5) N            A  
 |            |  
 John-i chayk-ul ilk-ess-ta.  
 John-N book-Ac read  
 'John read the book.'

- (6) N            A  
       |  
       John-i ttena-ss-ta.  
       John-N left  
       'John left.'

Like many other languages, Korean permits structures such as (7), in which there are multiple occurrences (here two) of the accusative suffix.<sup>1</sup>

- (7) Kay-ka John-ul son-ul mwul-ess-ta.  
       dog-N John-Ac hand-Ac bit  
       'The dog bit John on the hand.'

In order to account for such patterns, YMJ posit a process of 'spreading' (by analogy with the treatment of tone in autosegmental phonology), which allows the same case marker to be associated with more than one NP.

- (8) N            A  
       |            |  
       Kay-ka John-ul son-ul        mwul-ess-ta.  
       dog-N John-Ac hand-Ac bit

Crucially, however, Korean also allows multiple occurrences of the nominative case.<sup>2</sup>

- (9) Jane-i elkwul-i yeppu-ta.  
       Jane-N face-N pretty  
       'Jane is pretty in the face.'

Since we obviously do not want our case marking system to give the associations in (10), we must allow spreading of the nominative case as well —giving the representation in (11).

- (10) *without nominative spreading*

<sup>1</sup> This pattern, which is characterized by the fact that the two accusative-marked NPs are associated with a relationship of inalienable possession, is but one of many double accusative constructions in Korean. However, it is the only one that I will be able to deal with in this short paper. For a discussion of other double accusative constructions, see O'Grady (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Like the double accusative pattern in (7), this structure is characterized by the fact that the NPs with the identical case suffix are associated with a relationship of inalienable possession. This is the only double nominative pattern that I will consider here; I treat many other superficially similar constructions in O'Grady (forthcoming).

$$\begin{array}{cc} \text{N} & \text{A} \\ | & | \\ * \text{Jane-i} & \text{elkwul-ul} & \text{yeyppu-ta.} \\ \text{Jane-N} & \text{face-Ac} & \text{pretty} \\ \text{'Jane is pretty in the face.'} \end{array}$$

(11) *with nominative spreading*

$$\begin{array}{cc} \text{N} & \text{A} \\ | & | \\ \text{Jane-i} & \text{elkwul-i} & \text{yeyppu-ta.} \\ \text{Jane-N} & \text{face-N} & \text{pretty} \end{array}$$

Given that both the nominative and the accusative cases can undergo spreading in Korean, it is now necessary to find a way to prevent undesirable spreading of the nominative case in structures such as (7) above, giving (12).

$$\begin{array}{cc} \text{N} & \text{A} \\ | & | \\ * \text{Kay-ka} & \text{John-i} & \text{son-ul} & \text{mwul-ess-ta.} \\ \text{dog-N} & \text{John-N} & \text{hand-Ac} & \text{bit} \end{array}$$

YMJ's solution to this sort of problem involves positing separate VP and S tiers, with the former assigning accusative case and the latter nominative case. Thus, it is assumed that the second NP in (12) is part of the VP and must therefore bear the accusative suffix.

$$\begin{array}{cc} \text{N} & \text{A} \\ | & | \\ \text{Kay-ka} & [\text{VP} \text{John-ul} \text{son-ul} \text{mwul-ess-ta}] \\ \text{dog-N} & \text{John-Ac} \text{ hand-Ac} \text{ bit} \\ \text{'The dog bit John on the hand.'} \end{array}$$

The viability of this proposal obviously depends on the claim that the nominative suffix is always assigned to NPs outside VP and the accusative suffix to NPs within it. Crucially, however, there is reason to believe that some nominative-marked NPs, including the second one in (9) above, are part of the VP-as depicted in (14).

$$\begin{array}{c} (14) [\text{S} \text{Sue-ka} [\text{VP} \text{elkwul-i} \text{yeyppu-ta}]] \\ \text{Sue-N} \quad \text{face-N} \quad \text{pretty} \\ \text{'Sue is pretty in the face.'} \end{array}$$

The first nominative-marked NP in (14) exhibits a cluster of properties normally associated with the subject: in addition to being marked by the nominative suffix, it can trigger the honorific agreement marker *-si* (Chun 1986) and can be relativized (Lee and Kim 1986).

(15) *Honorific agreement triggered by first NP*

Yewang-i elkwul-i yeypu-si-ta.  
 queen-N face-N pretty-Hon  
 'The queen is pretty in the face.'

(16) *Relativization of first NP*

[<sub>s</sub> \_\_ elkwul-i yeypu-n] yewang  
 face-N pretty-Rel queen  
 'the queen who is pretty in the face'

The second nominative-marked NP, in contrast, neither promotes nor prevents use of the honorific marker and cannot be relativized.

(17) \* [<sub>s</sub> yewang-i \_\_ yeypu-n] elkwul  
 queen-N pretty-Rel face  
 'the face which the queen is pretty in.'

Furthermore, as pointed out to me by Young-Seok Choi (personal communication), the first NP in these double nominative patterns can undergo clefting, just as uncontroversial subjects such as the one in *Jane-i yeypu-ta* 'Jane is pretty' can. (For some speakers *kes* 'thing' is best replaced by *salam* 'person' in (18) and (19).) (Rel=relativizer)

(18) *Clefting of uncontroversial subject*

\_\_ yeypu-n kes-un Jane i-ta.  
 pretty-Rel thing-T Jane be  
 'What is pretty is Jane.'

(19) *Clefting of first NP in double nominative pattern*

\_\_ elkwul-i yeypu-n kes-un Jane i-ta.  
 face-N pretty-Rel thing-T Jane be  
 'What is pretty in the face is Jane.'

In contrast, clefting of the second NP in the type of double nominative structure we are considering ranges from very marginal to impossible.

- (20) a. ??\*Jane-i \_\_ yeypu-n kes-un elkwul i-ta.  
 Jane-N pretty-Rel thing-T face be  
 'Where Jane is pretty is in the face.'
- b. \*Jane-i \_\_ coh-un kes-un meli-ta.  
 Jane-N good-Rel thing-T head be  
 'Where Jane is good is in the head.' (= 'Jane is smart.')

Finally, as sentences such as (21) show, the first nominative-marked NP can be replaced by PRO in 'control' structures—a strong indication that it bears the subject relation.

- (21) Mary-ka [<sub>S</sub> PRO elkwul-i yeypu-e ci-lyeko] nolyekhayss-ta.  
 Mary-N PRO face-N pretty-become-Comp tried  
 'Mary tried to become pretty in the face.'

Taken together, these facts suggest that the first nominative-marked NP in structures such as (14) and (15) is the unequivocal subject of the sentence.

Since the system of phrase structure assumed by YMJ is restricted by the X-bar theory, it seems reasonable to assume that any phrase to the right of the subject in an SOV or SVO language will be part of the VP, as depicted in (14) above, repeated here.

- (14) [<sub>S</sub> Sue-ka [<sub>VP</sub> elkwul-i yeypu-ta]]  
 Sue-N face-N pretty  
 'Sue is pretty in the face.'

This in turn undermines the proposal that nominative case is assigned solely by an S-level tier, leaving us with the problem of preventing 'spreading' of this suffix into the VP in cases such as (12), repeated below, while allowing it in (14).<sup>3</sup>

- (12) N A  
 \*Kay-ka [<sub>VP</sub> John-i son-ul mwul-ess-ta]  
 dog-N John-N hand-Ac bit

At this point it might be suggested that the second nominative case in structures such as (14) is assigned 'lexically' rather than by spreading. In YMJ's system, lexical case is assigned by the verb to a thematic argument in its lexical entry and remains invariant throughout a derivation. A first problem with lexical case assignment in sentences such as *Jane-i elkwul-i yeypu-ta* 'Jane is pretty in the face' is that *elkwul* 'face' is apparently not a thematic argument of the verb. In fact, as I shall argue below, it seems to have the properties of a locative adverbial. A second difficulty for the lexical case

<sup>3</sup> It might be suggested that the relevant structure resembles (i) and that *Jane-i* is some sort of nonargument, what Saito (1985) calls a 'major subject'.

(i) [<sub>S</sub> Jane-i [<sub>S</sub> elkwul-i yeypu-ta]]  
 Jane-N face-N pretty

'Jane is pretty in the face.'

However, this hypothesis fails to account for the fact that *Jane* has the subject properties in this sentence while *elkwul* 'face' does not.

analysis comes from passive sentences such as (22) and (23).

(22) John-i[<sub>VP</sub> son-i mwul-li-ess-ta]  
 John-N hand-N bite-Pass  
 'John was bitten on the hand.'

(23) John-i[<sub>VP</sub> son-ul mwul-li-ess-ta]  
 John-N hand-Ac bite-Pass  
 'John was bitten on the hand.'

In these sentences, the NP *John* is by hypothesis the subject, implying that the NP *son* 'hand' is part of the VP headed by *mwul* 'bite'. Significantly, this NP can bear either the accusative or the nominative case—an unexpected complication if we are to assume that the second nominative suffix in (22) is somehow inherently associated with a particular argument in the lexical entry and remains unchanged throughout the derivation.

In addition to the descriptive problems that YMJ's theory encounters, there is a deeper conceptual difficulty. This has to do with the fact that YMJ assign case virtually no 'functional load'. At most, the nominative-accusative distinction indicates whether a particular NP lies within VP (in which event it receives accusative rather than nominative case). In languages without a VP tier, case would do nothing more than indicate relative ordering in S-structure (with the nominative suffix assigned to the first NP and the accusative to all others). This provides little insight into why case seems to play such a central role in the morphosyntax of so many of the world's languages.

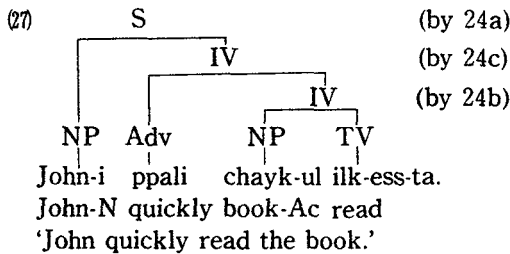
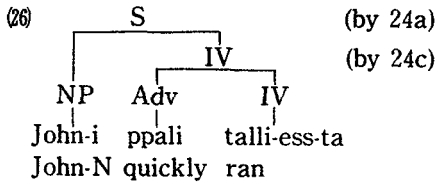
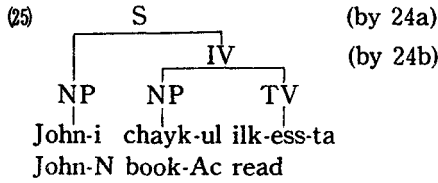
### 3. A Proposal

The central thesis that I wish to develop is that case in Korean (and presumably other languages as well) helps record the combinatorial relations into which NPs enter in S-structure. I maintain that each case suffix records a single relation of this type, so that the theory of case must provide a unique characterization for each of these markers.

For purposes of illustration, I will assume that there are two categories with which an NP can combine—TV (transitive verb) and IV (intransitive verb). I will further assume that Korean sentence structure is formed in accordance with the following simple combinatorial rules.

- (24) a. An IV combines with an NP to give an S.  
 b. A TV combines with an NP to give an IV.  
 c. An Adv combines with a verbal category to give a category of the same type.

This combinatorial system will form syntactic structures such as (25)-(27).



In the most complicated of these structures (i.e.(27)), the TV *ilk-ess-ta* 'read' combines with the NP *chayk* 'book' to give an IV category in accordance with (24b). The adverb *ppali* 'quickly' then combines with this phrase to give another IV, in accordance with (24c). Finally, this IV phrase combines with the NP *John* to give an S, as stipulated in (24a).<sup>4</sup>

Based on these sentences, it is tempting to think that the Korean case rules can be stated as (28).

(28) *Korean Case Conventions*

- Assign accusative case to the direct object NP.
- Assign nominative case to the subject NP.

<sup>4</sup> Use of the IV label for both a simple verb (e.g. *talli-ess-ta* 'ran' in (25)) and a verb phrase (e.g. *chayk-ul ilk-ess-ta* 'read the book' in (26) or (27)) does not deny the obvious differences in internal composition. Rather, it is intended to capture the fact that the two elements are alike in sharing a very important combinatorial property: each can be joined to a subject NP to form an S.



However, this would be a serious mistake since, as we have already seen, Korean allows structures such as (7) and (9), in which there is more than one nominative-marked or accusative-marked NP even though there is presumably no more than one subject and one direct object per monoclausal sentence.

- (7) Kay-ka John-ul son-ul mwul-ess-ta.  
 dog-N John-Ac hand-Ac bit  
 'The dog bit John on the hand.'
- (9) Jane-i elkwul-i yeypu-ta.  
 Jane-N face-N pretty  
 'Jane is pretty in the face.'

The standard approach to these structures is to assume that they have (at least) two levels of syntactic representation. Thus, there is supposedly an 'underlying' level at which *son* 'hand' in (7) is direct object and a 'surface' level at which *John* is. Similarly, there is supposedly an underlying level at which *elkwul* 'face' in (9) is subject and a surface level at which *Jane* bears this relation. By allowing the case marking conventions to refer to both levels of representation, an attempt is made to capture the intuition that the nominative marks the 'subject' and the accusative the 'direct object'. (For an example of this type of analysis, see Chun (1986) or Gerdts (1986).) However, this type of analysis is incompatible with the approach that I wish to adopt in that I claim that the notions relevant to case marking consist solely of combinatorial relations represented in *surface* structure.

The case marking conventions that I propose for sentences (25)-(27) are stated in (29).

- (29) *Korean Case Conventions*  
 -Assign accusative case to an NP combining with a TV category.  
 -Assign nominative case to an NP combining with an IV category.

The case marking patterns exemplified in (25)-(27) comply with these conventions in a straightforward way: the NP *chayk* 'book' receives the accusative suffix *-ul* since it combines with a TV category while the NP *John* is assigned the nominative ending *-i* by virtue of the fact that it combines with an IV category.

Turning now to the more challenging structures exemplified in (7) and (9), I wish to propose that the NPs *elkwul* 'in the face' and *son* 'on the hand' in these sentences have the combinatorial properties of adverbs; that is, they combine with a verbal category to give a category of the same type (see (24c)

above). Semantically, this is obviously a plausible assumption since the NPs in question have adverb-type locative meanings, as noted by Kang (1985 : 92), following an observation by Susumu Kuno, and as is evident in the English translations of the relevant sentences. Syntactically, we have already seen that the second nominative-marked NP in (9) (the putative adverbial NP *elkwul* 'in the face') differs from arguments in being unable to undergo relativization or clefting (see sentences (16)-(21) above). A similar contrast differentiates the putative adverbial NP *son* 'on the hand' in (7) from the direct object argument (I am grateful to Young-Seok Choi for these examples.)

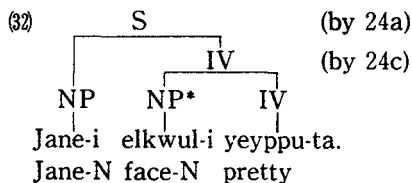
(30) *Clefting of the direct object NP*

Kay-ka \_\_\_ son-ul mwul-un kes-un John i-ta.  
 dog-N hand-Ac bite-Rel thing-T John be  
 'What the dog bit on the hand was John.'

(31) *Clefting of the putative 'adverbial NP'*

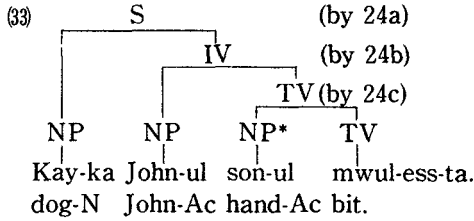
\*Kay-ka \_\_\_ John-ul mwul-un kes-un son i-ta.  
 dog-N John-Ac bit-Rel thing-T hand be  
 'What the dog bit on John was the hand.'

If the preceding proposal is correct, sentence (9) will have the structure in (32), with NP\* marking an 'adverbial' NP that combines with a verbal category to give a category of the same type. As before ordinary NPs either combine with a TV to give an IV or combine with an IV to give an S.



In (32), the adverbial NP *elkwul* 'in the face' combines with the IV *yeyppu-ta* 'pretty' to give another IV, consistent with the combinatorial rule for adverbials (i.e.(24c)). The resultant IV then combines with the NP *Jane* giving an S. Since both NPs have combined with an IV category, each receives the nominative case according to the convention in (29)—thereby giving the desired double nominative pattern.

Consider now the double accusative structure exemplified in (7), which will have the structure in (33). As before, NP\* marks an adverbial NP—in this case the nominal *son* 'on the hand'.



Here, the adverbial NP *son* 'on the hand' combines with the TV *mwul-ess-ta* 'bit' to give another category of the same type, with which the NP *John* can then combine, yielding an IV. Since both of these NPs combine with a TV category, they are each assigned the accusative suffix. Of course, the subject NP *kay* 'dog' bears the nominative case by virtue of its combinatorial relation with the IV *John-ul son-ul mwul-ess-ta* 'bit John on the hand'.

Now consider the intriguing minimal pair involving the passive sentences in (22) and (23) above, in which the 'adverbial' NP *son* 'on the hand' can be marked by either the nominative or the accusative suffix.

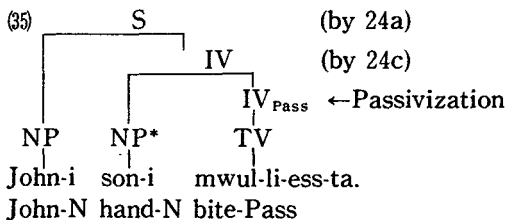
- (22) John-i son-i mwul-li-ess-ta.  
       John-N hand-N bite-Pass  
       'John was bitten on the hand.'
- (23) John-i son-ul mwul-li-ess-ta.  
       John-N hand-Ac bite-Pass  
       'John was bitten on the hand.'

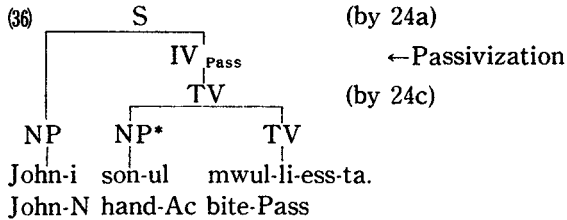
These sentences are formed with the help of Passivization, an operation which applies to a TV category, converting it into an IV by demoting its 'agent' argument to an oblique phrase. Because the status and representation of the oblique agentive phrase is irrelevant to our present concerns, I will set this issue aside and assume that Passivization has the form depicted in (34).

(34) *Passivization*

TV → IV pass

Sentences (22) and (23) will now have the structures in (35) and (36), respectively.





In the first of these sentences, the 'adverbial' NP *son* 'on the hand' combines with the IV created by Passivization and therefore bears the nominative case. In the second sentence, in contrast, it combines with the TV *mwul* 'bite', receiving the accusative suffix and yielding the phrase *son-ul mwul* 'bite on the hand'. Assuming, with Bach (1980), that Passivization can apply to phrasal TVs as well as to word-level TVs, this operation will then apply to *son-ul mwul*, giving the passive IV *son-ul mwul-li-ess-ta* 'was bitten on the hand'. Combination of this phrase with the NP *John* licenses the nominative case on the latter element and results in the formation of a complete S.

If these ideas are on the right track, then the Korean case system is extremely simple in conception, consistently recording the combinatorial relations into which NPs enter in surface structure—in compliance with the conventions in (29). On this view, case has a specific and important grammatical function since it encodes contrasts which are at the very core of the sentence-building system of Korean. As the combinatorial rules in (24) show, a grammar combines categories in particular ways to form sentences. Thus, a TV combines with an NP to give an IV, an IV combines with an NP to form an S, and so on. Interestingly, the notions and contrasts required to form even the simplest sentences of Korean are the very ones to which case marking is sensitive: distinctions among the categories NP, TV, IV, and Adv (including adverbial NPs). Seen in this way, then, case constitutes a very central and motivated grammatical system, a fact which should help explain the frequency with which it is used in the world's languages.

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