The Transitivization/Detransitivation Profile of Japanese and Korean

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Haspelmath (1993) and Nicholas et al. 2004 establish the opposition between transitivizing and detransitivizing languages as a significant typological feature, and take the first steps toward profiling the world’s languages with respect to this feature. Haspelmath and Nichols et al. reached different conclusions about the profile of Japanese: Haspelmath classified Japanese as basically equipollent, while Nichols et al. classified it as basically transitivizing. In a recent careful study, Narrog (2016) shows that Japanese presents a complex diachronic pattern, whereby “in pre-historical times, Japanese was apparently very strongly transitivizing and this strong tendency increasingly gave way to de-transitivizing and indeterminate patterns in historically documented times” (Narrog 2016: 246). On this view, Japanese fits with the general Northeast Asian transitivizing pattern (supporting the classification of Nichols et al), but has undergone diachronic developments which result in a synchronic pattern somewhat closer to Haspelmath’s characterization.

Korean

We add Korean to the picture. We show that Korean too classifies as primarily transitivizing. A simple check of the native Korean verbs corresponding to those in the sample of Nichols et al. (2004) confirms this; only one of the verbs in the sample, ‘eat’ shows a detransitivizing (“passive) variant (Cho and Whitman, 2019):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Causative</th>
<th>Passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eat</td>
<td>mek-ta</td>
<td>mek-i-ta</td>
<td>mek-hi-ta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read</td>
<td>ilk-ta</td>
<td>ilk-hi-ta</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cry</td>
<td>wul-ta</td>
<td>wul-li-ta</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>put on</td>
<td>sin-ta</td>
<td>sin-ki-ta</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sleep</td>
<td>ca-ta</td>
<td>cay-wu-ta</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like Japanese, there has been movement toward a more balanced profile since the earliest hangul sources in the 15th century, with a gradual increase in the ratio of detransitivizing exemplars of the morphological passive/causative suffixes -i/hi/li/ki- (Park 1994). The standard explanation for this, crosslinguistically (e.g., Nedjalkov 1993, Haspelmath 1998) and specifically for Korean (Kim 1992) is that detransitives (“passes”) develop from causatives, in the Nedjalkov/Haspelmath view through an intermediate stage of adversity passives. Yet as Malchukov (2016) points out, this is implausible in the case of Japanese, since Japanese adversity passives are morphologically quite distinct from and historically newer than the anticausatives characteristic of the Japanese bigrade (-e and -i stem) detransitives, and the development causative > adversity passive > anticausative is problematic. A similar problem exists for Korean, since not only transitivizing (conventionally “causative”), and detransitivizing “passive” but anticausative (3) exponents are already attested in the earliest Late Middle Korean hangul sources in the 15th century:

(1) Causative/transitive

Ha-n pi=lol kuch-i-sy-a (Yongpi 68 1447)
great rain=ACC stop-CAUS-HON-INF
‘Stopping the great rain’ (cited from Lee 1999)

(2) Passive with agent

yuceng-tolh=i motin cyungsoyng mul-Gy-e (Wel.in 9 1459)
human-PL=NOM cruel beast bite-PASS-INF
‘The humans being bitten by cruel beasts.’
We argue instead that the detransitive pattern arrives from suppression of case on the causee argument in a subjectless or impersonal causatives. This can be seen in (2), where the agent argument ‘cruel beast’ is not case marked, an option completely impossible in modern Korean. From an impersonal source such as ‘(It) caused the cruel beasts to bite’, bare case marking on the causee argument leads to its reanalysis as an adjunct in passives such as (2), and as completely absent in anticausatives such as (3).

**Japanese-Korean differences** Although both languages share the tendency to level out an earlier transitivizing bias, and some of the factors pointed out by Narrog (e.g. the role of Sinitic verbal nouns allowing both transitive and detransitive derivations with light verbs) are at work both, the basic patterns in the two languages have significant differences. Korean -i/hi/li/ki- is most plausibly related to hoy- ‘do’ and thus is functionally comparable to Japanese -s transitives on the view that the latter is relatable to *se- ‘do’. Korean lacks a counterpart of the Japanese bigrade transitive or detransitive froms. Japanese, in turn, never develops a detransitivizing function of -s comparable to what happens with Korean -i/hi/li/ki-.

**Japanese-Korean similarities in an areal context** Despite these differences, transitivity alternations in Japanese and Korean share properties that set them apart from primarily transitivizing languages in the area. Chief among these is the fact that Korean -i/hi/li/ki- transitives (e.g. LMK polk-hi- red, bright-CAUS; ‘clarify’ and both Japanese -s transitives (e.g. akas- < aka ‘red’ -s TRANS; ‘reveal’) and lower bigrade transitives (e.g. ake- < aka ‘red’ -e trans ‘redden’) can directly transitivize adjectives. This is in sharp distinction to neighboring language families such as Tungusic and Mongolic. In these families, adjectives, which pattern like substantives (i.e. nouns) must first be verbalized by a suffix such as Manchu -LAI/RA/NA-; the verbalized adjective may then be causativized as in Manchu (4) (data due to Andrew Joseph):

(4) a. saha-ra-bu-
black-VBL-CAUS
‘blacken, cause to turn black’

(5) b. Dere-be saha-ra-bu-
face-ACC black-VBL-CAUS
‘blacken the face’

Transitivized adjectives account for a significant portion of Korean -i/hi/li/ki- transitives and Japanese -s and lower bigrade transitives. Since adjectives cannot be passivized, and derived inchoatives are usually not included in counts of anticausatives, this fact contributes to the statistical bias in favor of transitivization in both languages, in contrast to their neighbors.

Although Korean lacks a counterpart of Japanese bigrade detransitives, there is some vestigial evidence for fossilized intransitive derivations in -IV-, perhaps comparable to Japanese -s- intransitives. These include examples like LMK pisk- ‘crooked, askew’ ~ pisk-ul- id. and isk- ‘lead, draw’ ~ iskul- pointed out by Chang (1999).

**Conclusion** Japanese and Korean share the basic profile of originally transitivizing languages which have undergone a shift toward a more equal balance of transitivization and detransitivization, although the mechanisms for this shift differ in part. Both show an ability to transitivize adjective roots that is marked in their region. Both have a transitivizing pattern arguably related to the lexical
verb ‘do’, but Korean lacks a counterpart of the Japanese transitivizing and detransitivizing bigrade pattern in -e and -i.

References


