‘Relational’ noun modifying constructions in Japanese and Korean: The differential divisions of labor between pragmatics and grammar

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Japanese and Korean, which allow for zero anaphora abundantly in both speech and writing, are deemed to show relatively low “referential density”, i.e. “the average ratio of overt argumental NPs (nouns or pronouns) to available argument positions in the clause” (Bickel 2003:5). In these languages, the manifestations of ‘gaps’ are supposedly more diverse and complex than those with high referential density like English. This paper explores the interpretive mechanism of gaps in Noun Modifying Constructions (NMCs) in Japanese and Korean.

Typological studies on NMCs (e.g. Matsumoto, Comrie, and Sells 2017) have revealed that many Asian languages possess “General Noun Modifying Clause Constructions (GNMCCs)”. GNMCCs, wherein the relationship between head nouns and modifying clauses is pragmatically determined, are distinguished from syntactically defined “relative clauses” found in many European languages. Japanese and Korean NMCs are GNMCCs par excellence, and are known to allow for flexible interpretations between head nouns and modifying clauses as shown in (1a) and (1b).

(1a) (J) [se-ga takaku nar] kutu (1b) (K) [khi-ka khecinun] sinpal height-NOM high become shoes height-NOM become high:PRES shoes

‘the shoes which make one become taller’ *(lit.) the shoes which one becomes taller*

This paper probes into the interpretive mechanism of gaps in special types of NMCs in Japanese and Korean where the two languages make a subtle yet systematic contrast. Specifically, these NMCs express broadly construed ‘relational’ concepts (Teramura 1992), e.g. spatial relation (e.g. front/back) and temporal relation (e.g. before/after) such as (2) and (3):

(2a) (J) Benti ni kosikake, [watasitati-no sumu] mukai-no apaato-o miageru.
bench-LOC be seated:CONJ we-GEN live opposite side-GEN apartment house-ACC look up

‘I take a seat on the bench and look up to the apartment house on the opposite side (of the location) where we live.’ (lit. …the apartment house on the opposite side where we live.)

(2b) (K) Peynchi-ey anc-a, [wulitul-i sa-nun] kon macunphyen-uy
bench-LOC be seated:CONJ we-NOM live-PST:ATTR place opposite side-GEN apartment house-ACC look up-PRES:DECL

‘I take a seat on the bench and look up to the apartment house on the opposite side of the location where we live.’

that-NOM title-NOM former wife with meet:PST last COP:POL:PST

‘That was the last (time/occasion) when Yasuo met his ex-wife.’

(3b)(K) Kukes-i [Yasuo-ssi-ka cen puin-ul manna-n] macimak ham mosup
that-NOM title-NOM former wife-ACC meet:PST:ATTR last day/figure
i-ess-supnita.

COP-PST-SFS:HON

‘That was the last day when Yasuo met his ex-wife/the last sight of Yasuo’s ex-wife when he met her.’

In the NMCs (2a) through (3b), spatial and temporal relation nouns are used, i.e. (J) mukai, (K) macunphyen (‘the opposite side (of)’), (J) saigo, (K) macimak (‘the last’). Crucially, in Japanese, these relational nouns can serve as heads of modifying clauses without additional linguistic coding (2a, 3a), and the additional interpretive details (italics in parentheses) are provided by pragmatic inference. In Korean, in contrast, the relational nouns cannot serve as heads without additional linguistic coding marked by the square □. Concretely, in (2b), an additional place noun kos ‘place’ needs to be supplied as the true head, and the relational noun macunphyen ‘opposite side’ serves as its modifier. In (3b), unlike its Japanese counterpart saigo ‘the last’ serving as the head, the Korean temporal relation noun macimak ‘the last’ needs to be followed by specific head nouns such as nal ‘day’ and mosup ‘figure’ to facilitate the interpretation of the NMC.

A similar contrast is observed in NMCs including non-spatiotemporal relation nouns such as (J) doryoku and (K) nolyek ‘efforts’ and (J) orei and (K) salyey ‘(tokens of) gratitude’ in (4) and (5). These nouns are relational in the sense that efforts are related to a specific purpose and (tokens of) gratitude are related to a specific favor previously done. Similarly to (2b) and (3b), unlike their Japanese counterparts, relational nouns in Korean need ‘facilitative’ linguistic coding marked by the square □.

(4a) (J)[Sutoresu-o keigensuru] doryoku-o tuzukeru koto-ga hityou-desu.

stress-ACC reduce efforts-ACC continue NMLZ-NOM necessity-COP:POL

‘It is necessary to continue making efforts (to) reduce stress (lit. that reduce stress).’

(4b) (K) [Suthuleysu-lul cwuli-ki wihan] nolyek-ul

Stress-ACC reduce-NMLZ done for the purpose of:ATTR efforts-ACC

kyeysokha-nun kes-i phyohapnita.

continue-ATTR:PRES NMLZ-NOM necessary-COP:HON

‘It is necessary to continue making efforts for the purpose of reducing stress.’

(5a)(J) [Kasite kure-ta] orei-wa bai-ni site kaesu.

Lend:CONJ give-PST gratitude-TOP double-to do:CONJ return:PRES

‘As for the tokens of gratitude (for the money/fact that) you lent me, I’ll pay you back double.’

(5b) (K) [Pilley-cwu-n kes-ey tayha-n] salyey-nun pay-lo ha-n-ta.

lend-give-PST:ATTR fact-toward:ATTR gratitude-TOP double-to do:PRES-DECL

‘As for the tokens of gratitude for the fact that you lent me, I’ll pay you back double.’

The systematic contrast between Japanese and Korean NMCs in (2) through (5) suggest that Japanese NMCs (2a, 3a, 4a, 5a) allow for interpretive gaps between and head nouns and modifying clauses, which are resolved pragmatically by inference. In contrast, in Korean NMCs, these interpretive gaps need to be filled by overt linguistic coding, as illustrated by the square □ in (2b, 3b, 4b, 5b). This indicates that the functional division of labor between pragmatics and grammar, particularly the interpretative mechanism of gaps in NMCs, can differ between Japanese and
Korean, in spite of the extensive overall similarity in morpho-syntactic typological profiles as well as discursive-pragmatic phenomena including honorification.

References

