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24.902: Syntax

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<div align="center">Double Nominative Constructions in Korean</div>

The double nominative construction in the Korean language is a curious, widely-investigated syntactic phenomenon. It is noteworthy because cross-linguistically, the nominative Case is generally applied to Determiner Phrases (DPs) acting as the subject of a verb. This is true of Korean as well, but interestingly, the nominative Case may also be applied to other sentence DPs which are not alone the subject of the verb. The present goal, then, is to understand this construction under the X-bar theory of syntax using preexisting principles to explain why multiple DPs in a Korean sentence may receive nominative Case. In particular, it is proposed that differences in verb argument structure bring about the double nominative construction.

First, it is important to demonstrate the double nominative construction itself. Essentially, it occurs when two related DPs are both assigned the nominative Case. The following data is from Kim (1995):

(1)   a.   Mary-uy/ka   son-i   yeppu-ta
                  M.-GEN/NOM   hand-NOM   pretty-DEC
                  'Mary's hand is pretty'

         b.   John-uy/i   hyeng-i   pwuca-ta
                  J.-GEN/NOM   brother-NOM rich-DEC
                  'John's brother is rich'

(2)   a.   Seoul-ey/i   pul-i   na-ss-ta
                  S.-LOC/NOM   fire-NOM   break.out-PST-DEC
                  'A fire broke out in Seoul'

b. Hankwuk-ey/i   san-i   man-ta
    Korea-LOC/NOM   mountain-NOM   many-DEC
    'In Korea there are a lot of mountains'

(3)   a.   Mary-eke/ka   kohyang-i   kurip-ta
           M.-DAT/NOM   hometown-NOM   miss-DEC
           'Mary misses her hometown'

      b.   Tom-i   Mary-ka   joh-ta
           Tom-NOM   Mary-NOM   like-DEC
           'Tom likes Mary'

We see that the double nominative construction is possible in a few different types of environments. One type, shown in (1), is a possessive construction. Where we might usually see a complex DP like [*Mary-uy son-i*] 'Mary's hand' we see alternation with a double nominative construction, *Mary-ka son-i*. In (2), we see that locative constructions also permit double nominative forms – the locative DP can be assigned either locative or nominative Case. Lastly, (3) indicates that certain types of verbs appear to allow two nominative arguments, resulting in a double nominative construction. So far it appears that double nominatives are permitted in all of these situations. However, the following data, also from Kim (1995), disputes this:

(4)   a.   John-uy/i   hyeng-i   cwuke-ss-ta
           J.-GEN/NOM   brother-NOM   die-PST-DEC
           'John's brother died'

      b.   John-uy/*i   hyeng-i   talyeka-ss-ta
           J.-GEN/*NOM   brother-NOM   run-PST-DEC
           'John's brother ran'

(5)   a.   Mikwuk-ey/i   cicin-i   na-ss-ta
           America-LOC/NOM   earthquake-NOM   occur-PST-DEC
           'An earthquake occurred in America'

      b.   Mikwuk-ey/*i   Tom-i   san-ta
           America-LOC/*NOM   Tom-NOM   live-DEC
   'Tom lives in America'

The sentences in (4) and (5) show us that not all possessive and locative constructions allow a double nominative. With this information in mind, the present goal is to determine when double nominative constructions are possible, and to understand the underlying syntactic mechanism that forms them.

Before continuing, it is important to briefly cover grammatical Case assignment. The principle that mentions and governs Case is called the Case Filter, and it states that all Determiner Phrases must be assigned a Case. Usually Case is assigned in certain positions in the syntactic tree. Carnie (2013) points out two such positions: the specifier position of IP, where a finite I assigns nominative Case; and the complement to a Case-assigning element such as a verb or preposition. To see an example of how the Case Filter operates when a sentence is being produced, let us consider the following English sentence:
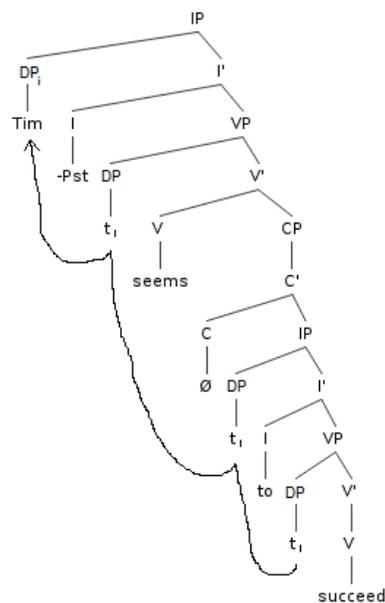
(6)   Tim seems to succeed.

This sentence can be posited to have the deep structure given in (7a). However, we see that the DP *Tim* is not in a position that can receive Case, so it must move all the way up to the specifier of the main IP, where the finite -PST can assign nominative Case. This produces the surface structure shown in (7b).
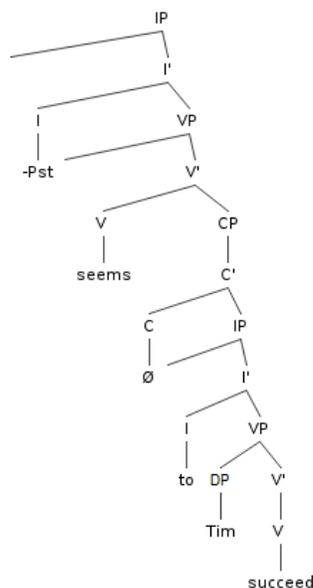
(7)   a. Deep structure   b. Surface structure
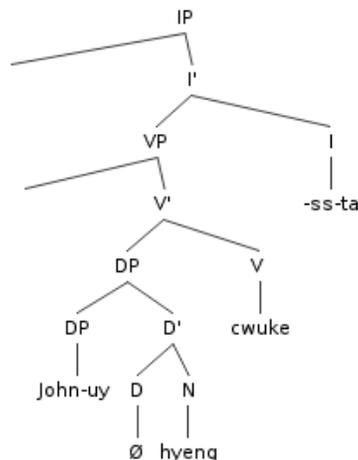
Now that we see how Case is assigned and know that it is necessary for all DPs, we can begin to examine the data in (1)-(5). Considering a minimal pair like that in (4), where the only difference is the verb, we gain the insight that the verb must somehow influence the grammaticality of the double nominative construction. Since the verbs in (4) are intransitive, let us consider the different classes of intransitives: unaccusatives and unergatives. An unaccusative verb does not obligatorily assign an external θ-role, and takes its argument in the object position, as a complement to V. On the contrary, an unergative verb only assigns an external θ-role and takes its argument in the subject position. Now we can turn to the verbs in (4), and see if the type of verb may have a role in the grammaticality of the double nominative. Consider the following sentences, with grammaticality judgments provided by a native Korean speaker born in South Korea who moved to the United States at age 8 and uses primarily Korean in her household:

(8)   a.   Tom-i   John-uy   hyeng-ul   cwuk-ye-ss-ta
                  T.-NOM   J.-GEN   brother-ACC   kill-ACT-PST-DEC
                  'Tom killed John's brother'

        b.   * Tom-i   John-uy   hyeng-ul   talyek-ye-ss-ta
                  T.-NOM   J.-GEN   brother-ACC   run-ACT-PST-DEC
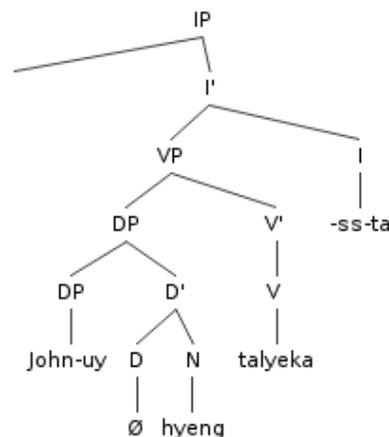   'Tom ran John's brother'

Here we see that the verb *cwuk* takes an object – in this case the DP *John-uy hyeng-ul* 'John's brother' – while the verb *talyek* cannot. This hints that in (4a), the DP *John-uy/i hyeng-i* is the underlying object of the verb, and it moves to subject position to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP). This would make *cwuk* an unaccusative verb in its use in (4a), since it only takes an object argument (this also explains the difference in the gloss of *cwuk* in (4a) vs. (8a) – the root means something like 'become dead', and when used without a subject, it takes on the meaning 'die'; when used in an active sense with the particle *-ye*, it means 'kill'). Sentence (8b) shows that the verb *talyek* cannot take an object, implying that the DP *John-uy hyeng-i* in (4b) is

the subject of the verb. This would make *talyek* an unergative verb. The finding that these two

verbs are of different classes further suggests that they do indeed play a role in determining

whether a double nominative construction is possible. We can examine this further by looking at

the deep structure representations of the sentences in (4), given in (9).

(9)   a. Deep structure of (4a)   b. Deep structure of (4b)
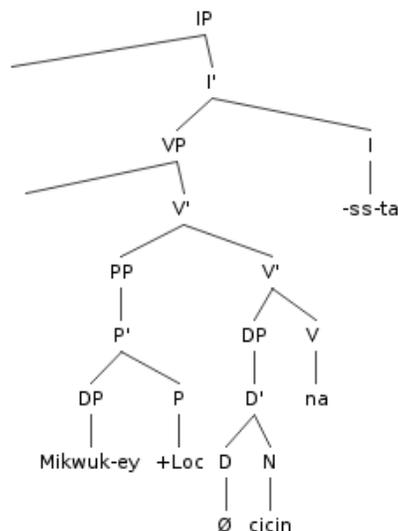

We note that as shown in (9a), the DP *John-uy hyeng* 'John's brother' is in a position where it

can be assigned Case, since it is the complement of V *cwuke*. Given that stative predicates assign

the nominative Case to their objects, as Wunderlich (2014) states, it can be posited that the DP

John-uy hyeng receives nominative Case in its deep structure position, becoming [*John-uy

hyeng*]-*i*. Then the entire DP can undergo movement to the specifier of IP (through the specifier

of VP) to satisfy the EPP, resulting in the final sentence *John-uy hyeng-i cwuke-ss-ta*.

Alternatively, since the main DP already has Case, the embedded DP *John-uy* alone may move

into the specifier of IP to satisfy the EPP. Once there, it may receive nominative Case from the

finite I, resulting in the surface structure *John-i hyeng-i cwuke-ss-ta*. This explains the possibility

of the double nominative construction for (4a) – now let us consider (4b). The tree in (9b) shows

that the DP *John-uy hyeng* is not in a position where it can receive Case. Therefore it must move
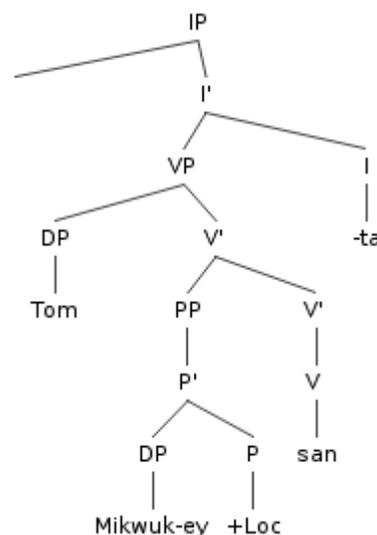
into the specifier of IP, where it can receive nominative Case from I, to satisfy the Case Filter.

This produces the final sentence *John-uy hyeng-i talyeka-ss-ta*. In this case, the embedded DP

John-uy cannot move alone because the main DP would still lack Case. This correctly rules out

the sentence **John-i hyeng-i talyeka-ss-ta*.

    Now that possessive constructions have been discussed, we have established a better

understanding of the causes of double nominative constructions. In fact, a very similar line of

reasoning applies for locative constructions. Taking the locative noun as an adjunct in the VP,

we get the following deep structures for the sentences in (5), where *na* is an unaccusative verb

and *san* is unergative.

(10)   a. Deep structure of (5a)   b. Deep structure of (5b)

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        IP                                          IP
       /  \                                        /  \
           I'                                          I'
          /  \                                        /  \
         VP    I                                     VP    I
        /  \   |                                    /  \   |
       V'  -ss-ta                                  DP  V' -ta
      /  \                                         |   / \
     PP   V'                                      Tom PP  V'
     |   /  \                                         |   |
     P'  DP  V                                        P'  V
    / \  |   |                                       / \  |
  DP   P D'  na                                     DP  P san
   |   | / \                                        |   |
Mikwuk-ey +Loc D  N                              Mikwuk-ey +Loc
              |  |
              Ø cicin
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In (10a), we see that the DP *cicin* 'earthquake' is the complement of the V *na* 'occur', so it

receives the nominative Case, becoming *cicin-i*. Then, to satisfy the EPP, there are two options:

either the DP *cicin-i* can move up the tree, stopping in the specifier of IP, or the DP *Mikwuk-ey*

'in America' can, where it will receive nominative Case from the finite I. The former situation,

followed by topicalization of the PP, results in the final sentence *Mikwuk-ey cicin-i na-ss-ta*. The

latter situation results in the sentence *Mikwuk-i cicin-i na-ss-ta*. The tree in (10b) shows that the DP *Tom* is not in a position where it can be assigned Case, so it must undergo movement into the specifier of IP where it can be assigned nominative Case, becoming *Tom-i*. After topicalization of the PP, the final sentence is *Mikwuk-ey Tom-i san-ta*. We note that the DP *Mikwuk-ey* cannot move to the specifier of IP because *Tom* would be left without Case, which rules out the sentence **Mikwuk-i Tom-i san-ta*.

Thus we have seen that the Korean double nominative construction appears to be possible due to a combination of the Extended Projection Principle and the Case Filter. Of course, this analysis is limited in its scope; another interesting consideration that was omitted in this paper but is of theoretical interest is how a DP can be reassigned Case. We saw that in possessive constructions, a DP like *John-uy* 'John's' may move into the specifier of IP to satisfy the EPP and end up in the surface structure having the nominative Case as *John-i*. We also saw that a locative DP like *Mikwuk-ey* 'in America' can move and be assigned nominative Case as well. Investigating these patterns would be a good next step towards fully understanding the nature of the double nominative construction. However, the model we have developed above provides a good foundation for understanding the phenomenon.

References

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Wunderlich, Dieter (2014). Variations of double nominative in Korean and Japanese. *Studies in Language and Cognition*, Düsseldorf University Press, Düsseldorf, Germany.