Double Relative Clauses in Korean

It has been observed that Korean allows relativization from within another relative clause, yielding island-violating Double Relative Clauses (DRCs) (see (1)). In an influential account, Han and Kim (2004) argued that there are no true DRCs in Korean, since DRCs involve island-observing relativization of the initial nominative NP of a double nominative construction (DNC), which is coindexed with a null pronoun inside the RC modifying the second nominative NP (see (2a,b)). Under this view, apparent violation of locality in DRCs is a ‘grammatical illusion’ (Phillips, 2013). Opposed to this view are approaches that take DRCs to result from the lack/irrelevance of island constraints, in Korean or more generally. Yoon (2011) claims that processing constraints, which she takes to be the source of islands following Klunder & Kutas (1993) and others, explains why DRCs like (1) are possible. Processing the gap inside DRC is facilitated by the preference for subjects to be relativized and the lack of intervening referential NPs in the filler-gap dependency. Na & Huck (1993) assume islands to be without force in Korean and argue that a particular interpretive relationship between the head nouns in DRCs (dubbed thematic subordination, TS) licenses DRCs. In (1), there is a conventional/real-world TS-relation between a child and his puppy (especially a beloved one that recently died).

The approaches make different predictions for DRCs like (1) when the gap that appears to be within the island is replaced by an overt/resumptive (R) pronoun (3a,b vs. 3c,d). Under the first approach, the R-pronoun could mark either the position that is relativized (=e in 2a) or be inside the RC modifying the subject (=proi in 2a). If the former, the pronoun is not warranted since there are no island violations incurred by relativization. If the latter, it will have no effect because the position inside the RC is not the one from which relativization took place. Thus, we predict that R-pronouns will make DRCs worse or have no effect on their acceptability. Under the processing account, the R-pronoun occurs inside an island and is predicted to make DRCs more acceptable, since gaps are more difficult to process than overt pronouns, especially inside islands. If the third approach is correct, DRCs where TS holds strongly should be better than those where it does not (or holds weakly), regardless of the gap/R-pronoun distinction. However, it should be noted that Na & Huck (1993) argue that TS also characterizes DNCs. Thus, if TS is found to be relevant, both the first and third approaches would be supported, since the first approach takes felicitous (i.e., TS-observing) DNCs to be the source of DRCs.

We tested 80 native speakers’ judgments of DRCs like (1) by manipulating two factors – a) the TS relation between head NPs in DRCs (strong vs. weak), and b) gap vs. R-pronoun within the DRC – using a 5-point acceptability judgment task (see (3) for sample items). Results showed that speakers found DRCs in all four conditions to be acceptable, with only slight variations (see Fig 1). The result cannot be due to a yes-response bias because ungrammatical filler items were rated low in acceptability (mean = 1.54, SD = 1.06). There was a slight difference between DRCs with strong vs. weak TS (t = 2.97, p < .01), and DRCs with gaps were judged better than those with R-pronouns (t = -3.37, p < .01).

Our results imply the following: 1) the processing account of DRC cannot be correct, given that DRCs with gaps were judged to be better than those with R-pronouns, which is the opposite of the prediction of the processing account; 2) the grammatical illusion approach and the TS approach are supported because a strong TS relation between the head nouns in DRCs made them more acceptable than those with a weak TS relation. However, our results cannot differentiate between the first and third approaches, which we leave for a future study.

Nevertheless, we take our study to have made an inroad on a topic that has been clouded with indeterminacy of relevant judgments and competing analyses. We know at least that processing fails as an adequate account of DRCs like (1) that have a plausible DNC source.
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(1) DRC (movement across RC2 violates locality/CNPC)
\[ RC1 [RC2 ei ej cohaba-nun] kngaci-ka\_kwk-un] (ku) ai
like-rel dog-nom die-rel (that) kid
‘(that) kid who the dog that [he] liked died’ (Han and Kim 2004: 316)

(2) Analysis of (1) in Han & Kim (2004:327)
a. [ei [RC pro\_i ej cohaba-nun] kngaci-ka\_kwk-un] (ku) ai
DNC source
b. (Ku) ai-ka\_i [RC pro\_i ej cohaba-nun] kngaci-ka\_kwk-ess-ta
(that) kid-nom like-rel dog-nomj die-pst-decl
‘As for that kid, the dog that he likes died.’

(3) a. strong TS (actress-performance), gap:
\[ ei ej hakoiss-nun yenki-ka\_j twienda-n] yepaywu\_i
do-rel performance-nom excellent-rel actress
‘the actress who the performance which [she] is doing is excellent.’

b. weak TS (actress-food), gap:
\[ ei ej hakoiss-nun umsk-i\_j twienda-n] yepaywu\_i
doo-rel food-Nom excellent-rel actress
‘the actress who the food which [she] is cooking is excellent.’

c. strong TS (actress-performance), overt:
\[ caki/kunye-ka\_i ej hakoiss-nun yenki-ka\_j twienda-n] yepaywu\_i
self/she-nom do-rel performance-nom excellent-rel actress
‘the actress who the performance which [she] is doing is excellent.’

d. weak TS (actress-food), overt:
\[ caki/kunye-ka\_i ej hakoiss-nun umsk-i\_j twienda-n] yepaywu\_i
self/she-nom do-rel food-nom excellent-rel actress
‘the actress who the food which [she] is cooking is excellent.’

Figure 1. Mean acceptability judgment score for each condition

Selected references