The changing status of Korean plural-marking: Evidence from an acceptability judgement task

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Issue and research questions: It is predicted that no language will have both a generalized classifier system and plural-marking (Chierchia, 1998). Korean facts pose a problem for this picture, since while Korean lacks obligatory singular/plural morphology, it is generally considered that the suffix -tul is an optional plural-marker (e.g. Kang 1994, Kwak 2003, Kim 2005). While -tul has been studied extensively, there is little consensus as to the distribution and function of this morpheme. Based on a historical corpus study I conducted, I hypothesized that the disparate descriptions of the use of -tul are due to a language change in progress. The historical study showed that in the early 1920s -tul was only used in specific contexts and always with human nouns. More recent data show it being used much more frequently and on a large range of animate, inanimate, and abstract nouns. The acceptability judgement task reported on in this paper lends further support for this hypothesis. The question addressed in this paper is whether the modern-day uses of -tul are consistent with the properties of a classifier language and whether, based on the judgements I analyzed, Korean still qualifies as a classifier language.

Task: For the acceptability judgment task, 31 native speakers of Korean (of various generations) provided judgments on 190 test items. Participants were asked to make judgements on both bare nouns and -tul-marked nouns in various semantic contexts (e.g. specific/non-specific reference) and morpho-syntactic contexts. Data were also collected on the use/non-use of classifiers in certain -tul-marked and bare noun constructions. The task included examples of nouns referring to humans (e.g. salam ‘person’), nouns referring to animate objects (e.g. khokkiri ‘elephant’), nouns referring to inanimate objects (e.g. gongchayk ‘notebook’), abstract nouns (e.g. gongwon ‘friendship’), and mass nouns (mul ‘water’).

Analysis: For many semantic categories of nouns, -tul is required in order to obtain a plural reading. The bare noun, despite claims that it is number neutral, or unspecified for number (e.g. Nemoto 2005), only allows a singular reading in a large majority of cases, the exception being among some of the older participants. Also of interest in the acceptability judgement task were the Korean classifier constructions. There were various instances where a bare noun combined directly with a number (a construction normally not permitted in classifier languages). Kim (2005) points out that the Num Noun construction can be used with certain human nouns, but the data shows that it has already been extended to include more human nouns as well as animate, inanimate, and abstract nouns. In the data that was analyzed, not all of the new trends can be observed fully on all categories of nouns. Corbett (2000:57) proposes an implicational ranking of semantic classes for languages that do not mark Number for all count nouns. He proposes that if a language marks Number on nouns referring to inanimates, then it must also mark it on animate nouns, which further implies marking it on nouns referring to humans. I propose to extend Corbett’s Animacy Hierarchy to diachrony, such that if Number is introduced as a morphological category, it will first appear on human nouns, then be extended to other animates, next to inanimates, and finally to nouns referring to abstract concepts. This appears to be supported by the Korean data.

Discussion: The results of the acceptability judgement task show an increasing trend towards the use of the suffix –tul to express plurality in Korean, the interpretation of a bare noun as ‘singular’ (as opposed to the previous claims that bare nouns are unspecified for number), and the loss of classifiers from certain classifier constructions. My study provides support for the suggestion that this morpheme is currently undergoing change and that Korean appears to be shifting from a classifier language to a mass-count language.
References