Abstract This paper uncovers a systematic correlation between semantics of aspect and syntactic argument structure as manifested in the difference between two imperfective aspect markers -ko iss and -a iss in Korean. Unlike the common assumption that the -ko iss form is a progressive marker, while the -a iss form is a resultative marker, this paper argues that the difference between the two derives from their different argument structure: -ko iss selects transitive and unergative verbs, which have an external argument, while -a iss selects unaccusative and passive verbs, which only have an internal theme argument. It is argued that the difference in argument structure is determined by semantic event structure depending on agentivity in Korean. The results of the paper have broader implications for the issues of syntax and semantics interface and unaccusativity.

Keywords Korean imperfective aspect · Argument structure · Agentivity versus dynamicity · Unaccusativity · Syntax/semantics interface

1 Introduction

This paper aims to uncover a systematic correlation between semantics of aspect and syntactic argument structure as manifested in the difference between two imperfective aspect markers in Korean. The Korean tense and aspect system includes two imperfective periphrastic constructions: -ko iss and -a/e iss.

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-A iss is often compared with -ko iss because these two forms contain the same auxiliary verb iss ‘be, exist’ and differ only with respect to the connectives, -a/e ‘have -en’ and -ko ‘and’, which are attached to the main verb. It is commonly assumed in the literature that the -ko iss form denotes actions in progress, i.e., progressive (Choe 1971; Lee 1993; Kim 1986; Martin 1992), and the -a/e iss form denotes resultant states, i.e., resultative (Lee 1993; Martin 1992; Ahn 1995). (1) contains contrasting examples of the two durative (imperfective) markers (Lee 1991).

(1)

student-PL-NM all chair-LC sit-CN exist-DC
‘The students are all taking a seat.’
b. Haksayng-tul-i motwu uica-ey anc-a iss-ta.2
student-PL-NM all chair-LC sit-CN exist-DC
‘The students are all in their seats.’

When complemented by the same predicate anc- ‘to sit down’, -ko iss in (1a) expresses an action-in-progress, i.e., the action of taking a seat, while -a iss in (1b) expresses the state of being in one’s seat, which resulted from the action of sitting down. Although many Korean linguists claim that -a iss denotes the perfective resultative, in line with Lee (1991) and Shirai (1998), I take both -ko iss and -a iss to express durative situations which encode the imperfective aspect. In other words, the main assertion of (1b) is the continuous state of the students being in their seat, viz., the completion of a previous event of sitting down is not the focus.

The descriptive dichotomy of process versus result state, however, is problematic since -ko iss, like -a iss, can refer to a resultant state when it is affixed to certain telic transitive verbs, i.e., verbs of wearing and body postures. (2) is ambiguous between the two readings ‘He is now in the process of putting on clothes’, or ‘He has already put on clothes and is now in the state of wearing them’ (Lee 1991; Kim 1986, 1993; Ahn 1995). Therefore, the semantic feature ‘dynamic’ cannot serve as a distinguishing factor between the two. Given that the progressive describes an on-going process, without entailing that the described event has ended, the result state reading in (2) is unexpected. -A iss cannot be used in (2) because it exclusively takes intransitive verbs. As I will argue later, this complementation restriction does not follow from the analysis of -a iss as the result state marker, and therefore calls for an explanation.

1 The abbreviations used in the glosses are as follows: NM: nominative case marker, AC: accusative case marker, PL: plural marker, CN: connectives, DC: declarative sentence ending, MP: imperative sentence ending, PST: past tense marker, PRS: present tense marker, PS: passive, CS: causative, LC: locative marker, TP: topic marker.

2 Unlike the English perfect, (1b) does not have an experiential reading but instead describes an on-going current state. The variation between a and e in the -a/e iss construction is phonologically determined and depends on the last vowel of the verb stem to which it is attached. I will represent it hereafter as -a iss.