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The Interpretation of Spanish Middle Voice Constructions by Korean L2 Learners of Spanish and Native Speakers

ABSTRACT

Both Korean and Spanish distinguish between true reflexives and middle voice constructions although they differ in many respects. This causes difficulties for Korean speakers learning Spanish as a second language (L2). Furthermore, it is not only learners who experience difficulties distinguishing the constructions, researchers also have found the distinction difficult to define. According to Alexiadou & Doron (2012:4), in line with Kemmer (1994), there are four types of constructions which are marked as middle voice in various languages: (i) anticausatives, denoting spontaneous events (*break, open*); (ii) naturally reflexive verbs, e.g. verbs of body care (*wash, comb*) and naturally reciprocal verbs (*meet, kiss*); (iii) dispositional middles (*This book sells well*); and (iv) medio-passives, typically underdetermined as passive/anticausative constructions. In Spanish, these middle constructions are marked by a multifunctional clitic, *se*, as shown in the examples below:

- (1) a. *La ventana se rompió.* ‘The window broke.’ (Anticausative)
b. *Ella se miró en el espejo.* ‘She looked at himself in the mirror.’ (Reflexive)
c. *Este libro se vende bien.* ‘This book sells well.’ (Dispositional middle)

The clitic *se* in (1b) is considered a reflexive marker whereas it is referred to as a middle marker (Maldonado 1992, among others) for its non-reflexive uses illustrated in (1a) and (1c). In Spanish, the main function of this middle marker *se* is to focus on the central properties of events, rather than on the subject or object of the sentence. The most distinctive difference between Korean and Spanish middle voice constructions derives from the fact that Spanish employs the same clitic *se* to mark both reflexivity and middle-ness. Korean, on the other hand, uses one morpheme (*-i*¹) to mark middles and a different morpheme (*casin*) to mark reflexivity:

- (2) a. *kunye-nun kewul-eyse casin-ul po-ass-ta.* (Reflexive marker *casin*)
she-NOM mirror-in REFL-ACC see-PST-DECL
‘She looked at herself in the mirror.’

¹ Some consider the morpheme *-i* a passive marker, denying the existence of middle voice in Korean, while other define it as a multifunctional marker, with uses as a causative, middle and passive marker. The present study follows the latter approach, based on Kim (2013) who takes the theoretical framework of Alexiadou & Doron (2013). Kim argues that middle, passive and causative constructions in Korean should be categorized under non-active voices.

b. *i chayk-un cal phal-li²-n-ta.* (Middle marker *-i*)
 this book-NOM well sell-MM-PRES-DECL
 ‘This book sells well.’

In spite of the fact that Korean does not use the same morpheme for both reflexive and middle constructions, Korean and Spanish middle voice systems are similar since both employ the multifunctional marker *se* and *-i*, respectively. However, although they show some overlapping usages, they are not completely equivalent. For example, the Korean middle marker *-i* cannot be used in anticausative constructions (Kim 2013:48) while Spanish *se* is compatible with them, which results in *-i* lacking an event-focusing function that Spanish *se* possesses. Based on this mismatch between the two languages, it is plausible to predict that L1 Korean speakers will have to develop a target language-specific system in order to fully acquire the Spanish middle domain.

In order to examine to what extent this prediction illustrates the acquisitional process of L2 Spanish by L1 Korean learners, the present study investigates the interpretation of Spanish middle constructions by 30 L1 Korean-speaking Spanish learners across three levels of proficiency and compared their responses with those of 30 L1 Spanish speakers. The analysis is based on participants’ responses of an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) specifically designed to favor the selection of verbal forms in bare (without *se*) and middle-marked (with *se*) contexts. Results show that the lowest-level learners did not show any significant differences in their choice of verbal forms in contexts related to the use of middle *se*. The results from learners of Advanced and Near-Native proficiency levels, however, are in accordance with those of native speakers, showing that they have overcome the discrepancies in the middle system between their L1 and L2.

Works cited

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² The morpheme *-li* is a phonological variant of *-i*.