

Korean Middles with Passive Suffixes

This paper investigates Korean middles, which generally convey a sense of ‘potentiality.’

- (1) a. *i cha-nun Mia-eykey phal-li-ess-ta.*
 this car-TOPIC Mia-DAT sell-PASS-PAST-DC
 ‘This car was sold to Mia.’ (passive)
- b. *i cha-nun cal phal-li-n-ta.*
 this car-TOPIC well sell-PASS-PRES-DC
 ‘This car sells well.’ (middle)

Typical passive forms in Korean contain suffixes such as *-i*, *-hi*, *-li*, and *-ki* as exemplified in (1a). Interestingly, the same suffixes are also used to form middles such as (1b). The middle construction in Korean is coded as a passive form, while English middles are active forms. Cho (1998) argues that middles are nonexistent in Korean, and that the middle-like construction in Korean is actually a subtype of passives. Cho’s claim notwithstanding, it is widely known that there is a close correlation between middles and passives (Shibatani 1985). In this paper, I argue that Korean has middles which are distinct from canonical passives, and further discuss the constraints associated with Korean middles through more articulated analyses.

1. Issues The previous literature on the middle construction has shown three major restrictions on middles: namely syntactic, semantic, and distributional properties. (i) Syntactically, it has been argued that middles imply an agent role which cannot be projected overtly. From this standpoint, the previous studies have advanced some tests for differentiating middles from ergatives or passives, e.g. inserting an expression such as ‘by’-phrase, or ‘all by itself’ into the sentence. While these expressions can co-occur with passives freely, they rarely appear in the middle construction. However, the former test is not applicable to Korean because, if an NP-*ey uyhayse* ‘by-NP’ appears in a Korean sentence, the sentence sounds awkward. Besides, the ‘all by itself’ insertion cannot be a reliable test to show that there are no middles in Korean, because ‘all by itself’ can co-occur with middles even in English, in certain cases (Chung 2002:351). (ii) Semantically, it has been argued that middles have stative meanings not eventive. Because of this aspectual property, middles basically cannot be transformed into the progressive or the imperative. Cho (1998) claims the sentence such as (2) is the evidence that the construction under discussion does not belong to middles.

- (2) *i cha-nun cal phal-li-ko iss-ta.*
 this car-TOPIC well sell-PASS-COMP be-DC
 ‘(Lit.) This car is selling well.’ (progressive)

It is clear that there is an eventive aspect in (2), but I suggest that (2) cannot also be critical evidence for the nonexistence of Korean middles. The reason why middles cannot denote an event lies in the fact that a middle construction is a generic statement, and a middle verb is a

kind of stage-level predicate which conveys a sense of a habitual situation (see Steinbach 2002). If we assume all middles belong to the subset of generic expressions, it is more essential to compare a middle sentence with a generic sentence rather than with a stative sentence. (3a) taken from Jun (1997:297) is considered as a typical Korean generic sentence which employs a stage-level predicate. Note that it can be transformed into the progressive, as shown in (3b).

- (3) a. *kay-nun* *cic-nun-ta.*
 dog-TOPIC bark-PRES-DC
 ‘Dogs bark.’
 b. *kay-nun* *cic-ko* *iss-ta.*
 dog-TOPIC bark-COMP be-DC
 ‘A dog is barking.’

If middles which are responsible for generic quantification can never be transformed into the progressive or the imperative, how can we explain the acceptability of (3b)? Jun (1997) argues that sentences which are composed of a stage-level predicate such as *cic-* ‘bark’ in (3a) have both a generic reading and a specific reading. That is, there is an ambiguity. It is reasonable that (3b) is interpreted as a specific event, while (3a) may be not. Likewise, if a verb which includes a passive suffix is transformed into the progressive or the imperative, it is a specific predicate which denotes an event. (2) is no more than evidence that (1b) actually has an ambiguity between middles and passives. (iii) Distributionally, it is said that there are co-occurrence restrictions on middles; middles need a modifier such as an adverb or a negation operator. Korean middles also show a tendency to co-occur with such modifiers, but it's not always the case. However, there are a number of exceptions to this generalization (Steinbach 2002:35); the exceptions are attested in Korean. On the other hand, although it is said that middles do not select agent-oriented adverbs such as ‘willingly’ in English, the so-called middles in Korean do allow them, as given in (4a). Fagan (1992), however, provides examples of French middles which allow agent-oriented adverbs as presented in (4b), which is analogous to (4a).

- (4) a. *i* *chayk-un* ***uyyokcekulo*** *manhi* *phal-li-n-ta.*
 this book-TOPIC **willingly** a lot sell-PASS-PRES-DC
 ‘(Lit.) This book sells a lot willingly.’ (Cho 1998:185)
 b. *Ce* *livre* *se* *lit* *avec* ***plaisir.***
 ‘This book is read **with pleasure.**’ (Fagan 1992:157)

Fagan regards the sentence such as (4b) as the non-core of middles which include an event. On the basis of his analysis, if a verb form with a passive suffix co-occurs with an agent-oriented modifier such as (4a), I consider the construction is inclined to passives rather than middles.

2. Analyses Keenan (1985:253) states that the type used for passives can often be used to derive other VPs such as middles. Since it is so hard to draw a clear line between passives and middles formally, he suggests that the distinction can be made on semantic

grounds. In line with his proposal, I also take the semantic properties as the core of middles. The claims along these lines are grounded upon the fact that the middle-like construction is semantically ambiguous. A Korean sentence such as (1b) has an ambiguity between middles and passives, while an English sentence, for example ‘These boats sink easily,’ has an ambiguity between middles and ergatives (Zubizarreta 1987:141). Therefore, I differentiate Korean middles from passives with semantic operators. Middles are interpreted within a generic operator which stands for a stative situation, whereas passives are bound by an existential quantifier which denotes a specific event. The proper representation for (1b) may be as (5) adapted from Jun (1997). Although Jun does not refer to the relationship between generics and middles, his model to analyze generic statements is useful in representing middles as well.

(5) GEN_{x,s}[this-car(x) & C(x,s)][sell-well(x,s)] (C : contain / s : a situation argument)

With respect to the constraints on Korean middles, I provide the following: **(i)** Morphologically, middles consist of verb’s root plus a passive suffix, and this stem should combine with present tense markers (Chung 2002:352). **(ii)** Syntactically, I suggest the basic function of passive suffixes is ‘agent-defocusing.’ (Shibatani 1985). It is the reason why middles share some properties with typical passives. The syntactic difference between them is whether the defocused agent can be realized freely. **(iii)** Semantically, middles are invariably generic statements, particularly habitual sentences. If a linguistic category which denotes a specific event intervenes with the construction, the construction is excluded from middles. **(iv)** Distributionally, middles tend to co-occur with adverbs or negatives, though the modifier may be deleted thanks to pragmatic reasons.

3. Implications Chung (2002) divides English middles into two subgroups such as plain or reflexive middles. Building on his claim, I regard the former as an unmarked one which takes an active form and the latter as a marked one which includes a special word or an affix. The unmarked type imposes rather rigid restrictions on their constructions, because if not, it is difficult to discriminate between middles and typical actives. On the other hand, the marked type which is already differentiated from actives, such as French middles (Fagan 1992), does not need such rigid restrictions. Korean middles are akin to the latter, because passive suffixes make a marked formation and play a role similar to reflexives in French, Spanish or Russian middle sentences (Shibatani 1985).

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