Semantics and pragmatics of tensed and untensed coordination: The Korean -ko construction

In the Korean -ko construction, which roughly corresponds to English coordination in its function, the tense marker is optional in the first clause, as in (1). At first sight, the tensed and untensed variants look almost synonymous, but three distinct contrasts have been noted in the literature. First, the two variants differ in the strength of the pragmatic implicature of temporal precedence (Na and Huck 1992). That is, the implicature that the events of the two clauses are sequentially ordered is cancellable only with the tensed variant, which is evidenced by the fact that (2b), but not (2a), can be followed by the assertion of (2c). Second, the Coordinate Structure Constraint (CSC) is strictly observed in the tensed but not in the untensed variant (see, e.g., Cho 2005). That is, as in (3), with asymmetric semantic relations between the two clauses, the untensed variant does, but the tensed variant still does not, allow for extraction from a single conjunct. Finally, native speakers of Korean discern a subtle difference between the two variants such that, when the tensed variant is used, the two clauses are felt to describe events that are unrelated to each other (Yoon 1997). This paper proposes, for the first time in the literature, an analysis of the two variants of the -ko construction that accounts for the above three contrasts uniformly by means of an interaction between semantics and pragmatics.

Our analysis builds on the analysis of the (untensed) -ko construction by Lee (2008). We follow Lee in assuming that the untensed variant is underspecified in the temporal specification of the untensed clause and further assume that the two variants are minimally different in that the tensed variant does actually specify temporal information for the first clause. Thus, (2a) and (2b) receive the semantic interpretations along the lines of (4a) and (4b). We argue that this difference in semantics interacts with pragmatic factors to derive different discourse functions associated with the two variants. Specifically, in the untensed variant, due to the underspecification in the compositional semantics, there is a strong need to resolve the temporal reference of the first clause when the sentence is interpreted in the discourse. We assume, following Kehler (2002), that (when appropriate) sentences establish certain coherence relations with each other when they are interpreted in the discourse. Crucially, establishing a discourse relation generally has the side effect of resolving the temporal order between the relevant clauses, along the lines of (5). Given these, we propose that the untensed variant contrasts with the tensed variant in that it is associated with an urgent requirement for establishing a discourse relation due to the need to resolve the temporal reference of the first clause. This already accounts for the first contrast: in the untensed variant, since discourse relation establishment is needed for determining the underspecified temporal reference, the temporal order associated with the appropriate discourse relation that is established in the context becomes uncancellable.

The other two contrasts result from the pragmatic implicature that gets associated with the tensed variant, which competes with the the untensed variant in actual linguistic use: because of the fact that the (almost truth conditionally equivalent) untensed variant is always used with the establishment of a discourse relation, the use of the tensed variant implicates (via Gricean principles) the lack of a discourse relation. This immediately explains the third contrast: the unrelatedness of the two events discerned by native speakers is due to this lack of discourse relation. Finally, the second contrast is accounted for along the same lines. Following Kehler (2002), we assume that the CSC is a pragmatic principle. Thus, the CSC is not observed in the untensed variant when (as is the case with the cause-effect relation in, e.g., (3a)) the discourse relation does not require a parallelism among the conjuncts. However, in the tensed variant, the lack of a discourse relation entails (even in cases like (3b), where some inherent relation such as the causal relation can be plausibly assumed by world knowledge, etc.) that each clause has to independently maintain a filler-gap linkage with the overt filler in order to identify itself as a proper component of the coordinated extraction construction. This is what makes extraction from a single clause unacceptable in the tensed variant.

Our account makes only the minimum assumptions within each component: the semantic difference corresponds to a directly observable morphological property and the pragmatic factors are general principles for discourse interpretation. What crucially enables it to account uniformly for the somewhat puzzling set of contrasts is that it takes into account the interactions of semantics and pragmatics. We thus conclude that the present study demonstrates the importance of investigating empirical issues involving interfaces.
(1) [John-i capci-lul sa(-ess)-ko] [Mary-ka chayk-ul sa-ess-ta].
John-NOM magazine-ACC buy-PAST-KO Mary-NOM book-ACC buy-PAST-DECL
‘John bought the magazine and Mary bought the book.’

(2) a. John-i [ku yak-ul mek-ko] [pyeng-i na-ass-ta].
John-NOM that medicine-ACC take-KO sickness-NOM get.better-PAST-DECL
‘John took that medicine and recovered from the sickness.’
b. John-i [ku yak-ul mek-ess-ko] [pyeng-i na-ass-ta].
John-NOM that medicine-PAST-ACC take-PAST-KO sickness-NOM get.better-PAST-DECL
‘John took that medicine and recovered from the sickness.’
c. ‘To be more accurate, he took the medicine after recovering from the sickness.’

This thing-TOP John-NOM take-KO sickness-NOM get.better-PAST-DECL
‘This is the medicine that John took and then recovered from the sickness.’
b. *I kes-un [John-i mek-ess-ko] [pyeng-i na-un]
This thing-TOP John-NOM take-PAST-KO sickness-NOM get.better-PAST-REL
yak-i-ta.
medicine-be-DECL
‘This is the medicine that John took and then recovered from the sickness.’

(4) a. denotation of (2a) (untensed -ko):
\[ \text{AT}(t_1,\text{take}_m) \land \text{AT}(t_2,\text{recover}_f from_s) \land t_2 < s^* \]
b. denotation of (2b) (tensed -ko):
\[ \text{AT}(t_1,\text{take}_m) \land t_1 < s^* \land \text{AT}(t_2,\text{recover}_f from_s) \land t_2 < s^* \]
(\(s^*\) designates the speech time and \(t_1\) and \(t_2\) are temporal free variables whose values are contextually determined)

(5) **Resemblance:** Two events need to be parallel in terms of temporal reference as well. That is, the events of the two clauses happen at some comparable times.

**Contiguity:** The event of the first clause immediately precedes the event of the second clause with respect to some contextually determined scale.

**Cause-Effect:** The event of the first clause precedes the event of the second clause for there to be a causal relation between the two.

**References**


