The Ambiguity of the Progressive in Korean and the Semantics of ‘And’ and ‘EXIST’

In Korean, progressive meaning is expressed by the periphrastic imperfective marker –ko iss- (KO ISS), as illustrated in (1): KO is a connective (Conn) meaning ‘and’ and ISS means ‘be’ or ‘exist’. A puzzle surrounding this marker is that, with the so-called ‘put on’ type verbs, it can produce not only a progressive reading but also what is called a result state reading, as shown in (2) (Kim 1986, Kim 1990, Lee 1991, Kim 1993, Ahn 1995).

The ambiguity of KO ISS is problematic for existing analyses: it poses a challenge to Lee’s (2008) analysis, for instance, which argues that the imperfective marker invariably selects for a VP that takes an actor subject. This challenge is exemplified by (3), where the subject snowman passively receives the action described by the VP; somebody else must have put the clothes on the snowman. This problem can be circumvented by Son’s (2004) analysis. Son claims that when KO ISS yields a progressive state meaning for ‘put on’ type verbs, the subject bears the Agentive as well as the Locative role, but when a result state reading comes about, it only bears the Locative role. On this analysis, in (3), the snowman merely designates the location of the clothes and hence the non-ambiguity of the sentence. While attractive, this analysis also cannot capture the full array of facts. For example, it cannot explain why (4) receives a result state interpretation, even though the subject does not bear the Locative role.

This paper aims to account for the ambiguity of KO ISS by arguing for a non-uniform analysis of the periphrastic marker. The central claim is that while the KO ISS that produces a progressive reading is an imperfective marker, the one that produces a result state reading is not; it rather describes the circumstantial state of an individual, i.e., the subject. This semantic difference is claimed to follow from the semantic versatility of KO ‘and’ and ISS ‘exist’. More specifically, on a progressive reading, KO ISS indicates the completion of the event described by the VP in some possible world that exists in the relevant continuation branch in the sense of Landman (1992), analogously to be + -ing in English. On a ‘result state’ reading, KO means ‘with’, a variant of ‘and’ indicating concomitance, and ISS literally means ‘exist’, and together they assert the existence of the subject under some circumstance described by the VP, such as ‘with clothes on’ or ‘with the door open’. Support for this analysis comes from the fact that sentences like (3) can be best translated as ‘Subject has a nominal X in a state Y’, a paraphrase of ‘Subject exists with X Y’, where Y is a PP or a participial.

We submit that the ambiguity of KO ISS correlates with different syntactic structures: on a progressive reading, ISS behaves like a true auxiliary. Thus the VP combines with KO ISS first and then with the subject next, as schematically depicted in [DP_{subject} [VP KO ISS]], yielding, e.g., (5a) for (4). On a circumstantial reading, which is known as a result state reading in the literature, ISS behaves more like a main verb and the VP like a secondary predicate which selects for a PRO co-indexed with the subject. Hence the VP combines with the PRO first and then with KO ISS next, as sketched in the compositional scheme [DP1 [[PRO, VP] KO ISS]], giving rise to, e.g., (5b) for (4). Despite the syntactic differences, however, the two types of KO ISS are similar in that, in both cases, the VP and ISS are connected by KO and, furthermore, ISS is predicated of some entity, be it an eventuality or an individual.

The proposed analysis can readily extend to the other imperfective marker E ISS in Korean, which exclusively selects for an intransitive verb and usually describes a result state, as illustrated in (6) (Kim 1990, Ahn 1995, Lee 1991, Lee 2008). This extension is possible, because, just like KO, E behaves like the connective ‘and’ and thus the state it describes can be recast as a circumstantial state of the subject, with E meaning ‘with’ and ISS meaning ‘exist’ there too. This analysis also carries over to English progressive sentences like John is wearing clothes and Japanese te iru sentences, which are ambiguous between progressive and result state interpretations (see, e.g., Ogihara 1998). Furthermore, it provides additional evidence for a profound connection between the copular verb, the verb of existence, and locative constructions, which is widely attested across languages (e.g., Lyons 1968, Clark 1978).
Data
(1) a. Nongpwu-ka 
farmer-Nom 
pat-ul 
field-Acc 
kal-ko 
plow-Conn 
iss-ta. 
be-Decl

b. Yeonghuy-ka 
Y.-Nom 
sosechayk-ul 
Acc 
ilk-ko 
read-Conn 
iss-ta. 
be-Decl

c. John-i 
J.-Nom 
ppali 
quickly 
ket-kō 
walk-Conn 
iss-ta. 
be-Decl

(Son 2004: ex. (1))

(2) 


Landman, Fred

(3) a.

b.


Kim, K

Ahn, Y. 1995

Selected References


