

# Ratified and Unratified Topics in Spoken Korean

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**Oh, Chisung. 2008. Ratified and Unratified Topics in Spoken Korean.** *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 16(3), 25-41. This paper investigates two different types of topics in spoken Korean: ratified and unratified topics. Following Lambrecht and Michaelis (1998), it is first noted that topics are divided into ratified and unratified topics. It is then shown that ratified and unratified topics in English and French have different formal realizations. Like English and French, Korean is also shown to have the formal distinction of ratified and unratified topics; zero pronouns and unaccented bare NPs are used for ratified topics, and *nun*-marked NPs and the *maliya*-construction are used for unratified topics. The marker *-nun* is thus regarded as having the function of indicating unratified topics. As a related issue, this paper addresses "contrastiveness" associated with *-nun*, and it is argued that the contrastiveness related to *-nun* is a gradient notion.

**Key Words:** topic, ratified topic, unratified topic, contrastiveness

## 1. Introduction

Every language has its own means to express topics in sentences, and it has been suggested that formal devices that are used to mark the topic in sentences include syntactic structures, sentential accents and morphological markers (Lambrecht 1994; Gundel 1988). According to Lambrecht (1994) and Lambrecht & Michaelis (1998), sentence topics are divided into two types, namely unestablished/unratified topics and established/ratified topics though their role in the proposition is the same, and it has been shown that these two types of topics have different formal manifestations in English and French (Lambrecht 1987, 1994). Topics are ratified when their roles as topics in the sentence is

assumed to be taken for granted, while in the case of unratified topics, their role as topics is not assumed to be taken for granted.

Generally, ratified topics take such formal markings as unaccented pronominals/nouns or zero pronouns. Unratified topics, on the other hand, are generally expressed as lexical NPs with an accent. It has been noted that, in English, unratified topics take an accent (Lambrecht 1994; 2000) and also that, in French, unratified topics are left-dislocated (Lambrecht 1987). In this paper, I will investigate how ratified and unratified topics are expressed in Korean, and the related issue of contrastiveness associated with *-un/nun*<sup>1)</sup> will be discussed. Also, by comparing Korean data with English and French ones, we shall see how the same function is coded differently in different languages.

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, the definition of topic based on the notion of "aboutness" will be introduced and the distinction between ratified and unratified topics will be discussed in more detail. In section 3, it will be shown that ratified and unratified topics are expressed in different ways in English and French. Section 4 will discuss the main issue of this paper: how ratified and unratified topics are expressed in Korean. In that section, we will see that Korean, like English and French, use different formal devices for marking its ratified and unratified topics. In section 5, the issue of contrastiveness will be addressed, which is closely related to topic marking in Korean. In that section, I will argue that the division of *un/nun*-marked topics into contrastive and non-contrastive topic is not clear-cut. Rather, this section will show that contrastiveness related to *un/nun*-marking is a gradient notion.

## 2. Ratified vs. Unratified Topics

### 2.1 The definition of Topic

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1) *-un/-nun* are allomorphs of one morpheme. If the preceding noun ends in a consonant, *-un* is attached; otherwise *-nun* is attached.

Before discussing ratified and unratified topics in Korean, let us give the definition of the topic first. Following Reinhart (1982), Gundel (1988), and Lambrecht (1994), I will adopt the definition of topic based on the notion of aboutness. According to the notion of aboutness that is applied in the definition of topic, topic is defined as what the proposition expressed by a sentence is about. Let us look at the definition of topic proposed by Gundel (1988), who defines topic in terms of "pragmatic relations that hold relative to a discourse" (p. 210).

(1) Definition of Topic (Gundel 1988:210):

An entity, E, is the topic of a sentence, S, iff in using S the speaker intends to increase the addressee's knowledge about, request information about, or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to E.

As Gundel suggests, the above definition allows us to capture the intuitive characterization of topic as what a proposition is about. Her definition of topic thus involves a relation of aboutness between an entity and a predication in a given discourse. Lambrecht (1994) suggests a similar account of aboutness; according to him, a proposition is about a topic only when the sentence conveys relevant information about the topic, and consequently, increases the hearer's knowledge about it. Let us look at his definition of topic in which the notion of aboutness is well illustrated.

(2) Definition of Topic (Lambrecht 1994:127):

A referent is interpreted as the topic of a proposition if in a given discourse the proposition is construed as being about this referent, i.e. as expressing information which is relevant to and which increases the addressee's knowledge of this referent.

It should be noted that both of the definitions emphasize the relational nature of topic: a referent cannot be a topic by its own pragmatic property (e.g. discourse-active) but only by its relation to the proposition.

## 2.2 Ratified vs. Unratified Topics

Not every topic referent has the same status in a discourse: if a topic referent is already discourse-active and does not have any competitors, it is easily expected by the hearer that the referent will play a topic role in the current utterance. However, if a topic referent is not discourse-active or has more salient competitors in the discourse, the topic role of this referent would not be easily taken for granted by the hearer, so the speaker needs to have some special formal devices telling the hearer that this referent will be the topic.

Lambrecht & Michaelis (1998) divide these two types of topics and call them ratified and unratified topics, respectively. And it has been shown that these two types of topics are systematically coded differently in English and French (Lambrecht & Michaelis 1998; Lambrecht 1987). In the next section, English and French topic constructions will be presented, which will show how these two languages code their ratified and unratified topics.

## 3. Topic Constructions in English and French<sup>2)</sup>

### 3.1 English

Let us first see how ratified and unratified topics are expressed in English. According to Lambrecht (1994, 2000), in English, ratified topics are expressed as unaccented pronominals/lexical nouns, while unratified topics are expressed in the form of accented constituents. Let us see the following examples:

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2) I have to acknowledge that the discussion on English and French topics in this section does not cover every formal device marking ratified and unratified topics in those languages. For example, English sometimes uses left-dislocation to mark its unratified topics (cf. Gundel (1985) and Lambrecht (2001)). What I intend to show in this section is the fact that both English and French use different formal devices to mark their ratified and unratified topics.

- (3) a. A: How is your neck?  
       B: It/My neck HURTS.<sup>3)</sup> (Lambrecht 1994:137)
- b. A: How is Mary's family?  
       B: Her HUSBAND had an ACCIDENT,...(Lambrecht 2000:620)

In (3aB), the referent of the subject is ratified, because it was mentioned before and the hearer expects it will play a topic role (i.e. the proposition is about the referent). However, in (3bB), the referent of the subject, which is what the proposition expressed by the sentence is about, is not a ratified topic, because it is not discourse-active and the hearer will expect A's family as a whole rather than the husband alone to be the topic of the sentence. It is noted from the above data that these two different kinds of topic have different formal markings: the ratified topic, which is active, is expressed as an unaccented pronominal/lexical noun, and the unratified topic is expressed as an accented lexical NP.

### 3.2 French

Lambrecht (1987, 1994) also shows that the two kinds of topic are formally distinct in French: while ratified topics are generally expressed as zero pronouns, unaccented pronominals or right-dislocated NPs, unratified topics are generally expressed as left-dislocated NPs. The following examples show the difference:

- (4) a. A: Comment va ton cou?  
       'How is your neck?'  
       B: Il me fait MAL.  
       'It hurts.' (Lambrecht 1994:137)
- b. Context: a husband is complaining to his wife about the food on his plate.

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3) The small capitals indicate the locus of the sentence accent.

H: Ça n'a pas de GOÛT, ce poulet.  
'This chicken has no taste.'  
W: Le VEAU, c'est PIRE.  
'Veal is worse.' (Lambrecht 1987:233)

In (4aB), the subject referent is ratified since it is discourse-active and its topic role is expected at utterance time, and the subject is expressed as the unaccented pronoun *il*. However, in (4bW), the referent of the subject NP *le veau* 'veal' is not ratified since its topic role is not expected by H at utterance time (Note that the referent of the NP *ce poulet* 'this chicken' is more expected as a topic), and this referent is marked as a left-dislocated lexical NP. The data in (4) thus show that French formally distinguish its ratified and unratified topics.

#### 4. Ratified and Unratified Topics in Korean

According to Gundel (1988), there are three devices to code topic-comment relations in languages: syntactic structure, prosody, and morphological markers. I assume that these three devices are also used to mark unratified topics in world languages, if they are to formally distinguish ratified and unratified topics. As we saw above, English uses prosodic means and French uses special syntactic constructions for this purpose, and we can expect that there should be some languages that use morphological means to mark their unratified topics. This section will show that Korean is one of those languages that use morphological markings to indicate their unratified topics. Also, the comparison of English, French and Korean with respect to their marking of unratified topics shows that they employ different grammatical means to express one and the same pragmatic function.

In the literature on Korean topic constructions, most of the research agrees that the marker *-nun* has the function of topic-marking. (Choi 1984; Kim 1990; Choi 1996; Han 1998 among others). As we will see below, unratified topics<sup>4)</sup> in Korean can be introduced with the marker

*-nun/un* (henceforth *-nun*) or the *maliya*-construction while ratified topics are generally expressed as zero pronouns or unaccented bare<sup>5)</sup> NPs (including pronominals). This section addresses this issue of differently marked topics in Korean, which will show that the different topic markings in Korean are closely related to the distinction of ratified and unratified topics.

#### 4.1 Ratified Topics

Let us first see how ratified topics are expressed. Consider the following conversation<sup>6)</sup>:

- (5) Context: A and B are professors, who work at the same department in a college. A and B now meet each other at a restaurant where they are supposed to meet for dinner.

A: Panghak-tongan Kinsensayngnim cal cinaysyess-eyo?  
 break-during Kim-sensayngnim well get.along-Q  
 'Did you have a good time during the break?'  
 B: Ne, cal cinayssupnita. Olaysmaney poypneyyo.  
 yes well got.along after.a.long.time meet  
 'Yes, I did. I haven't seen you for a long time.'

In A's first utterance, *kimsensayngnim* 'teacher Kim,<sup>7)</sup> which

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4) As in the cases of English and French, the discussion on Korean ratified and unratified topics in this paper does not cover every formal device marking ratified and unratified topics in Korean. The main point of the discussion is that Korean also has different formal devices for its ratified and unratified topics and that the Korean formal devices are different from those of English and French.

5) Bare NPs in this paper are defined as NPs to which no post-nominal marker (e.g. *-i/ka*, *-un/nun*) is attached. So they are realized as NPs with neither *-i/ka* nor *-un/nun*, but they can have determiners, possessive markers or other modifiers.

6) The Korean data presented in this paper are all created by me based on my native-speaker intuition.

7) Unlike English *you*, there is no pronoun in Korean which invariably refers to

corresponds to "you" in the English translation, is unaccented. Because the first person and the second person are always present in the discourse situation, they always qualify as expected topics, so the referent of *kimsensayngnim* is considered a ratified topic in the sentence. In the following two sentences in (5B), whose propositions are about the same referent, we can notice that it is totally unexpressed.<sup>8)</sup> Here again, the referent is ratified: the topic status of the referent is expected and taken for granted by the addressee. The sentences in (5) thus show that ratified topics are expressed as unaccented bare NPs or zero pronouns in Korean.

Let us look at another example of a ratified topic. Consider:

- (6) Context: A is B's uncle, and they are in a restaurant for dinner. They are looking at the menu on the wall. B has been to this restaurant often before, so he knows much about its foods.

A: Minho-ya, i cip kalpithang-un<sup>9)</sup> masiss-ni?  
 Minho-VOC this restaurant kalpithang-TOP be.delicious-Q  
 'Minho, is this restaurant's kalpithang delicious?'  
 B: Anyo, i cip kalpithang masepseyo.  
 no this restaurant kalpithang be.not.delicious  
 'No, it's not good.'

In (6B), where B answers his uncle's question, the referent of *i cip kalpithang* is ratified since it is well expected by A as the topic of the sentence. Note that, unlike the referent of the subject NP *i cip kalpithang* 'this restaurant's kalpithang' in (6A), which is an unratified topic (we will

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the second person. The pronoun *ne* is used to refer to the second person only if he/she is close to and younger than the speaker. In other cases, title names (e.g. *sacangnim* 'head of a company' and *kyoswunim* 'professor,' etc.) and family relation terms (e.g. *emma* 'mother,' *hyeng* 'older brother,' etc.) are frequently used.

8) Note that the second sentence in (5B) has two zero pronouns (one for the subject referent and the other for the object referent). Thus the sentence shows we can have more than one topic in a sentence.

9) *Kalpithang* is the name of a Korean food.



return to this issue in section 4.2), this ratified topic is expressed as an unaccented bare NP. So the example in (6), like that in (5), shows that a ratified topic can be expressed as an unaccented bare NP.

#### 4.2 Unratified Topics

As mentioned in section 2.2, the topic role of a referent is not easily taken for granted by addressee when the referent is not discourse-active or has more salient competitors in the discourse. We have already seen an example of such non-discourse-active topics in (6). It is obvious that the proposition expressed by the sentence (6A) is about the subject referent, so the referent is the topic of the sentence. However, it is not discourse-active since (6A) is the first sentence of the conversation, and due to this non-discourse-activeness, it is not assumed to be expected as a topic at utterance time (i.e. unratified) and marked with *-nun*.

The following data show another example of a non-discourse-active topic with the marker *-nun*:

- (7) Context: A and B are friends and students of the same school. They know each other's families well. A and B met at a cafeteria after a long summer break. B knows that A's mother has a disease.

A: Swumi-ya, olaykanmanine. Cal cinay-ni?  
 Swumi-VOC long.time.no.see well get.along-Q  
 'Swumi, long time no see. Are you doing fine?'  
 B: Ung, cal cinay. Nehi emenim-un ettesini? Kenkanghasi-e?  
 yes well get.along your mother-TOP how be.healthy-Q  
 'Yes, I am fine. How is your mother? Is she healthy now?'

In (7B), the topic referent "your mother" is not discourse-active because it is introduced into the discourse for the first time. Since its topic role is not taken for granted by A at utterance time it is not a ratified

topic, and the marker *-nun* is used to indicate this unratified status of the topic. Also note that this same referent becomes active and are unexpressed in the following sentence indicating that it now becomes a ratified topic.

According to Chafe (1987:22ff), there are three different activation states for discourse referents: active (i.e. discourse-active), semi-active/accessible, and inactive (i.e. discourse-inactive). A semi-active/accessible referent is defined as one "that is in a person's peripheral consciousness." In other words, unlike an active referent which is currently at the consciousness of an addressee, a semi-active/accessible (henceforth accessible) referent is "a concept of which a person has a background awareness." The referent of the *nun*-marked topic NP *kalpithangun* in (6A) can be seen as accessible since it may be assumed to be the addressee's peripheral consciousness; the conversation takes place at a restaurant the foods of which B is well aware of. Since an accessible topic referent is not active, it cannot be generally considered ratified even though it can be easily retrieved by an addressee. The unratified status of an accessible topic is also well illustrated by the *nun*-marked topic NP in the following example:

- (8) Context: A and B are students of the same college. They are preparing for the exams they are supposed to take next week and now discussing which library of the college they should go tomorrow to study. The college has several libraries.

A: Wuli nayil      hakkyo tosekwan-ey ka-se    kongpwuha-ca.  
 we tomorrow school library-to go-and study-let'  
 'Let's go to a school library and study tomorrow.'

B: Cwungang tosekwan-un pyelloya. wuli kwa tosekwan-ulo ka-ca.  
 center library-TOP be.not.good our department library-to go-let's  
 'The central library is not good. Let's go to the library of our department.'

In B's utterance, the referent of *cwungang tosekwan* 'central library' is

accessible because it is one of the school libraries mentioned by A. But it is not ratified yet, and is coded with the marker *-nun*.

So far, we have seen examples of unratified topics that are either accessible (cf. (6) and (8)) or discourse-inactive (cf. (7)). However, even discourse-active referents can be unratified topics. Consider:

- (9) Context: A and B are coordinators of a conference. A wants to check if two of the presenters already came.

A: Kim kyoswunim-hako Park-kyoswunim-i ches twu  
 Kim professor-and Park-professor-NOM first two  
 palphyoca-intey. Twu pwun ta osyess-e?  
 presenters-be two person both came-Q  
 'Professor Kim and professor Park are the first two  
 presenters. Did both of them come?'

B: Kim kyoswunim-un osyess-nuntey Park kyoswunim-un  
 Kim professor-TOP came-but Park professor-TOP  
 acik an osyesseyo.  
 yet not came.  
 'Professor Kim came, but professor Park didn't come yet.'

In B's utterance in (9), the two topics "professor Kim" and "professor Park" are expressed with the marker *-nun*, which so far has been shown to mark unratified topics. Note, however, that unlike our other examples of unratified topics in the previous data, these two topics are discourse-active; both of them are mentioned in (9A). The only reason these topics are unratified is that each of them is separately mentioned competing for the topic role in (9B); if they were mentioned together as one NP, they would be expressed as a ratified topic (i.e. as unaccented bare NP or a zero pronoun). In B's first sentence, the referent "professor Kim" is not ratified since the expected topic is the referent of the coordinated NP Kim *kyoswunim hako Park kyoswunimi* 'professor Kim and professor Park', and in B's second sentence, the referent "professor Park" is not ratified since the expected topic of this sentence is

"professor Kim." The two *nun*-marked NPs in (9B) thus show that *-nun* is used even for discourse-active referents when there are competing and more salient/expected topics already established in the discourse.

So far, the examples of unratified topics in (6-9) have shown that *-nun* is used to mark the unratified status of topic referents. Korean unratified topics, however, can also be introduced with the *maliya/malyeyo/malita*-construction<sup>10)</sup> (henceforth *maliya*-construction). Let us look at the following data set with examples of the *maliya*-construction being used to introduce unratified topics.

- (10) Context: A and B are working in the same office. They do not like their boss Parksacang, who only wants them to work hard. A, who has a lot of work to finish today, got tired and is now having a coffee break with B in their office. He starts to complain about their boss.

A: Parksacang	malya,	onul	nal	cengmal
Parksacang		today	me	really
yelpatkey	mantunta.		Nal	
be.mad	make		me	
ilha-nun	kikye-lo		sayngkaha-napwa.	
work-REL	machine-as		think-seem	
'Parksacang really makes me mad today. He seems to think of me as a working machine?'				
B: Maca.	Ku	salam	il-pakkey	mola.
right	that	person	work-except	not.know
'Right! He knows nothing but work.'				

- (11) Context: Chelswu and H are close friends. Recently Chelswu moved close to H's house. H and his wife visited Chelswu's house yesterday. While having dinner with his wife, H starts to talk about the house.

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10) The different forms indicate different levels of addressee honorification.

H: Chelswu cip maliya nemwu etupci ahn-a?  
 Chelswu house too be.dark not-Q  
 'Isn't Chelswu's house too dark?'

The topic referent introduced with the *maliya*-construction in (10A), i.e. "Kimsacang," can be considered accessible since they are having a talk in their office; the referent may be in their peripheral consciousness. However, it cannot be considered a ratified topic in the sentence because it is clear from the context that the topic role of the referent is not expected by the addressee at utterance time. Also in (11H), the topic referent "Chelswu's house", which is introduced with the *maliya*-construction, is not ratified since the addressee (H's wife) is not expecting it to be a topic.

From the discussion on Korean topic constructions above, we may draw the following conclusions: i) as in English and French, topics in Korean are divided into ratified and unratified topics, ii) as in English and French, the ratified and unratified topics are coded by different formal markings in Korean (Korean uses zero pronouns and unaccented bare NPs for marking its ratified topics and the *maliya*-construction and *nun*-marked NPs for marking its unratified topics), and iii) To mark the same discourse-pragmatic function, "unratified topic", English, French and Korean adopt different formal markings.

## 5. The Problem of Contrastiveness

In the previous section, it was shown that the marker *-nun* has the function of indicating unratified topics. In this section, one related issue to this topic marking, namely "contrastiveness", will be discussed in detail. In Korean, it has been generally accepted that topics marked with *-nun* have two distinct functions: marking contrastive topics and non-contrastive topics (e.g. Kim 1990; Han 1998; Jung 1990). The basic argument of such an approach is that we can divide referents marked by *-nun* into contrastive and non-contrastive topics according to whether or not a speaker is thinking about other alternatives when he

makes an utterance about the topic.

Thus, according to this argument, our examples of *nun*-marked topics in section 4 can also be divided into contrastive and non-contrastive topics. At first glance, the topic referents "professor Kim" in (9) and "the central library" in (10) seem to be interpreted as contrastive, since they have alternatives explicitly established in the discourse, while the topic referents "kalpithang" in (6) and "your mother" in (7) do not have such explicit alternatives in the discourse, being interpreted as non-contrastive topics. As we shall see below, however, the division of contrastive and non-contrastive topics are not as clear-cut; *nun*-marked topics, in fact, show various degrees of contrastiveness depending on the context.

*Nun*-marked topics, as unratified topics, tend to have some alternatives (expected topics or other competitors) either explicitly or implicitly since they are unexpected at utterance time. If the alternatives are created explicitly in the context, the sense of contrastiveness would be very strong, but if they are implicit, the sense of contrastiveness would be weak. If we look at the examples in section 4 and their contexts again, we shall see how different topics have different degrees of contrastiveness. First of all, "professor Kim" in (9) would have the strongest contrastiveness, because it is clearly contrasted to professor Park, and "the central library" in (8) would have a strong contrastiveness, because it may be contrasted to other libraries at the school. However, it is clear that the degree of the contrastiveness in this example is weaker than that of "professor Kim" in (9). Next, "kalpithang" in (6) would have lesser degree of contrastiveness, because the alternatives are a little vague (possibly other foods in the restaurant or kalpithangs in other restaurants); however, depending on the context, the speaker might have no alternatives in his mind when he utters the sentence. And finally, "your mother" in (7) would have the lowest degree of contrastiveness because it appears with no explicit alternatives in the context. Each of the four topic referents have different degrees of contrastiveness, and it seems almost impossible to divide this continuum into two parts and call one part contrastive and the other

non-contrastive. Thus, I argue that the contrastiveness related to the Korean *nun*-marked topics should be regarded as a gradient notion (cf. Lambrecht (1994: 290) and Bolinger (1961)) and that *nun*-marked topics, irrespective of their relative degrees of contrastiveness in the context, should belong to the same category of unratified topics.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked into Korean topic constructions. First, following Lambrecht and Michaelis (1998), I divided topics into ratified and unratified topics depending on their status in the discourse, and have shown that English and French use different formal devices to mark their ratified and unratified topics: it has been shown that, in English, a ratified topic is expressed as an unaccented NP/pronominal while an unratified topic is accented, and that, in French, a ratified topic is expressed as an unaccented pronominal while an unratified topic is left-dislocated. Discussion on the Korean ratified and unratified topics in section 4 has revealed that Korean, like English and French, also formally distinguish its ratified and unratified topics; it uses unaccented bare NPs or zero pronouns to mark its ratified topics and the marker *-nun* or the *maliya*-construction to mark its unratified topics. Finally, I have discussed the issue of contrastiveness, and argued that the contrastiveness related to the Korean *nun*-marked topics should be understood as a gradient notion.

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