

# The Syntax and Semantics of the Contrastive and Exhaustive Focus in Korean<sup>1)</sup>

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**Song, Mean-Young 2001. The Syntax and Semantics of the Contrastive and Exhaustive Focus in Korean.** *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 9(2), 123-137. In Korean, the NPs marked by the topic marker *-nun* and the NPs marked by the nominative case marker *ka* / *-i* can produce a contrastive focus reading and an exhaustive focus reading, respectively. This paper is an attempt to investigate a syntactic and a semantic account of such kinds of foci. When it comes to the syntactic aspect of the contrastive focus reading, I argue in this paper that the topic marker allowing a contrastive focus reading is base-generated inside VP, whereas the topic marker allowing a neutral reading is base-generated outside VP. In case of the exhaustive focus reading, on the other hand, the nominative case marker inducing an exhaustive focus reading is base-generated VP-externally, whereas the nominative case marker inducing a neutral reading is base-generated VP-internally. This paper also explores the possibility of the semantic account of the contrastive and the exhaustive focus within the framework of Hooth's (1992) alternative semantics. In particular, I argue that the semantics of the contrastive focus shows a pattern similar to the scalar implicature. (Dongguk University)

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims at providing a syntactic and semantic account of

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focus illustrated in the contrast between (1a) and (1b):

- (1) a. John-un hakkyo-e ka-ss-ta  
       TOP school-to go-PAST-DEC  
       ‘John went to school’  
       ‘No other persons than John went to school’
- b. John-i hakkyo-e ka-ss-ta  
       NOM school-to go-PAST-DEC  
       ‘John went to school’  
       ‘It was John that went to school’

One should notice that the only syntactic difference between (1a) and (1b) is that in (1a), the subject NP is marked by the topic marker *-nun*, while in (1b), the subject NP the nominative case marker *-i* / *-ga*. Probably, this leads to the difference in meaning between them. A sentence like (1a) is ambiguous between a neutral reading and a contrastive focus reading. On the neutral reading, (1a) simply describes the event of John’s going to school at some past time. On the contrastive focus reading, on the other hand, (1a) means that among other entities in contrast with John, no other person than John went to school. In contrast, a sentence like (1b) is ambiguous between a neutral reading and an exhaustive reading, as Kuroda (1965) and Kuno (1973) note from Japanese. On the neutral reading, (1b) describes the event of John’s going to school. On the exhaustive focus reading, it roughly means that of all the people salient at this point, it was John who went to school. The examples in (1a) and (1b) show that the topic marker is responsible for the contrastive focus reading, while the nominative case marker the exhaustive focus reading.

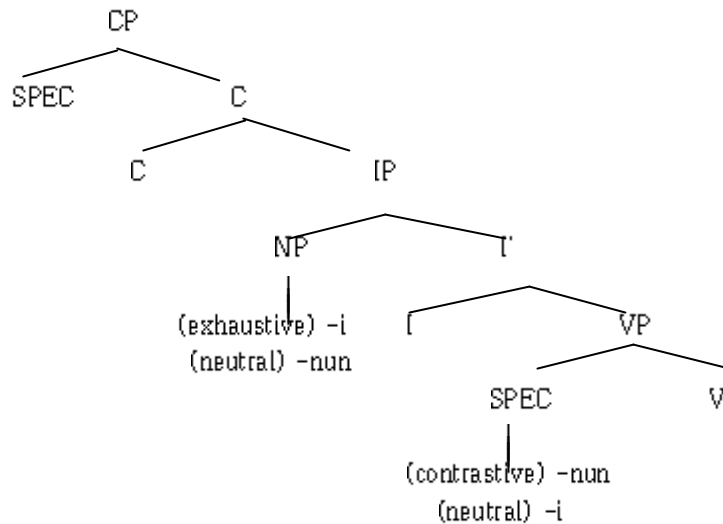
Based on the observation of the above sentences, I will explore the possibility of presenting a syntactic and semantic account of the fact that the subject NP marked by the topic marker yields a contrastive exhaustive reading, while the subject NP marked by the nominative

case marker allows an exhaustive focus reading. Specifically, I concentrate on the following two questions: (i) what are the possible syntactic representations of the contrastive *-nun* and the exhaustive *-ka* / *-i*, and (ii) what are their possible semantic interpretations?

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 is devoted to addressing the syntactic positions for the contrastive focus *-nun* and the exhaustive focus *-i*. In section 3, I will discuss how we can interpret the contrastive focus *-nun* and the exhaustive focus *-i* in terms of the alternative semantics proposed by Rooth (1992).

## 2. Syntactic Positions for Contrastive *-nun* and Exhaustive Focus *-ka* / *-i*

This section is devoted to discussing which syntactic position is available for the contrastive topic marker and the exhaustive-focused nominative case marker. What I'd like to claim in this paper is this. When NPs marked by the topic marker *-nun* leads to the contrastive reading, they are base-generated in the SPEC of VP. In contrast, when NPs are marked by the nominative case marker *-i* and receives the exhaustive focus reading, they appear in the SPEC of IP. In addition, if we think conversely, this means that the neutral *-nun* appears outside of the SPEC of VP, and the neutral *-i* appears inside of the SPEC of VP. This is illustrated as follows:

(2) Syntactic Positions for Contrastive *-nun* and Exhaustive Focus *-i*

The first evidence is that the topic marker *-nun* can be attached to XPs that are generated within VP, yielding a contrastive reading. Notice that unlike the topic marker, the nominative case marker cannot be attached to constituents that are VP-internally generated. Consider the following sentences:

- (3) a. John-i [<sub>VP</sub> haypyen-nun cohaha-n-ta]  
 NOM beach-TOP like-PRES-DEC  
 'John likes the beach, not other things'
- b. John-i [<sub>VP</sub> chenchenhi-nun umsik-lul mek-ul su-iss-ta]  
 NOM slowly-TOP food-ACC eat-can-DEC  
 Lit: John can eat food slowly (John can eat food only if he eat slowly)
- c. John-i [<sub>VP</sub> Mary-lul ecey-nun po-ass-ta]  
 NOM ACC yesterday-TOP saw-PAST-DEC  
 'It was yesterday, not other day or time, that John saw Mary'

- d. *ecey-nun*            John-i [<sub>VP</sub> Mary-lul po-ass-ta]  
 yesterday-TOP        NOM            ACC saw-PAST-DEC  
 'Speaking of yesterday, John saw Mary'
- e. John-i    \*ilpwule-nun / ilpwule [<sub>VP</sub> Mary-lul mana-ss-ta]  
 NOM intentionally-TOP / intentionally ACC meet-PAST-DEC  
 'John intentionally met Mary'

In (3a), the NP *hayeppen* 'beach' is the object of the verb *cohaha* 'like.' Nevertheless, it is marked by the topic marker *-nun*, rather than by the accusative case marker *-lul*. This suggests that the contrastive topic marker *-nun* can occur with the constituents which are base-generated inside of VP, for the object NP in a sentence like (3a) is generated inside of VP. Since it is marked by the topic marker, the object NP in (3a) is focused in contrast with the rest of the elements in the alternative set the speaker has in mind, leading to nothing but a contrastive reading.

The same explanation holds for a sentence like (3b). In (3b), the adverb *chenchenhi* 'slowly' modifies the verb, and thus, it is generated inside of VP. In a sentence like (3b), the adverb *chenchenhi* 'slowly' is a focused phrase. As we saw in (3a), (3b) is interpreted to have only a contrastive focus reading since *chenchenhi* 'slowly' is marked by the topic marker. This indicates that the VP-internal constituent marked by *-nun* usually leads to a contrastive focus reading, as in (3a) and (3b).

Compare (3c) and (3d). A sentence like (3c) allows a contrastive reading, while this is not the case with a sentence like (3d). In (3c), the temporal adverb *ecey* 'yesterday' occupies a position within VP and it is marked by the topic marker *-nun*, hence only a contrastive reading is available. Notice that in a sentence like (3d), the temporal adverb *ecey* 'yesterday' is marked by the topic marker. However, a pure topic reading, not a contrastive reading, is available in (3d) since *ecey* 'yesterday' occupies a position outside of VP. Thus, sentences like (3c) and (3d) are also in favor of the hypothesis in (2).

It is generally held that adverbs like *ilpwade* 'intentionally' in (3e) occurs outside of VP since it is always associated with the subject in a sentence. If we attach the topic marker *-nan* to a constituent (i.e. *ilpwade* 'intentionally') that is generated outside of VP, as in (3e), it will be ungrammatical. This suggests that the topic marker cannot be attached to constituents that appear outside of VP when it comes to the contrastive (focus) reading. In other words, (3d) and (3e) show that when the topic marker *-nan* is attached to an XP that is VP-internally generated, it does not allow a contrastive reading, as in (3d), or the sentence is unacceptable, as in (3e). Thus, it is reasonable to say that every XP marked by *-nan* appears within VP when it allows a contrastive reading, and that every XP marked by *-i* appears outside of VP.

Second, Diesing (1988) argues that focus can project from the VP-internal subject, yielding a wide focus reading, whereas focus cannot project from the VP-external subject, yielding a narrow focus reading, as illustrated in (4a) and (4b):

- (4) a. [<sub>F</sub> Blowfish] are poisonous  
 b. [<sub>F</sub> Blowfish are available]

To account for sentences like (4a) and (4b), Diesing argues that the subjects of individual-level predicates which denote a permanent property are generated outside of the VP and the subjects of stage-level predicates denoting a transient property inside of the VP. Thus, focus projection is impossible in (4a), yielding a narrow focus reading only, while focus projection is possible in (4b), yielding a wide focus reading only.

If we assume that Diesing's observation is correct, we can make the following prediction. If a subject marked by the topic marker *-nan* appears within VP (i.e. SPEC of VP) and a subject marked by the nominative case marker *-i* appears outside of VP (i.e. SPEC of IP), then focus projection from the subject NP will be possible in the case of the topic marker responsible for a contrastive reading, yielding a wide focus

reading, whereas focus projection from the subject is blocked in the case of the nominative case marker responsible for an exhaustive focus reading, as illustrated in (5a) and (5b):

- (5) a. [<sub>TP</sub> John-nun Mary-lul cohaha-ciman] [<sub>TP</sub> Kim-un Mary-lul salangha-n-ta]  
           TOP ACC like-but                   TOP ACC love-PRES-DEC  
           ‘John likes Mary but Kim loves Mary’  
   b. \*[[John-i Mary-lul cohaha-ciman] [<sub>TP</sub> Kim-i Mary-lul salangha-n-ta]  
           NOM ACC like-but                   NOM ACC love-PRES-DEC  
           ‘John likes Mary but Kim loves Mary’

The grammaticality of (5a) can be accounted for by the fact that the contrastive focus of the subjects *John* and *Kim* are projected into each of their predicates from the VP-internal subject position. In contrast, the ungrammaticality of (5b) comes from the fact that the exhaustive focus of the subjects *John* and *Kim* cannot be projected into each of their predicates. Assuming Diesing’s (1988) proposal is correct, we can conclude from (5a-b) that the topic marker responsible for a contrastive reading appears within VP, and the nominative case marker responsible for an exhaustive focus reading appears outside of VP.

Finally, the double subject constructions in Korean provide another piece of evidence for the argument that the contrastive *-nun* appears within VP, while the exhaustive focus *-i* appears outside of VP. Consider the following sentences:

- (6) a. Seoul-un [<sub>VP</sub> salam-un manh-ta ]  
           TOP person-TOP many-DEC  
           ‘Speaking of Seoul, it is people, not others, that are many’  
   b. Seoul-i [<sub>VP</sub> salam-i manh-ta ]  
           NOM person-NOM many-DEC  
           ‘It is Seoul that has many people’  
   c. Seoul-un [<sub>VP</sub> salam-i manh-ta ]  
           TOP person-NOM many-DEC  
           ‘Speaking of Seoul, there are many people’

If we assume that in the double subject constructions, one subject appears outside VP and the other appears within VP, this supports that the contrastive *-nun* occurs within VP, and the exhaustive focus *-i* appears outside of VP. A sentence like (6a) receives a contrastive reading on *salam* 'people' since it appears inside of VP. However, *Seoul* cannot receive a contrastive reading, even though it is marked the topic marker *-nun*. This is because it occupies a position outside of VP. In (6a), *Seoul* only leads to a pure topic reading.

Let's consider (6b). A sentence like (6b) is interpreted to have an exhaustive focus reading on *Seoul* since it appears outside of VP. The other subject *salam* 'people' cannot receive an exhaustive reading, even though it is marked by the nominative case marker *-i*. This is because *salam* 'people' appears inside of VP, yielding a neutral reading.

One should notice that neither exhaustive focus reading nor contrastive reading is available in a sentence like (6c). In (6c), *Seoul* with the topic marker *-nun* allows a pure topic reading, since it occupies a position outside of VP, and on the other hand, the other subject *salam* 'people' with the nominative case marker *-i* receives a neutral reading since it appears inside of VP. Thus, we can draw a conclusion from the above facts that the topic marker that appears inside of VP triggers a contrastive reading, whereas the nominative case marker that appears outside of VP leads to an exhaustive focus reading.

### 3. Focus Interpretation of *-nun* and *-i*

#### 3.1. Interpretation of the Exhaustive Focus *-i*

This sub-section is devoted to discussing the semantic interpretation of the exhaustive focus induced by the nominative case marker. In his theory of focus interpretation, Rooth (1992) proposes two different levels of semantic interpretations: the ordinary semantic value denoted by *o* and the alternative semantic value denoted by *f*. The ordinary semantics



is the ordinary semantics of a constituent or phrase, and the alternative semantics is intended to denote the semantics of a focused constituent. Originally, a set of alternatives for focused phrases is built up on presupposition sets or p-sets introduced in Rooth (1985). His idea of p-sets comes from Jackendoff's (1972) analysis of focus based on presupposition. For example, the following sentence [<sub>F</sub> John] walks presupposes that someone walks. Based on this, Rooth proposes a p-set, or a set of alternative propositions. The alternative semantic value is the set of propositions obtained by substituting for a focused phrase the ordinary semantic value of a phrase corresponding to the focused phrase. Thus if a sentence has an ordinary semantic value like (7) which is the outcome of applying semantic rules in a compositional way, and then the alternative semantic value will be like (8):

- (7)  $P_n(c_1, [c_2]_F, \dots, c_n)$   
 where  $P_n$  is an  $n$ -place predicate,  $c$  is an argument, and  $F$  is a focus feature
- (8)  $\|P_n(c_1, [c_2]_F, \dots, c_n)\|^f = \{P_n(c_1, x, \dots, c_n) \mid x \in D\}$ , where  $D$  is the domain of entities

In order to account for how a formula like (8) containing focus can be interpreted, Rooth (1992) introduces an operator  $\sim$  at the level of LF by which focus interpretation is given to a focused phrase. The operator  $\sim$  is a two place predicate which takes a constituent containing focus and a free variable of that type as its first argument and second argument respectively, as illustrated in (9):

- (9)  $[X \dots F \dots] \sim C_n$  where  $F$  is a focused phrase and  $n$  is an index
- In (9),  $C_n$  behaves like an anaphor, in that it is interpreted by an appropriate antecedent for the variable  $C_n$  which is provided in the context. He defines the operator  $\sim$  which introduces the following presuppositions (Rooth (1992: 93)):

- (10) a. Set case  
 (9) presupposes that C<sub>n</sub> denotes a subset of the focus semantic value of x and contains both the ordinary semantic value of x and an element distinct from the ordinary semantic value of x.
- b. Individual case  
 (9) presupposes that C<sub>n</sub> is an element of the focus semantic value of x distinct from the ordinary semantic value of x

Let us consider the following sentence that is interpreted to receive an exhaustive focus reading and see how we can present its semantic interpretation.

- (11) [F John-i] chayk-lul ilk-ess-ta  
 NOM book-ACC read-PAST-DEC  
 'It was John that read a book'

Suppose we interpret a sentence like (11) in a context where it is an answer to the following question?

- (12) nwu-ka chayk-lul ilk-ess-ni?  
 Who-NOM book-ACC read-PAST-Q  
 'Who read a book?'

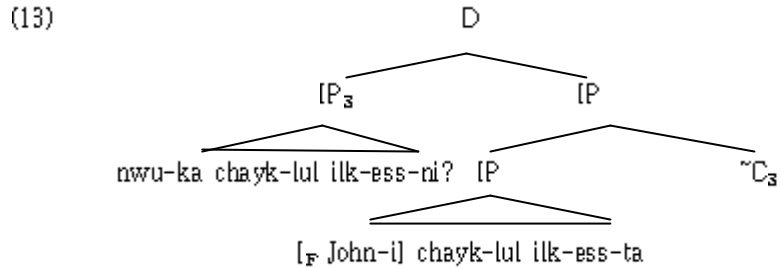
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2) Notice that the topic marker *-nun* cannot be used in answering questions like (12), as illustrated below.

- A: nwu-ka chayk-lul ilk-ess-ni?  
 Who-NOM book-ACC read-PAST-Q  
 'Who read a book?'
- B: \*John-nun chayk-lul ilk-ess-ta  
 TOP book-lul read-PAST-DEC  
 'John read a book'

The context in (i) suggests that the nominative case marker in a sentence like (11) is felicitous in the question-answer context. Probably, this is because the nominative case marker induces an exhaustive focus reading.

When we interpret a sentence like (11) in the above context, the representation for LF would be like (13):



D is the constituent of a discourse node which combines the question and answer. In this case, the free variable  $C_3$  introduced by focus interpretation shares the same index as the preceding question, or  $IP_3$ . This indicates this variable is identical to the ordinary semantic value of the question which is a set of propositions expressed by possible answers. This can be represented as (14):

$$(14) \{ \text{read}(x, \text{book}) \mid x \in D \}^3$$

Recall that the alternative semantic values for (11) is the set of propositions obtainable from the form "x read a book," (11) presupposes that (14) (i.e. the ordinary semantic value of the question to which  $C_3$  is identical) is a subset of the focus semantic value of (11), (i.e.  $\| [_{\text{F}} \text{John-i}] \text{chayk-lul ilk-ess-ta} \|_{\text{f}} = \{ \lambda x[\text{read}(x, \text{book})] \mid x \in D \}$ ), which happens to be identical to (14) in this case. Thus, this satisfies the conditions for focus interpretation in (10), indicating that the focus interpretation in (11) is licensed semantically in the above context.

### 3.2. Interpretation of the Contrastive *-nun*

3) For simplicity, the existential quantifier is translated as "book" in this formula.

In this sub-section, we will explore how to provide the semantic interpretation of the contrastive focus reading induced by the topic marker, as exemplified in (15)<sup>4</sup>:

- (15) [F John-nun] chayk-lul ilk-ess-ta  
 TOP book-ACC read-PAST-DEC  
 'No other people than John read a book'

What I'd like to make a claim about the interpretation of the contrastive reading in (15) is that the contrastive focus can be obtained in terms of the notion of the scalar implicature. This is due to the way a sentence like (15) is interpreted. That is, as we notice in the English translation of (15), (15) roughly means 'John is the only person that read a book in contrast with the rest of entities in the domain of discourse. This kind of interpretation triggered by the contrastive focus is reminiscent of Grice's maxim of quantity which says, "Make your sayings as informative as is required." Suppose the speaker says, "John has twenty dollars," then he or she will implicate that John has only twenty dollars, although it might have been the case that John in fact has more than twenty dollars. If John had had thirty dollars, then the speaker would have said so by the maxim of quantity. Since the speaker haven't, he or she intends to implicate that John has only twenty dollars. The same reasoning can hold for the contrastive reading of (15). Suppose the discourse domain is composed of three individuals, say, John, Sue, and Mary. Suppose the speaker had said (15), then he or she would have implicated that the other members in the domain, say, Sue and Mary, didn't read a book. This can be captured using the scalar implicature which will be elaborated upon in what follows.

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4) One should recall that a sentence like (15) is ambiguous between a neutral reading and a contrastive focus reading. Since the present study is concerned with focus, we will consider only the contrastive reading of (15).

In the scalar implicature, a scale is composed of a set of contrastive expressions of the same grammatical category, which can be arranged in a linear order by degree of semantic strength, as in  $\langle a_1, a_2, \dots, a_n \rangle$ . If a speaker asserts a weaker point on the scale, he or she implicates a stronger point does not obtain. In other words, if a speaker asserts  $S(a_i)$ , then he or she implicates  $\neg S(a_j)$ . For example, suppose we have a scale of quantifiers like this:  $\langle \text{all, most, some, a few} \rangle$ . If a speaker asserts, "Some students voted for Tom," then he or she implicates that not all the students voted for Tom.

Let us get back to (15). Given the domain  $D = \{\text{John, Sue, Mary}\}$ , a sentence like (15) is interpreted to mean that Mary and Sue in  $D$  did not read a book. Put in another way, (15) presupposes that all the other alternatives in the domain of discourse did not read a book. The sentence in (15) has the following scale  $C$ :

- (16)  $\langle \text{read}(j+m+s, b),$   
 $\text{read}(j+m, b), \text{read}(j+s, b), \text{read}(m+s, b),$   
 $\text{read}(j, b), \text{read}(m, b), \text{read}(s, b) \rangle$

The reasoning for (15) is, for example, like this: the formula  $\text{read}(j, b)$  implicates both John and Mary (or  $\text{read}(j+m, b)$ ) do not read a book. If  $\text{read}(j, b)$  is true and  $\text{read}(j+m, b)$  is false,  $\text{read}(m, b)$  must be false. Thus, asserting that  $\text{read}(j, b)$  implicates  $\neg \text{read}(m, b)$ . We can reason about Sue in the same way, that is, asserting that  $\text{read}(j, b)$  also implicates  $\neg \text{read}(s, b)$ . Eventually, from this, we can get the meaning of (15) that no other person than John read a book. One should notice that the scale  $C$  in (16) is a subset of  $\| [\text{John-nun}] \text{ chayk-lul ilk-ess-ta} \|_f$ , and thus, this satisfies the conditions for the focus interpretation in (10).

#### 4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored a syntactic and semantic account of

focus in Korean within the framework of Rooth's (1992) alternative semantics, focusing primarily on the focus readings induced by the nominative case marker *-ka* / *-i* and the topic marker *non*.

In the first part of this paper, I have discussed the syntactic positions for the contrastive *-non* and the exhaustive focus *-ka* / *-i*. I have argued in this paper that the contrastive *-non* occurs VP-internally, while the exhaustive focus *-ka* / *-i* occurs VP-externally. The second part of this paper has been an attempt to provide a semantic account of how we could interpret the contrastive *-non* and the exhaustive focus *-ka* / *-i* in terms of the alternative semantics.

It is worth noticing that any part(s) of constituents in a sentence can be focused. As we saw in section 2, for example, adverbs can be focused in some contexts. Since this paper is mainly concerned with the focus induced by the nominative case marker and the topic marker, we have not covered other types of foci in this paper. Thus, a further and rigorous study of them is required in the next stage. For the time being, I might only be content that a small amount of the work done in this paper may assist in allowing the improved understanding of the focus that has been discussed here.

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그림 삽입해 주세요.