A Constructional Approach to Multiple Nominative Constructions

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The so-called ‘multiple’ nominative constructions (henceforth MNCs) exemplified in (1) are some of the more puzzling phenomena in topic-prominent languages like Korean, Japanese, and Chinese:

(1) a. John-i/-uy son-i khu-ta
   John-NOM/GEN hand-NOM big-DECL
   ‘John’s hand is big.’

   b. yelum-i/-ey/*-uy maykcwu-ka choyko-i-ta
   summer-NOM/-LOC/-GEN beer-NOM best-COP-DECL
   ‘Summer is the best time to have beer.’

In both examples, it is not the first but the second nominative (NOM) phrase that is the argument of the intransitive matrix predicate: it is the hand that is big, and it is the beer that tastes good in summer. John and summer are not direct arguments of the matrix predicate. Considering that a clause usually contains at most one subject, expressed as a NOM phrase, the function of the first NOM is then a puzzle.

In terms of pragmatic conditions, the first NOM phrase in both cases characterizes the remaining part (which is often called ‘sentential predicate’). For example, in (1)a having a big hand is a characterizing property of John whereas in (1)b, tasty beer is a characteristic of summer. If there is no such relation, the first phrase cannot be NOM, though it can be a genitive modifier:

(2) a. John-uy/*-i [swuep-i ttapwunha-ta]
   John-GEN/-NOM class-NOM boring-DECL
   ‘John’s class is boring.’

   b. yelum-ey/*-i [John-i congcong mikwuk-ul ka-n-ta]
   summer-LOC John-NOM often America-ACC go-PRES-DECL
   ‘In summer, John often goes to America.’

However, the first NOM in these examples also behaves differently. In examples like (2)a (which we call the possessive nominative construction (PNC)), the two consecutive NOM phrases are in a possessive relation, as attested by the alternation with the possessive marker on the first NOM. Meanwhile, in examples like (2)b (which we call the adjunct nominative construction (ANC)), there is no such a relation. The first phrase functions more like an adjunct, as indicated by the locative marker.

As a way of capturing generalizations about the shared properties of diverse construction types (including the MNCs here), our grammar adopts the notion of constructions from Ginzberg and Sag (2001) and classifies phrases in terms of HEADEDNESS and CLAUSALITY, as represented in (3):

(3)

As shown in the hierarchy here, each type of phrase is cross-classified, inheriting both from the CLAUSALITY type and from a HEADEDNESS type. The constraints on the subtypes of HEADEDNESS will license well-formed phrases in the language.

‘Multiple nominative’ constructions present challenges to theoretical as well as computational linguists. In particular, the functions of the first NOM phrase in MNCs are not straightforward. The first NOM can be either a specifier or an adjunct, and it has a specific semantic relation with regard to the remaining sentence – it is ‘characterized’ by the rest of the sentence. This paper shows that a grammar allowing interactions of declarative constraints on types of signs – in particular, constructions (phrases and clauses) – can provide an robust and efficient way of parsing these two different types of MNC.