



# Case alternation in duration and frequency adverbials in Korean: A semantic–pragmatic explanation<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Nominal frequency and duration adverbials in Korean are optionally marked with an overt case marker that alternates depending on the voice of the sentence. This has led several authors such as [Kim and Maling \(1993\)](#), [Wechsler and Lee \(1996\)](#), and [Maling et al. \(2001\)](#) to assume that such adverbials in Korean get their case assigned syntactically by the same process that is responsible for argument case assignment. We claim that the case of frequency and duration adverbials is not syntactically assigned by the verb but instead reflects the relative semantic–pragmatic prominence of the subject NP compared to the event described by the VP, which is determined by the subject's degree of control over the event. For the sake of explicit formalization, we represent this prominence in terms of the relative quantificational scope between the subject and the eventuality.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, case marking is assumed to correlate with thematic/argument structure. Nominal adverbial phrases like *last Tuesday*, *two times*, and *most of the week* typically do not bear structural case because they are adjuncts rather than valents, although they may bear lexical or semantic case in languages with a rich system of morphological case marking. It has been observed, however, that the domain of case assignment extends beyond the arguments of a predicate to certain temporal and measure adverbials in a variety of languages, including Chinese ([Li, 1990](#)), Finnish ([Maling, 1993](#)), Korean ([Maling, 1989](#); [Wechsler and Lee, 1996](#)) and Polish ([Przepiórkowski, 1999](#)). This raises important theoretical questions: Do temporal and measure adverbials in such languages get their case assigned syntactically by the same processes that are responsible for case assignment to arguments? Where does the line demarcating arguments from adjuncts lie? Why do only certain cross-linguistically similar classes of adverbials bear case marking?

[Kim and Maling \(1993\)](#) opened the door to theoretical work on the principles of Korean adverbial case marking and the more general issues mentioned above. What captured the attention of Kim and Maling and subsequent researchers is case alternation on temporal adverbials shown in (1). The optional case marking on the frequency adverbial – like the optional case marking on the object NP – is Nominative in the active but Accusative in the passive. What is distinctive

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about Korean is that case alternation between Nom and Acc depends on the voice of the sentence; it thus differs from other languages where Acc is the only acceptable case on temporal adverbials, marking the telicity or boundedness of an event (Kiparsky, 1998; Kratzer, 2004).

- (1) a. Swuni-ka cip-ul pheyinthu-lul twu pen-ul/\*i chilhay-ss-ta.<sup>1</sup>  
 Swuni-NOM house-ACC paint-ACC two times-NOM/ACC brush-PST-DEC  
 'Swuni painted a house two times.'
- b. Cip-i Swuni-eyuyhay pheyinthu-ka twu pen-i/\*ul  
 house-NOM Swuni-by paint-NOM two times-NOM/ACC  
 chilhay-ci-ess-ta.  
 brush-PAS-PST-DEC  
 'A house was painted two times by Swuni.'  
 (from Wechsler and Lee, 1996:635)

Kim and Maling (1993) and Maling et al. (2001) claim that structural case assignment in Korean does not distinguish between adjuncts and internal arguments. Wechsler and Lee (1996) also argue that such adjuncts receive structural case from the verb, pointing to the fact that the Nom/Acc alternation on adjuncts is conditioned by the active/passive voice features of the verb in Korean in (1) as evidence.

Unlike prior analyses which treat case marking on the nominal adjuncts as grammatical or syntactic case, we propose that the alternation can be traced to semantic and pragmatic properties.<sup>2</sup> We argue that case marking on nominal adverbials in Korean reflects the relative semantic–pragmatic prominence of the subject NP compared to the event described by the VP, which is determined by the subject's degree of control over the event. For the sake of explicit formalization, we represent this prominence in terms of the relative quantificational scope between the subject and the eventuality: Nom marking on temporal adjuncts signals that the modified event argument in the VP takes wide scope over the subject NP argument, whereas Acc on the adjuncts marks that the subject NP takes wide scope over the event in the VP. These constraints readily predict the semantic scope interpretations that correlate to each case marker, as noted by Kim (1990:295) and Kim and Maling (1993:372) using data like (2). The choice of case markers is tied to the wide or narrow scope of the bare animate subject. Acc on the adverbial correlates with subject NP wide scope, as shown in (2a). Conversely, Nom on the adverbial mirrors an event wide scope over the subject. As a result, each event of getting caught can involve different thieves, as represented in (2b), where the event has a higher position than the subject.

- (2) Totwuk-i twu pen(-i/ul) cap-hi-ess-ta.  
 thief-NOM two times-(NOM/ACC) catch-L.PAS-PST-DEC
- a. 'The thief was caught two times.' (with Acc)  
 $\exists x(\text{thief}(x) \wedge \exists y(|y|=2 \wedge \text{event}^*(y) \wedge \forall e'(e' \subseteq y \rightarrow \text{caught}(e', x))))^3$
- b. 'It happened twice that a thief was caught.' (with Nom)  
 $\exists y(|y|=2 \wedge \text{event}^*(y) \wedge \forall e'(e' \subseteq y \rightarrow (\exists x(\text{thief}(x) \wedge \text{caught}(e', x))))$

Since the case marking on the adverbial nominal mirrors the relative scope of the subject and the event, speakers can use the case marker to disambiguate the scope, if any scope ambiguity exists. This explains the fact that case marking on adverbials is only optional, and restricted to colloquial speech for emphasis or focus (Kim, 1990; Jun, 2000; Maling et al., 2001). Although native speaker judgments converge in certain cases, a wide range of individual variation exists in cases where both Nom and Acc can alternate. Because claims put forward in previous works ultimately rest on informally collected samples backed up only by the researchers' own judgments, they do not address the problem of divergences in critical judgments. We base our theoretical claims on the quantitative results of a survey completed by twenty speakers of Korean, with the goal of contributing to a better delineation of the boundaries of grammaticality for adverbial case

<sup>1</sup> The nominative case marker in Korean has two allophonic variants: *-i* after a noun that ends with a consonant and *-ka* after a noun that ends with a vowel. The accusative case marker also varies: *-ul* after a consonant and *-lul* after a vowel. We will use Nom and Acc throughout the paper to refer to each case marker. The abbreviations in the glosses are as follows. NOM: Nominative, ACC: Accusative, TOP: Topic, LOC: Locative, CL: Classifier, PST: Past tense, PRE: Present tense, DEC: Declarative sentence ending, L.PAS: Lexical Passive, S.PAS: Syntactic Passive, CAU: Causative, AD: Adnominal suffix (for a relative clause).

<sup>2</sup> The fact that semantic considerations play an important role in case marking in Korean is not surprising, since a wide range of languages exhibit a similar tendency. As Butt (2006) points out in her survey, case marking is used to signal differences in agency, animacy, definiteness, existence of an object, telicity, topicality, focus and even modalities such as obligation and desire.

<sup>3</sup> *event\** is a join semi-lattice on events (Link, 1983). See Appendix B for the compositional derivations of the two logical formulas using type-shifting operators.

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