Crosslinguistic Influence in Referential Choices by Korean L2 Learners of English

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In this study, we investigate how referential biases associated with causality verbs in Korean affect Korean-speaking L2 learners’ reference choices in an English sentence completion task, both with and without translation priming.

Verb-based implicit causality (IC) creates biases for who will be mentioned next (Garvey & Caramazza 1974); e.g., *threaten* implies the subject as the cause of the ‘threaten’ event, and thus the most likely next referent in the discourse. Korean, in addition to IC verbs, has a class of (subject-biased) syntactic causality (SC) verbs, best translated as ‘causing X to be Y’ (e.g., *Hyesoo-ka Younghee-lul mwusep-keyha-ess-ta*; ~‘H. frightened Y’; Lee 1996). IC verbs generally differ in the strength of their referential bias (Ferstl et al. 2011); in Korean, SC verbs show an overall stronger subject bias than (subject-biased) IC verbs (Kim & Grüter CUNY 2015). Here we ask whether the stronger subject-bias of Korean SC verbs creates a stronger subject-bias for their English translation equivalents (all IC verbs in English) in Korean-L1 English L2ers.

**Method:** 72 Korean learners of English completed a sentence completion task in English, either preceded (translation-first/T1 group, n=36) or followed (T2, n=36) by a translation task. Thirty-four native speakers of English were added as a control group (NS). In the completion task, participants read 48 English sentences, including English translation equivalents of Korean SC (k=12) and IC (k=12) verbs, followed by the connective *because* and a blank line, and provided written continuations, which were annotated for the intended reference of the grammatical subject by two independent coders. In the translation task, participants translated the same sentences (without connective or continuation) into Korean.

**Predictions:** If the stronger subject-bias for Korean SC (vs IC) verbs affects L2 learners’ reference choices in English, we expect more reference to the previous subject in continuations following English translation equivalents of Korean SC (vs IC) verbs (main effect of verb type), with a stronger effect in the translation-priming (T1) group (verb type x group interaction).

**Results:** Mixed-effects logistic regression (lmer) was used to examine the effects of verb type (SC, IC) and task order (T1, T2) on the likelihood of the subject of the completion referring to the previous subject (Fig.). The maximal model revealed a marginally significant interaction ($\beta=-.54$, $p=.07$), and no main effects. Follow-up analyses for each group showed more subject reference for SC vs IC verbs in the T1 ($\beta=.70$, $p=.03$) but not the T2 ($\beta=-.06$, $p=.87$) or the NS ($\beta=.21$, $p=.70$) group.

In the completion task, participants did not always make the specific cross-language associations we expected. In a second analysis, we therefore removed all trials for which participants did not provide a Korean translation with the expected verb type (e.g., when they did not use a SC construction for an item we had put in the SC condition; 22% of data) (Figure 2). In this reduced dataset, a main effect of verb type emerged ($\beta=1.12$, $p=.002$), qualified by an interaction ($\beta=-.70$, $p=.04$). Follow-up analyses for each group again showed more subject reference for SC vs IC verbs in the T1 ($\beta=1.52$, $p=.001$) but not the T2 ($\beta=.65$, $p=.15$) group.

These findings provide evidence of cross-language influence of the strength of referential bias in causality verbs, at least when cross-language associations are primed through a preceding translation task. This indicates that cross-linguistic activation at the word level can affect L2 learners’ processing at the sentence and discourse level, presumably through the mental models they create as a result of shared representations at a lexical level.
Reference