The Interpretation of Chinese Null and Overt Pronominal Objects by L1-Korean-speaking learners

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The interpretation of embedded null objects in Chinese is a debate. Huang (1984) proposes that there is a subject-object asymmetry in Chinese: embedded null subjects can be either A-bound or A’-bound, and be interpreted either as pro or as variables; whereas, embedded null objects can only be A’-bound and be interpreted as variables. When embedded null subjects and null objects are replaced by a lexical pronoun ta ‘he/him,’ subject-object asymmetry disappears. Overt subject and object pronouns can take matrix subjects and sentence-external referents as the antecedents. Nevertheless, Xu (1986) argues that embedded null objects in Chinese can be A-bound and be interpreted as pro. Hsieh (2009) discovered that two types of matrix verbs play a key role in determining the different interpretations, namely say-type and assume-type. Hsieh (2009) found that embedded null objects tended to be interpreted as variables with say-type matrix verbs, either as pro or as variables with assume-type matrix verbs by native Chinese.

Korean, like Chinese, allows not only the subject to be dropped, but also the object. Null objects in Korean can be interpreted either as variables or as pro. For overt object pronouns, Korean operates in the same manner as Chinese: can take either a sentence-internal or a sentence-external referent as its antecedent.

Motivated by the descriptions above, this paper sets out to investigate the interpretation of null and overt pronominal objects in Chinese with say-type and assume-type matrix verbs by L1-Korean-speaking learners of Chinese.

A reference resolution task was conducted, whereby 22 L1-Korean-speaking learners of Chinese judged bi-clausal sentences in which the embedded object was filled either by an empty category or by a lexical pronoun ta ‘him’ and the matrix verb was either a say-type or an assume-type. It was predicted that L1-Korean-speaking learners of Chinese will interpret embedded null objects either as pro or as variables with say-type and assume-type matrix verbs, and take matrix subjects and sentence-external referents as the antecedents of embedded overt object pronouns.

The results revealed that the L1-Korean-speaking learners of Chinese, as predicted, interpreted embedded null objects either as pro or as variables with say-type and assume-type matrix verbs, whereas highly referred embedded overt object pronouns to matrix subjects. The former is different from the Chinese data in Hsieh (2009), who showed distinction between say-type and assume-type matrix verbs in null object interpretation, while the latter may be due to the influence of sentence processing mechanisms.

Key words: Chinese, Korean, null and overt pronominal objects, language acquisition