

A Comparative Study on the Intransitive Verb Alternation of English and Korean in the Aspectual Event Syntax

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Abstract

In this paper I applies Borer (1993)'s way of classifying English intransitive action verbs such as 'run', walk, among many others, to the corresponding Korean intransitive action verbs such as 'tali-ta' and 'keot-ta', and show how they are different from - or similar with - each other in terms of syntactic structures and verb classification. Unlike the English verb 'run' which can be classified into an unaccusative verb as well as an unergative verb in Borer's theory, the corresponding Korean verbs 'tali-ta' or 't'wi-ta' can behave not only as an unergative and unaccusative verb, but also it can behave as a transitive verb. Though Borer's perspective on classification of verb types may be thought of as somewhat radical mostly due to its heavy dependency on aspectual representation of a whole sentence which a verb is just part of, it is clearly suggesting a new and great insight into the controversial topic of classification of verb types. So it is worth adopting this insightful perspective for the analysis of corresponding Korean verbs and seeing if it also works for the Korean ones.

Keywords: Aspectual Event Syntax, Event Measure, delimitedness, unergative, unaccusative

1. Introduction

As numerous studies have observed, alternation between the unaccusatives and the unergatives is not as stable and lexical-entry dependent as it is sometimes presented. Borer (1993)'s observation is provided as (1) in the following:

- (1) ...[T]he typical unergative verbs such as *sprongen* 'jump' in Dutch and *correre* 'run' in Italian, which take an unergative auxiliary (*hebben* and *avere* respectively) and which do not allow *ne*-cliticization, exhibit the full range of UNACCUSATIVE characteristics, selecting *zijn* and *essere* and allowing *ne*-cliticization if a PP specifying a terminal point of the motion is added. Dutch impersonal passive, typically restricted to unergatives, can occur with the unaccusative verbs *vallen* 'fall' and *stronken* 'stink', provided that an intention is ascribed to the argument as in 'fall on purpose', and 'stink on purpose', etc.). Finally, the Hebrew verbs *naval* 'wilt' and *ne'elam* 'disappear' (among many others) can behave both as unaccusatives, in

allowing a possessor dative, and as unergatives, in allowing a reflexive dative.” (Borer 1993, p 2)

By focusing on the variable behavior verbs in unaccusative / unergative alternation observed in Dutch, Italian, and Hebrew, Borer (1993) denies “the lexical-entry-driven approach” which says that lexical entries determine the projection of specific arguments. Further, following Van Valin (1990), she observes that syntactic unaccusative diagnostics are associated with telic and non-agentive characteristics, and syntactic unergative diagnostics are typically associated with agentive interpretation. Based on these observations, she finally concludes that “the unaccusative / unergative distinction is altogether not a syntactic one, but rather, an aspectual (or semantic) one.” (ibid., p.3) Thus, according to her, the distinction is completely dependent on “the properties of the entire predicate”, of which the meaning of the verb is just one part.

In the following sections, I will take an English intransitive verb of ‘run’ and its corresponding Korean intransitive one of ‘tali-ta’ for examples to show how they are analyzed within Borer (1993)’s aspectual event syntax. Detailed analysis will show the similarities and differences of the English intransitive verb ‘run’ and its corresponding Korean verb ‘tali-ta’.

2. Discussion

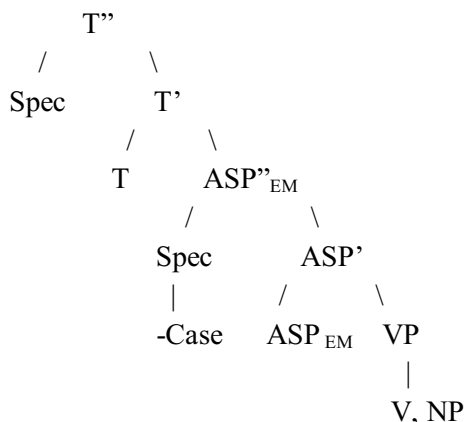
2.1 Analysis of the English Intransitive ‘run’

Consider the following two structures Borer (1993) suggests for the English intransitive verbs such as ‘run’, ‘walk’, disappear, among others.

(2) Structures for Intransitives (ibid., pp.9-10)

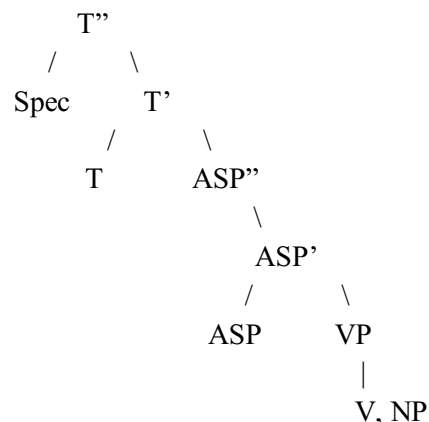
a. Unaccusatives

: Spec projected, no Case assigned.



b. Unergatives

: Spec not projected, Case not available



Borer’s (1993) point of view against the distinction of intransitives based on the lexical-driven approach is clearly shown in the following quotation:

“...concerning the unaccusative / alternation ... [V]erbs are not basically unaccusatives or unergatives, nor are they specified as projecting an internal or an external argument respectively. Rather, all are intransitive, and in accordance with the basic meaning of the verb, plus whatever other material resides in the predicate, a predicate would be assigned specific aspectual (AKTIONSART) properties, and the syntactic properties would then follow. ...” (ibid., p.4)

That is, the single argument of verbs such as *run*, *wilt*, *disappear* is not specified as ‘external’ or ‘internal’, nor are there any syntactic linking conventions in lexical entries associated with the projection of arguments. They are just intransitives with one argument. And a maximal projection, the VP, is “projected containing un-projected and hence un-ordered and un-hierarchical argument(s).” Aspectual roles from the entire predicate which is gained in a compositional way, then, decide on the configuration of the sentence given.

The movement of argument(s) under the VP is caused by the necessity of Case. As we clearly see from the above, the syntactic distinction between unergatives and unaccusatives is not available until the maximal category VP projects further. And the projection of the structure is entirely dependent on the aspectual role(s) which is(are) given from the compositional meaning of the entire predicate. Thus, when there is an aspectual role of ‘Event Measure’ as in (2a), the verb belongs to the unaccusative class and when there is none, then the verb belongs to the unergative class as is shown in (2b).

Then we can raise the question: “How can we get aspectual role(s) from the lexical entries?” Within Borer’s framework, it seems to be completely up to the speaker’s parsing of the event which is expressed by the entire predicate.

Consider Borer’s explanation of the alternation of the intransitive ‘run’ for example:

(3) Alternation of Verb Types of ‘run’

“...Turning now to intransitive motion verbs such as *run*, note that certainly they do not imply a delimitation. However, the argument of such a verb, other than being interpreted potentially as an AGENT, can also be interpreted as a MEASURE. Specifically, in *John ran*, *John* could be understood as measuring out the running event. ...” (ibid., p.12)

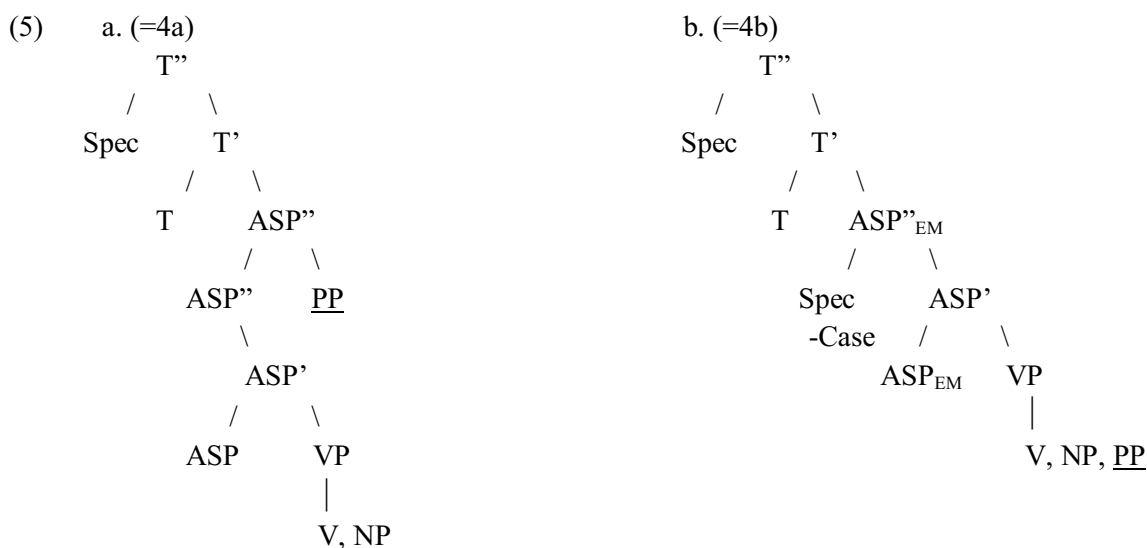
Therefore, the subject of *run* may be either a MEASURE, in which case *run* is unaccusative, or a non-MEASURE in which case *run* is unergative, depending on whether derivation (2a) or (2b) is pursued.

2.2 No Need to Distinguish Two Kinds of PP’s Contra Borer (1993)

Based on the arguments in the previous section, Borer (1993) furthers her study with the more enlarged data in the following. Consider:

- (4) a. John ran *in the park*.
b. John ran *to the park*.

According to Borer’s explanation, the PP’s in (4) are different from each other: ‘*in the park*’ in (4a) is an adjunct, while ‘*to the park*’ in (4b) is an argument. Unlike the other directional PP’s, the directional PP such as ‘*to the park*’ which would ‘delimit’ the event by referring to the property of the MEASURE is an indirect argument. This position is also shared by Hoekstra and Mulder (1990) as well as Borer (1993). Thus, their syntactic positions are distinct. The structures with all these perspectives so far are shown in (5) below:



In addition to the structures with two distinct positions for both PP's in (5), Borer suggests the following assumption:

(6) Semantic Incorporation

“Whatever stays in the VP incorporates semantically (and at times syntactically as well).” (ibid., p.13)

Semantic incorporation in (6) would mean to “enter the PP argument, as a delimiter, into the interpretation of the Aspect Phrase's sub-predicate in structures” as in (5b), while an adjunct does not enter the interpretation in a similar fashion.

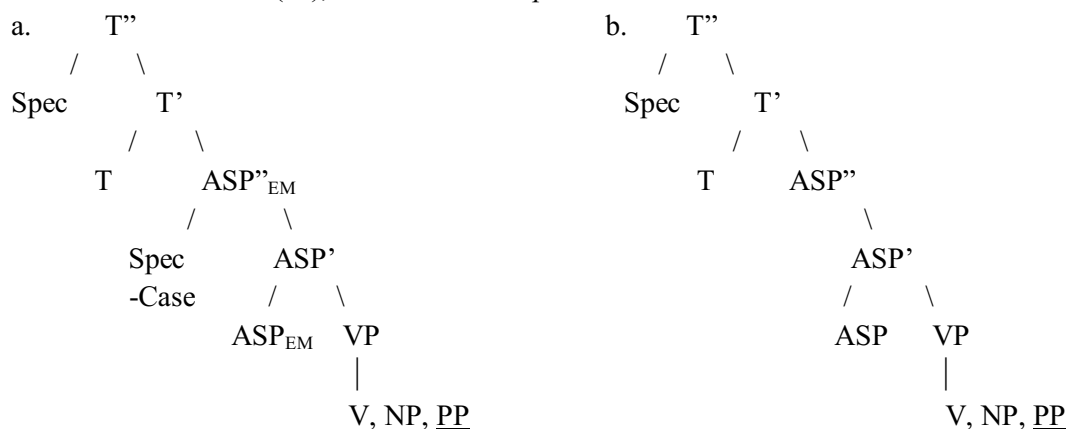
From the condition (6) and the structural difference of PP's shown in (5), ‘*in the park*’ and ‘*to the park*’ respectively, we clearly see that unlike the argument PP ‘*to the park*’, the adjunct PP ‘*in the park*’ does not do any semantic contribution to form aspectual role(s) of a whole sentence.

If this observation is correct, we may ask why we should admit the structural difference between ‘*John ran in the park*’ in (4a & 5a), and “*John ran to the park.*” In (4b & 5b).

When we have the lexical entries ‘*John*’ and ‘*to the park*’ led by the verb ‘*ran*’ under the maximal projection VP, we are able to have the aspectual role MEASURE from the delimiter ‘*to the park*’. Thus, we are automatically led to have the delimitedness reading only, and the existence of the aspectual role causes the projection of the ASP''_{EM}. The other unergative reading is never possible.

On the other hand, when we take a careful look into the sentence “*John ran in the park.*” in (4a & 5a), we immediately know that there are two possible structures rather than one which is unlike Borer (1993)'s analysis. Further, they are different from Borer's structure in the adjunct's position. Consider the following structures:

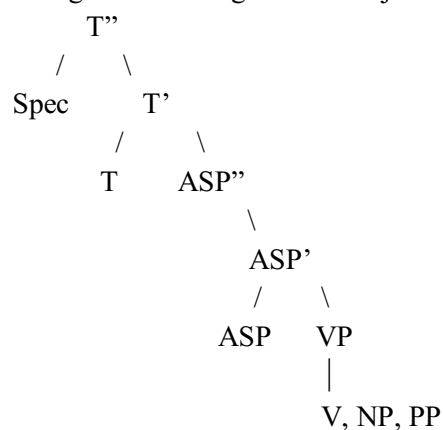
(7) Two Possible Structures of (4a), “John ran in the park.”



The structures (7a & b) shown above are easily deducible from the two possible structures for “John ran.” as expressed in (3). The PP ‘*in the park*’ is an adjunct, so it is not incorporated into the semantics of the whole predicate as Borer assumes. Recall the condition (6). That is, the PP ‘*in the park*’ is usually not supposed to do any contribution to the meaning of the predicate in order to form any aspectual role. All these arguments lead us to conclude that we do not have any motivation to have the locational PP ‘*in the park*’ adjoined to the aspectual node which is outside the lexical VP. Therefore, no syntactic distinction between them is needed at all. (8) in the following will be the resulting structures adopting the counter-arguments against Borer (1993).

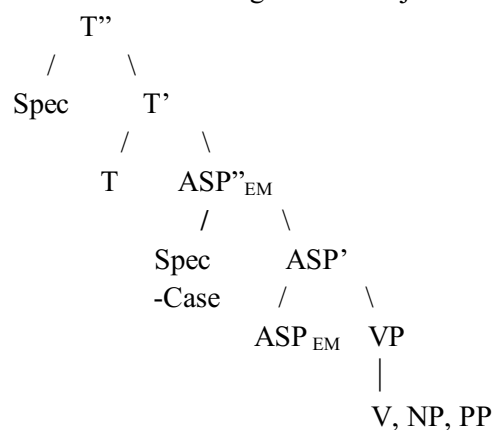
(8) Structures for Intransitives with a PP

a. Unergative Reading with an Adjunct PP



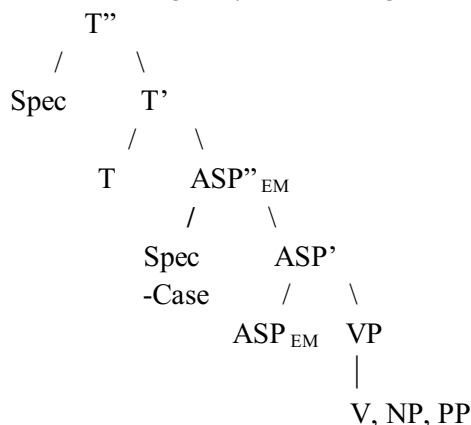
(ex.) John ran in the park.
 [‘John’: an AGENTIVE reading]

b. Unaccusative Reading with an Adjunct PP



(ex.) John ran in the park.
 [‘John’: a MEASURE reading]

c. Unaccusative Reading Only with an Argument PP



(ex.) John ran to the park.

[The event of 'John's running' can be delimited by the PP 'to the park'.]

[The aspectual role of "MEASURE" occurs, and ASP''_{EM} is activated.]

Concerning the structure (8c) which is for the Unaccusative reading only, we might ask the question: What if the PP, "to the park", instead of the NP, "John" moves first to the Spec of the ASP'' and then the NP, "John" moves to the Spec of the T'' ? In actuality, this possibility is prevented in Borer's framework because the ASP''_{EM} is associated with the assignment of the Accusative Case and the PP cannot be a Case recipient. I will return to this issue in Khym (forthcoming).

2.3 Analysis of the Corresponding Korean Action Verb 'tali-ta'

The Korean motion verb 'tali-ta', which corresponds to the English verb 'run', is more widely used than its corresponding English one: It can be used as a transitive verb as well as an intransitive verb. Note that the corresponding English action verb 'run' has been used only for intransitives. How will this Korean action verb be analyzed in the Aspectual Event Syntax?

First of all, the argument of 'tali-ta' is interpreted potentially as an AGENT. Second, it may also be interpreted as a MEASURE just as its corresponding English verb. The data with these verb reading are listed in the following. Consider:

(9) Usages of the Korean Action Verb 'tali-ta'

a. John-i tali -ət -ta.
 John-Nom run -Pst -DECL
 'John ran.'

b. John-i kɔŋwən -ɛsə tali -ət -ta.
 John-Nom the park -in run -Pst -DECL
 'John ran in the park.'

c. John-i kɔŋwən -k'adʒi tali -ət -ta.
 John-Nom the park -to run -Pst -DECL
 'John ran to the park.'

(cf.: Nom: Nominative Case Marker; Pst: Past; DECL: Declarative Marker)

'John' of (9a), which is an argument of the Korean action verb 'tali-ta', can be interpreted as an AGENT as

usually expected. This reading will lead us to recall the structure (2b) which is for an unergative verb. On the while, the argument of ‘tali-ta’, which is ‘John’ again, could also be interpreted as measuring out ‘the running event’, in which case the structure would be that of an unaccusative verb (2a). That is to say, the Korean verb ‘tali-ta’ which corresponds to the English verb ‘run’ can also be used as both unergative and unaccusative verb as ‘run’ can in English.

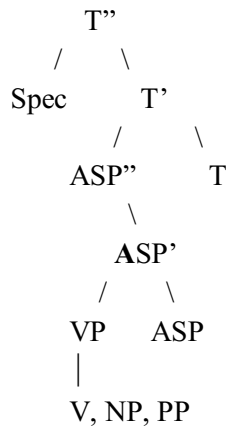
When it comes to (9b) in Korean, the analysis is the same as that for the English cases of (7a & b). In (9b) the PP ‘kəŋwən -ɛsə’ ‘in the park’ does not play any role in adding up the aspectual role of the whole sentence, which is expected by the ‘Semantic Incorporation Condition’ in (6). Therefore, (9b) will be projected with or without the MEASURE. With MEASURE (9b) will have an unaccusative verb, while without MEASURE it will have an ergative verb.

Looking into (9c), the story is exactly the same as that for (8c). The whole compositional meaning of (9c) will produce the aspectual role of MEASURE due to the appearance of the PP ‘kəŋwə -k’adʒi’ ‘to the park’ which serves to delimit the running event. Thus, only unaccusative reading is allowed, and it is exactly the same as that for (8c)

The structures for Korean data (9a to c) are provided below.

(10) Structures for Intransitives with a PP

a. Unergative Reading with an Adjunct PP

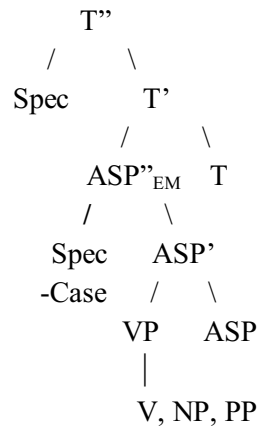


(9b) John-i kəŋwən -ɛsə tali-ət -ta.

‘John ran in the park.’

[‘John’: an AGENTIVE reading]

b. Unaccusative Reading with an Adjunct PP

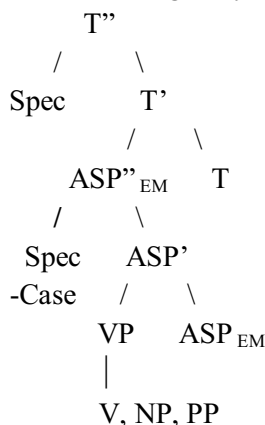


(9b) John-i kəŋwən -ɛsə tali-ət -ta.

‘John ran in the park.’

[‘John’: a MEASURE reading]

c. Unaccusative Reading Only with an Argument PP



(9c) John-I kŏŋwŏn -k'adzi tali -ət -ta.

'John ran to the park.'

[The event of 'John's running' can be delimited by the PP 'to the park'.]

[The aspectual role of "MEASURE" occurs by the delimiting PP 'to the park']

[ASP''_{EM} is activated.]

The discussion so far shows that Borer (1995)'s theory of Aspectual Event Syntax is working well with the classification of verb types both for Korean and English intransitive action verbs such as 'run' for English and 'tali-ta' for Korean. It expects that the two verbs at hand are both classified into an unergative and unaccusative, which is shown by different internal structures. The only differences in structures are due to the head-first or head-last parameter each language employs.

2.4 Broader Usage of the Korean Action Verb 'tali-ta'

The Korean action verb 'tali-ta' has a broader usage than its corresponding English action verb of 'run'. Consider the following Korean data showing various usages of 'tali-ta' other than the intransitive cases.

(11) Other Usages of 'tali-ta'

a. John-i kŏŋwŏn -eul tali -ət -ta.
 'John-Nom the Park-ACC run-Pst -DECL
 (Lit. meaning) "John ran in the park."

b. John-i mal-eul tali -ət -ta.
 'John-Nom horse-ACC run-Pst -DECL
 (Lit. meaning #1) "John ran on horse-back."
 (Lit. meaning #2) "John let the horse run."

c. John-i sesikan-eul tali -ət -ta.
 'John-Nom 3 hours-ACC run-Pst -DECL
 "John ran for three hours."
 (cf.: ACC: Accusative Case marker)

In (11a), ‘tali-ta’ is used as a transitive verb, not as an intransitive verb. And an Accusative Case marker ‘-eul’ is attached at the end of the argument ‘kəŋwən’. This means that unlike the case of English ‘run’ which always behave as an intransitive, the corresponding Korean action verb ‘tali-ta’ has a broader scope of usage. At this stage of discussion, however, I am not certain if the Accusative Case marker ‘-eul’ proves that its stem ‘kəŋwən’ is a real object and the verb ‘tali-ta’ in the sentence is really transitive.

In (11b) is more complicated. The literal meaning #1 of (11b) suggests the same story as (11a). Again the same questions arise and the answers are open again. The literal meaning #2 of (11b) is showing that ‘tali-ta’ is used as a causative verb.

In (11c) again we can observe the Accusative Case marker ‘-eul’ attached to the PP of time/duration. We may add a noun ‘təŋgan’ between ‘səsikan’ and the Accusative Case marker ‘-eul’, to form ‘səsikan təŋgan -eul’, which means ‘for three hours’.

3. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that the phenomenon of intransitive verb alternation in English can also be found in Korean by analyzing the English intransitive action verb ‘run’ and its corresponding Korean intransitive one ‘tali-ta’ under Borer (1993)’s aspectual event syntax. As English ‘run’ is used both as unaccusative and unergative, the corresponding Korean ‘tali-ta’ is also showing the same alternation patterns. In addition, the Korean ttali-ta’ shows a broader usage in various sentence structures, about which we need further study.

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