

The Cognitive Mechanism of Foregrounding in Korean Double Nominative Constructions: Focusing on the Nominative Case Marker *-i/ga*

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This study examines that the nominative case marker *-i/ga* in Korean a double-subject construction(DNC) functions as a cognitive syntactic mechanism that foregrounds backgrounded information. A DNC refers to a construction in which a noun phrase with a nominative case marker appears twice in a single sentence (Lim, 1997). In terms of its formal aspect, this construction possesses the structure of ‘NP1-*ga* NP2-*ga* Predicate’; however, it exhibits dual characteristics that allow it to be classified as ‘subject-subject’, ‘subject-complement’, or ‘topic-subject’ (Ahn, 2015). While such classifications focus on categorizing the types of DNCs, there has been less attention paid to the discourse-semantic functions that the DNC markers perform. Therefore, this study proposes that the doubled nominative *-i/ga* in DNCs functions to bestow prominence upon elements presented as background information, acting as a cognitive device that elevates them into foreground units. Talmy’s (2000) concepts of **Figure** and **Ground**, as well as Langacker’s (2008) concepts of **Trajector** and **Landmark**, provide evidence to support this proposition.¹

This study proposes that DNCs originate from a **prominence asymmetry** between the word level and the sentence level. This implies that the prominence manifested in relations between words can differ from the prominence assigned to a word at the sentence level.

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|---|---------------------------|----------------|
| (1) [Khokkili(G)- <i>ui</i>] _{lm} | <i>kho</i> (F)- <i>ka</i> | <i>kilta</i> . |
| elephant-GEN | nose-NOM | long |
| ‘A nose of an elephant is long.’ | | |
| | | |
| (2) [Khokkili(G)- <i>ka</i>] _{tr} | <i>kho</i> (F)- <i>ka</i> | <i>kilta</i> . |
| elephant-NOM | nose-NOM | long |
| ‘An elephants has a long nose.’ | | |

According to Talmy (2000) and Croft & Cruse (2005), the figure is an object understood in dependence on background information, whereas the ground serves to provide the background information that facilitates the understanding of the figure. That is, in (1), *nose* becomes the figure because it must be specified whose nose it is, and *elephant* becomes the ground because it delimits the scope of *nose*. This word-level prominence remains fixed, regardless of whether it is realized as the genitive case as in (1)a or as the nominative case as in (1)b.

Conversely, the Trajector and Landmark proposed by Langacker (2008) are determined by the **relational prominence** assigned by the predicate and particles at the sentence level. In (1)a, the genitive case marker *-ui* explicitly profiles the possessive meaning and assigns the highest prominence to the possessed item. Accordingly, *nose* acquires the status of the Trajector, while *elephant* obtains the status of the Landmark. In this case, the prominence at the word level aligns with the salience at the sentence level.

However, in (1)b, the attachment of the nominative case marker *-ga* heightens the prominence of the background, *elephant*, elevating its status to that of the Trajector. Nonetheless, *elephant* still retains its role as the ground, as it continues to provide the mental space within which *nose* is cognitively anchored and understood. Consequently, the DNC exhibits a structure

¹ Although Talmy’s (2000) *figure* and *ground* appear to correspond directly with Langacker’s (2008) *Trajector* and *Landmark*, they are virtually distinct in their actual application (Lim, 2014).

characterized by an asymmetry between word-level and sentence-level salience, and the nominative marker *-i/ga* performs a discourse-cognitive function of shifting the speaker's attention toward the background.

This explanation aligns with the view that the nominative case marker *-i/ga* functions not only as a case marker but also as a definiteness assigner and a focus marker. According to Mok (2018), the nominative case marker not only assigns focus status by combining with adverbs (e.g., *kongpho yenghwa-ka onul-i thukhi mwusepney*. "The horror movie is especially scarier today"), but it also functions as a discourse-functional element that performs the role of a determiner when combined with oblique cases (e.g., *khal-lo-ka te cal callacinta*. "It cuts better with a knife"). Definiteness is closely related to prominence associated with the speaker's attention, in that it assigns focus to enable the identification of a specific referent. Therefore, in DNCs, *-i/ga* functions to bring the speaker's attention to background elements at the clausal level by conferring definiteness and focus.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the asymmetry of prominence between the lexical and syntactic levels by examining the differences between Talmy's concepts of figure and ground and Langacker's concepts of trajector and landmark, and proves that the case marker *-i/ga* functions as a cognitive mechanism that foregrounds the ground. This study emphasizes that the DNC is not a mere syntactic phenomenon, but rather functions as a speaker's discourse device to manipulate the hearer's attention, by analyzing the use of *-i/ga* as a device for conferring definiteness. Furthermore, this study centers on the nominative case marker to analyze the semantic structure, unlike previous studies that analyzed the DNC solely from a formal perspective, thereby possessing academic significance in that it consistently maintains the cognitive linguistic perspective of the **Form-Meaning Pairing**.

Keywords: cognitive syntax; double-nominative construction; cognitive grammar; figure and ground; trajector and landmark

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