

Applicative substructure in Korean *iss-* ‘exist/be’ constructions

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1 Introduction

This paper argues for a distinct analysis of two constructions involving the Korean predicate *iss-* ‘exist/be’: locatives and possessives, as shown in (1).¹

- (1) a. Locatives
Hakkyo-ey sensayngnim-i iss-ta.
school-LOC teacher-NOM be-DECL
‘The teacher is at school.’
b. Possessives
Sensayngnim-eykey ton-i iss-ta.
teacher-DAT money-NOM be-DECL
‘The teacher has money.’

Korean uses the predicate *iss-* ‘exist/be’ to express both locative and possessive meaning. The fact that these patterns often coincide crosslinguistically has prompted earlier studies to propose a unified analysis for both constructions (e.g., Freeze 1992). However, in this paper I illustrate the different syntactic behaviors of each construction and then suggest an applicative substructure for possessives, but not for locatives. The present work offers a more systemic account of the complexities and differences inherent in each construction compared to previous studies (Park 2009; Kim 2016) and supports the recent claim that stative predicates can be applicativized (e.g., Baker 2014; Berro & Fernández 2019; den Dikken 2023).²

2 Characteristics of the predicate *iss-*

2.1 Categorical ambiguity

I will first show that *iss-* has ambiguous categorial status in locatives between adjectives and verbs, focusing on two diagnostics used for Korean: the compatibility

¹In Korean, the locative postposition and the dative case marker are homophonous, both represented by *-ey/-eykey*. Due to this, its grammatical category has not been established in the literature yet. In the present study, I will treat *-ey/-eykey* in locatives as a locative postposition whereas those in possessives as a dative case marker. Details will be discussed in section 4. Also note that the choice between two forms *-ey* and *-eykey* depends on the animacy of the nominal phrase they are attached to: *-ey* is attached to an inanimate noun while *-eykey* to an animate noun.

²Abbreviations: 3 = third person; ACC = accusative case; COP = copula; DAT = dative case; DECL = declarative ending; GEN = genitive case; HOR = hortative ending; IMP = imperative ending; NOM = nominative case; PST = past tense; TOP = topic marker.

with a non-past tense marker *-n/nun* (henceforth *-nun*) and with certain sentence endings (i.e., imperatives and hortatives).³

The non-past tense marker *-nun* is obligatory for verbs to be uttered in present declarative sentences while adjectives do not allow this morpheme, as shown in (2).

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| (2) a. Adjectives | b. Verbs |
| Satang-i cak(*-nun)-ta. | Aki-ka ca*(-n)-ta. |
| candy-NOM small-NUN-DECL | baby-NOM sleep-NUN-DECL |
| ‘The candy is small.’ | ‘The baby sleeps.’ |

The examples in (3) below show that the morpheme *-nun* is not compatible with the predicate *iss-* in present declaratives, suggesting that it is categorially similar to adjectives.

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|---|--|
| (3) a. Locatives | |
| Hakkyo-ey sensayngnim-i iss(*- nun)-ta. | |
| school-LOC teacher-NOM be-NUN-DECL | |
| ‘The teacher is at school.’ | |
| b. Possessives | |
| Sensayngnim-eykey ton-i iss(*- nun)-ta. | |
| teacher-DAT money-NOM be-NUN-DECL | |
| ‘The teacher has money.’ | |

However, this is not the entire story. *Iss-* can be accompanied by the morpheme *-nun* under certain circumstances, which adds to the challenge of regarding it as an adjective. If we replace the subject with the first pronoun *na(y)* ‘I’, the locative sentence becomes grammatical. It should also be noted that the volition of the subject is implied in such cases. For example in (4a), the expressed meaning is ‘I decide to be at school’ or ‘I am at school by choice’. This sharply contrasts with possessives, which do not allow *-nun* even with a first pronoun subject, as in (4b).

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| (4) a. Locatives | |
| Hakkyo-ey nay-ka iss- nun -ta. | |
| school-LOC I-NOM be-NUN-DECL | |
| ‘I am at school by choice.’ | |
| b. Possessives | |
| Na-eykey ton-i iss(*- nun)-ta. | |
| I-DAT money-NOM be-NUN-DECL | |
| Intended: ‘I have money by choice.’ | |

³The suffix *-n/nun* is commonly considered a non-past tense marker occurring with verbs. However, Chae (2006) illustrates that the non-past tense marker in Korean is actually null and argues that *-n/nun* is a part of the present declarative ending in the plain speech level. At the moment, it is not clear to me which approach is more tenable. Here I call it non-past tense marker, conforming to the traditional view and use *-NUN* as a gloss. Refer to Chae (2006) for further discussion.

The compatibility of a predicate with an imperative ending *-(e)la* and hortative ending *-ca* also shows a contrast between adjectives and verbs in Korean. For example, the adjective *yeyppu-* ‘pretty’ cannot be used with the imperative ending as shown in (5a) while a verb *ca-* ‘sleep’ can, as in (5b).

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|---------------------|-------------------|
| (5) a. Adjectives | b. Verbs |
| *Ne-nun yeyppu-ela! | Ne-nun ca-la! |
| you-TOP pretty-IMP | you-TOP sleep-IMP |
| ‘Be pretty!’ | ‘Sleep!’ |

Notably, the predicate *iss-* can occur with these endings in locative constructions, and the agentivity of the subject is emphasized similar to the aforementioned observations with *-nun* (Park 2009). This is not found in possessive constructions, as shown below:

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|--------------------|------------------|
| (6) a. Locatives | b. Possessives |
| Hakkyo-ey iss-ela! | *Ton-i iss-ela! |
| school-LOC be-IMP | money-NOM be-IMP |
| ‘Be at school!’ | ‘Have money!’ |

The data examined above show that the predicate *iss-* is categorially ambiguous between an adjective and a verb in locatives. In contrast, it consistently falls under the adjectival category in possessives, and the verbal uses are not allowed.

2.2 Subject honorific agreement

Another piece of evidence that differentiates the two constructions comes from subject honorification. See the examples in (7) below:

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| (7) a. Locatives | |
| Hakkyo-ey emeni- kkeyse kyeysi -ta. | |
| school-LOC mother-NOM.HON be.HON-DECL | |
| ‘Mother is at school.’ | |
| b. Possessives | |
| Emeni- kkey ton-i iss- usi -ta. | |
| mother-DAT.HON money-NOM be-HON-DECL | |
| ‘Mother has money.’ | |

The subject honorific agreement in Korean can be realized as a suffix *-(u)si* attached to the predicate or through suppletion of the predicate stem. In (7), the only possible candidate for honorific agreement is the nominal *emeni* ‘mother’. In locatives (7a) the nominative argument (i.e., theme) participates in honorific agreement, expressed as honorific nominative case *-kkeyse* and the suppletive form *kyeysi*.⁴ In

⁴In the case of suppletion, *kyeysi-* is considered a monomorphemic suppletive stem, instead of a multimorphemic element composed of *kye-* and *-si* (Choi & Harley 2019; contra Chung 2009). Also note that honorific subject agreement is not expressed through suppletion in possessives, nor via affixation in locatives (although some speakers marginally accept the latter). The account for this contrast is not clear to me yet; however, I assume it can be addressed within the framework of Distributed Morphology (e.g., Halle & Marantz 1993; Chung 2009; Choi & Harley 2019).

possessives in (7b), on the other hand, the dative argument (i.e., possessor) participates in honorific agreement, expressed as honorific dative case *-kkey* and affixation of honorific morpheme *-usi* to the predicate. Given that only the subject DP can exhibit honorific agreement in Korean (e.g., Kim 2016), the above pattern suggests that two constructions have different arguments as subjects: the nominative (theme) DP for locatives and the dative (possessor) DP for possessives.

2.3 Word order of arguments

I illustrate the last crucial difference between locatives and possessives in Korean with respect to the word order of arguments. The possession meaning is obtained only when the dative argument precedes the nominative argument, while the locative meaning remains unaffected by the relative order of the two arguments. That is, only in possessives is the word order fixed as DAT-NOM. Consider (8):

- (8) a. DAT/LOC-NOM
 John-eykey atul-i iss-ta.
 John-DAT/LOC son-NOM be-DECL
 Locative: 'The son is with John.'(✓)
 Possessive: 'John has a son.'(✓)
- b. NOM-DAT/LOC
 Atul-i John-eykey iss-ta.
 son-NOM John-DAT/LOC be-DECL
 Locative: 'The son is with John.'(✓)
 Possessive: 'John has a son.'(✗)

The possession reading is only obtained in (8a). Under the possession reading, *atul* 'son' cannot be anyone's son but John's. However, under the location reading it can be the speaker's son instead, who is temporarily with John. This location reading is obtained in both (8a) and (8b), irrespective of the word order of two arguments.

To sum up, the predicate *iss-* exhibits characteristics of both adjectives and verbs in locative constructions. In its verbal use, the agentivity of the subject is foregrounded. It has been also shown that possessive and locative constructions exhibit different subject honorific agreement patterns. Finally, possession meaning is conditioned by the word order of arguments, in contrast to location meaning. These observations are summarized in the table below.

	Locatives	Possessives
Adjectival use	✓	✓
Verbal (agentive) use	✓	✗
Subject honorific agreement	NOM DP	DAT DP
Fixed word order (DAT-NOM)	✗	✓

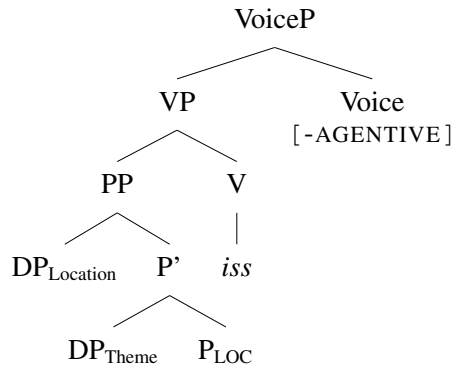
Table 1: Summary of the characteristics of *iss-*

3 Previous approaches

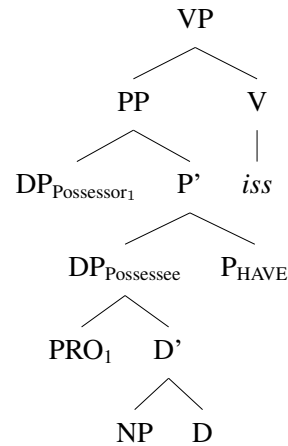
3.1 Park's (2009) PP analysis

Here I introduce two main approaches to Korean *iss*- constructions and their limitations. First, Park's (2009) PP analysis will be discussed. Park, building on Harley (2002), argues for a PP predicate analysis for both locative and possessive constructions. The meaning difference between them comes from different abstract P heads: P_{LOC} and P_{HAVE} .

(9) Locatives



(10) Possessives



(11) Agentive locatives: [$\text{VoiceP Spec } [\text{Voice}' \text{ VP Voice}_{[+AGENTIVE]}]$]

The author attempts to account for the agentive use (e.g., (4a)) in locatives in terms of a $[\pm AGENTIVE]$ feature on a Voice head. As shown in (11), the $[+AGENTIVE]$ Voice head in agentive locatives introduces an external argument in its specifier position (i.e., Spec), which contributes to the volitional meaning.

In contrast, there is no VoiceP projected above VP in possessives as shown in (11). The author also assumes that possessive constructions always encode an inalienable possession relation between a possessor and a possessee. Based on the observation that the overt reflexive *caki* 'self' can occupy Spec, $\text{DP}_{\text{Possessee}}$ as in (12), PRO, which is controlled by the possessor, is posited in possessive structures.

- (12) John₁-eykey [$\text{DP}_{\text{Possessee}}$ caki₁ ttal-i] iss-ta
 school-DAT self daughter-NOM be-DECL
 'John has his own daughter.' (Lit. 'John has self's daughter.')

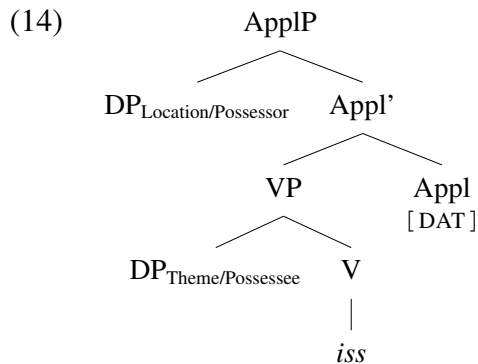
Park's analysis can account for some of the characteristics mentioned above. He proposes that the theme raises to Spec, TP in locatives, while the possessor undergoes raising in possessives. This can explain the distinct subject honorific pattern between two constructions. The fixed word order effect found in possessives (i.e., DAT-NOM) can also be accounted for in terms of PRO control. The inverse word order NOM-DAT is ruled out since scrambling $\text{DP}_{\text{Possessee}}$ over the controller $\text{DP}_{\text{Possessor}}$ violates the control relation between PRO and its co-indexed antecedent, as in (13b).

- (13) a. John₁-eykey [_{DP_{Possessee}} PRO₁ ttal-i] iss-ta.
 John-DAT daughter-NOM be-DECL
- b. * [_{DP_{Possessee}} PRO₁ ttal-i]_i John₁-eykey *t_i* iss-ta.
 daughter-NOM John-DAT be-DECL
- ‘John has a daughter.’

However, Park’s analysis also yields some incorrect empirical predictions and necessitates further theoretical clarification. Empirically, his analysis predicts that the possession relation should always be inalienable, contrary to the fact. The possession relation can be alienable—for example, as shown in (1b) above, the possessor *sensayngnim* ‘teacher’ and the possessum *ton* ‘money’ are not inherently associated to each other. Accordingly, the use of PRO in possessives does not seem convincing. Concerning theoretical aspects, the author assumes that in locatives the theme, which is structurally lower than the location raises to Spec, TP (e.g., (9)). It should be explained how the lower argument undergoes raising over the higher argument in locatives, violating the Relativized Minimality condition (Rizzi 1990) or Shortest Move (Chomsky 1993). Park also fails to account for why agentive possessives do not exist in contrast to agentive locatives. There is no theoretical reason to block the agentive reading of possessives under his analysis. Last but not least, Park’s analysis does not address the ambiguous categorial status of *iss-* in locatives between an adjective and a verb.

3.2 Kim’s (2016) applicative analysis

Kim (2016) proposes an applicative analysis for both locative and possessive constructions, building on Cuervo (2003). The applicative head Appl takes VP as its complement and introduces an applied argument (e.g., location or possessor).⁵ Kim also assumes that the Appl head can assign inherent dative case to the applied argument (Cuervo 2003; McFadden 2004), indicated as [DAT] in (14).



Kim proposes that the meaning difference between locatives and possessives is ascribed to the animacy of an applied argument: the possession meaning is obtained with an animate applied argument while the location meaning is acquired with an inanimate applied argument.

⁵Although Kim does not mention this explicitly, her applicative structure is analogous to high applicative in Pylkkänen (2008).

However, Kim's attempt to provide a unified analysis for locative and possessive constructions faces the following challenges. First, as it attributes the distinct meaning between locatives and possessives to the animacy difference, Kim's analysis incorrectly predicts that possessives cannot have inanimate possessors and locatives cannot have animate locations. This is contradicted by the examples in (15).

- (15) a. Locatives
 Sensayngnim-eykey na-uy atul-i iss-ta.
 teacher-LOC I-GEN son-NOM be-DECL
 'My son is with the teacher.'
- b. Possessives
 Cha-ey eyncin-i iss-ta.
 car-DAT engine-NOM be-DECL
 'The car has an engine.'

Next, under Kim's analysis, the higher argument (i.e., applied argument) raises to Spec, TP and function as a subject. This predicts that both constructions should exhibit the same subject honorific pattern, which contradicts the observed facts above. Furthermore, her analysis permits the possibility that the lower argument can be scrambled over the applied argument, predicting that both possessives and locatives should allow NOM-DAT word order. However, this prediction is incorrect, as possessive meaning is obtained only when the dative argument precedes the nominative argument. Lastly, Kim's proposal is not complete in that it does not give an explanation for the ambiguous categorial status of *iss-* and how agentive reading in locatives can be obtained.

4 My analysis

I first claim that the predicate *iss-* is best analyzed as an adjective underlyingly and may derive a verb-like agentive locative through v_{DO} head selecting *aP*. I also propose that possessives have a distinct argument structure compared to locatives, including an applicative projection under *aP*.

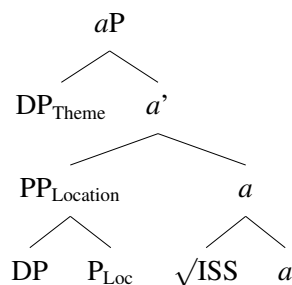
4.1 Argument structure of locatives

I argue that the predicate *iss-* is best analyzed as an adjective underlyingly in locatives. The theme argument asymmetrically c-commands the location argument, conforming to the Thematic Hierarchy (e.g., Jackendoff 1972). This contrasts with Park (2009) and Kim (2016) in which the location c-commands the theme. The asymmetric c-command relationship can be substantiated by the examples below.

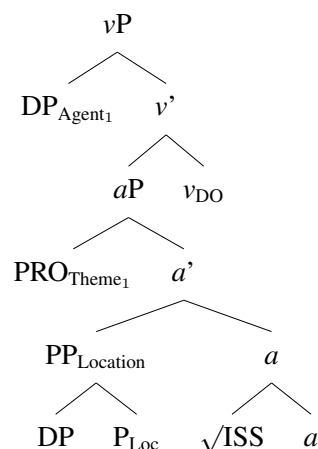
- (16) a. John₁-i caki₁-uy cip-ey iss-ta.
 John-NOM self-GEN home-LOC be-DECL
- b. [Caki₁-uy cip-ey]_i John₁-i *t_i* iss-ta.
 self-GEN home-LOC John-NOM be-DECL
 'John is at his home.' (Lit. 'John is at self's home.')

(16a) is the base word order for locatives (i.e., THEME-LOCATION) as the higher argument raises to Spec, TP. The reflexive anaphor *caki* ‘self’ is c-commanded by its co-indexed antecedent *John*, as expected. The fact that (16b), where *caki* ‘self’ is scrambled over its antecedent, is grammatical indicates that *caki* ‘self’ is c-commanded by its antecedent before the scrambling, which supports the proposed structure (17).

(17) Locatives



(18) Agentive locatives



Regarding the agentive locatives, I propose that a verbalizer v_{DO} selects for aP as a complement and introduces an agent in its Spec (Hale & Keyser 1993), as shown in (18). In agentive locatives, the nominative argument is associated with two thematic roles simultaneously: an agent and a theme. PRO is thus posited in Spec, aP , receiving the theme role and controlled by the agent DP in Spec, vP . An alternative explanation is to merge DP_{Theme} in Spec, aP and then raise it to Spec, vP . However, this would violate the Theta Criterion.⁶

Throughout the paper, the suffix *-ey/-eykey* in locatives is considered a locative postposition whereas in possessives, it is regarded as a dative case marker. The examples in (19) show that *-ey* in locative constructions can be replaced with the locative postposition *-eyse* ‘at, in’ whereas *-ey* in possessives cannot. Based on this, I suggest that *-ey* in locatives is a locative postposition rather than a dative case marker, represented as P_{Loc} in (17).⁷

⁶I found it hard to apply other diagnostic tests for control and raising discussed in the literature (e.g., passivization test, expletive subject test, and clausal subject test). These tests operate between two clauses: matrix and embedded. The only viable distinction in our case comes from the number of thematic roles that control and raising predicates can have. The controller of PRO can bear two thematic roles with the existence of PRO; however, the raising argument can bear one thematic role at most. The other alternative is the movement theory of control (Hornstein 1999), according to which there is no distinction between movement and control in the first place. At the moment I follow the use of PRO based on the distinction of the thematic role assignment.

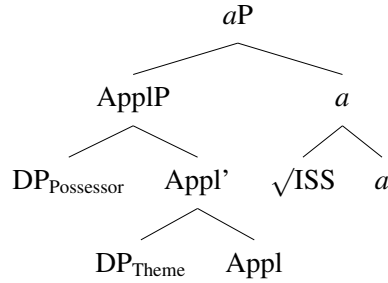
⁷As noted in the footnote1, the grammatical category of *-ey/-eykey* remains unsettled in the literature. Park (2009) considers it a postposition in locatives and a dative case marker in possessives. Kim (2016) treats it as a dative case marker in both constructions. However, neither provides independent evidence to support their claims. Additionally, Park & Whitman (2003) argue that *-ey/-eykey* functions as a postposition in Korean ditransitive constructions.

- (19) a. Locatives
 John-i cip-ey/-eyse iss-ess-ta.
 John-NOM home-LOC/LOC be-PST-DECL
 ‘John was at home.’
 b. Possessives
 Cha-ey/*-eyse eyncin-i iss-ess-ta.
 car-DAT/LOC engine-NOM be-PST-DECL
 ‘The car had an engine.’

4.2 Argument structure of possessives

For possessives, I posit an applicative projection: the applicative projection is realized within an adjectival phrase, *aP*. An applicative head *Appl* introduces an applied argument (e.g., possessor) in its *Spec* position, which asymmetrically c-commands the theme argument. The applied argument gets inherent dative case from *Appl* (Cuervo 2003; McFadden 2004; Kim 2016).

- (20) Possessives



Semantically, the *Appl* head encodes the possession relation between two arguments (Cuervo 2003; Pylkkänen 2008). More specifically, I adopt the semantics of Cuervo’s (2003) *LowAppl_{AT}*, as illustrated in (21), which expresses a non-dynamic possession relation (cf. Pylkkänen’s (2008) transfer-of-possession). This readily captures the static possession relation found in *iss-* possessive constructions.

- (21) *Appl*: $\lambda x. \lambda y. \lambda f_{\langle e, \langle s, t \rangle \rangle}. \lambda e. f(e, x) \ \& \ \text{Theme}(e, x) \ \& \ \text{in-the-possession}(x, y)$

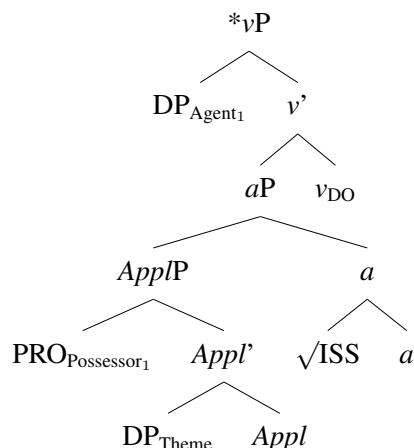
4.3 Consequences

Let’s see how the current proposal accounts for data observed in section 2. First, regarding the categorial ambiguity of *iss-* between an adjective and a verb, it has been discussed in section 4.1 that the *iss-* is underlyingly an adjective, and verbal agentive meaning is derived via v_{DO} projection above *aP* in locatives.

It is crucial to explain why an agentive interpretation is not permissible in possessives. (22) below represents a potential derivation of a verbal agentive possessive. Analogous to agentive locatives, v_{DO} takes *aP* as its complement and introduces an external argument in the *Spec*. PRO can be posited in the possessor position (i.e., *Spec, ApplP*), controlled by the co-indexed antecedent, DP_{Agent} . However, this derivation is syntactically ruled out under the case theorem: PRO must be

caseless. Given that Spec, ApplP is a dative case-licensed position (Cuervo 2003; McFadden 2004), PRO should be excluded in such a position.

(22) *Agentive possessives



The distinct subject honorification pattern can also be readily accounted for under the current proposal. The higher argument consistently functions as a subject, correctly predicting the observed honorific agreement pattern: in locatives, the nominative theme argument participates in subject honorific agreement while the dative possessor argument does so in possessives.

Lastly, I will show how the fixed word order of DAT-NOM found in possessives can be explained in tandem with case stacking and case alternation. The dative argument in possessives allows case stacking of a nominative and case alternation with a nominative case (Gerdt & Youn 1990; Yoon 2004), as shown in (23), while the locative counterparts do not allow any of them, as shown in (24).⁸

(23) Possessives

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|----|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. | John-eykey-ka atul-i iss-ta. | <i>Case stacking</i> |
| | John-DAT-NOM son-NOM be-DECL | |
| b. | John-eykey/-i atul-i iss-ta. | <i>Case alternation</i> |
| | John-DAT/NOM son-NOM be-DECL | |
| | ‘John has a son.’ | |

(24) Locatives

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|----|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. | *Cip-ey-ka John-i iss-ta. | <i>Case stacking</i> |
| | home-LOC-NOM John-NOM be-DECL | |
| b. | Cip-ey/*-i John-i iss-ta. | <i>Case alternation</i> |
| | home-LOC/NOM John-NOM be-DECL | |
| | ‘John is at home.’ | |

⁸I assume that case stacking can be explained by means of either an Agree-based Case model à la multiple agree (Hiraiwa 2002) or Dependent Case model à la Levin (2017). Further discussion is omitted here due to the space limit.

Case alternation is associated with case stacking in that the former is a reduced phonological realization of the latter (Levin 2017). For example, the case stacking in (23a) and two instances of case alternation in (23b) are identical in syntax, while the case alternation appears as a reduced phonological realization of case stacking. To address the word order effect, one constraint on scrambling should be introduced. It has been argued that Korean prohibits scrambling of DP over DP having the same morphological case (Kim 1990; Lee 2007). To illustrate, consider (25).

- (25) a. Kwulum-i pi-ka toy-ess-ta.
cloud-NOM rain-NOM become-PST-DECL
'The cloud became the rain.'
- b. *Pi-ka_i kwulum-i t_i toy-ess-ta.
rain-NOM cloud-NOM become-PST-DECL
Intended: 'The cloud became the rain.'

In (25b), scrambling the second nominative argument, *pi* 'rain,' over the first, *kwulum* 'cloud,' is ungrammatical for the intended meaning because a nominative DP is scrambled over another nominative DP. Given these two considerations, the scrambling of the nominative theme over the dative possessor in possessives is ruled out since in syntax two arguments have the same morphological case, nominative case. Locatives are not subject to this constraint since case stacking is not permitted, as in (24a), allowing both (base) NOM-LOC and (scrambled) LOC-NOM word order.

5 Conclusion and implications

In the present study, I claim that the predicate *iss-* is best analyzed as an adjective underlyingly and can further be merged with a verbalizer v_{DO} in agentive locative constructions given that the volition of the subject is encoded in an agent role. In addition, I argue for distinct argument structures for locatives and possessives, employing the applicative substructure in the latter.

Before closing the discussion, it is worth noting that my analysis supports the growing argument that stative predicates such as unaccusatives and adjectives can also be applicativized (Baker 2014; den Dikken 2023 for unaccusatives; Berro & Fernández 2019 for adjectives). In particular, den Dikken (2023) shows that dyadic unaccusatives in Shipibo can participate in both high and low applicatives. The applicative analysis of possessives proposed in the current study is parallel in that the predicate *iss-* participates in the syntax of applicatives that relate two non-agent arguments (i.e., possessor and theme) of a stative predicate.

Moreover, the current proposal of the applicative substructure can be extended to psychological dyadic adjectives in Korean, for example in (26).

- (26) John-eykey holangi-ka mwusep-ta.
John-DAT tiger-NOM be.afraid.of-DECL
'John is afraid of a tiger.'

Psychological dyadic adjectives in Korean exhibit parallel characteristics found in *iss-* possessives: subject honorific agreement with the dative argument, fixed argument order of DAT-NOM, and case stacking and alternation. These similarities

suggest that the current proposal for possessives also accounts for the argument structure of psychological adjectives in Korean, providing new evidence that statives can be applicativized in Korean. This can further contribute to more refined analyses of argument structures in the language.

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