Ambiguous After All: Korean RC Attachment With Balanced Plausibility

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Introduction. This study revisits relative clause (RC) attachment ambiguity in Korean, a language widely described as showing a strong preference for attaching the RC to the non-local NP (aka High Attachment; [3,4]). Although this pattern is often treated as a stable property of Korean RC interpretation, prior work has rarely controlled for the plausibility of the two noun phrases (e.g., *the colleague* vs. *the wife of the colleague* in (1)) as heads of the RC.

(1) yehayng-ul ka-n tonglyo-uy anay
trip-ACC go-REL colleague-of wife
'the wife of the colleague who went on a trip'

The absence of plausibility controls raises the possibility that the reported non-local preference reflects lexical/discourse-level asymmetries rather than Korean disambiguation strategies. Here we address this issue running a plausibility norming test before a forced-choice comprehension experiment. Additionally, attachment preferences have been shown to vary significantly across individuals, with studies reporting an effect on working memory capacity (WMC) on local vs. non-local preferences in English [5], but not in Korean [2]. We thus collect WMC scores before the comprehension task.

Materials. We designed 24 sets of sentences containing *RC N1-of N2* sequences like in (1). We included an RC-length manipulation to test whether prosodic weight influences attachment. Short-RCs consisted of two words, whereas long-RCs were constructed by adding two adjuncts (3–4 syllables each) to the short ones. According to the Balanced Sisterhood Hypothesis [1], larger constituents should attract non-local attachment because prosodic grouping favors balanced sister nodes.

EXP1: Plausibility Norming. We tested variants on the target items where the RC could only refer to one of the two nouns ("the wife" or "the colleague's wife"). Native Korean speakers (N = 34) rated these sentences on a 7-point Likert scale. Both the local- and non-local-attachment versions of each item were rated as highly plausible (6.68: local, 6.33: non-local; Figure 1), independently of length. Thus, in each item set the RC was judged as a semantically coherent modifier of either noun.

EXP2: Comprehension. We then conducted a forced-choice task to assess attachment preferences, for long and short RCs, given equally plausible local and non-local interpretations. The 24 target sets normed in EXP1 where were distributed across two groups together with 48 fillers. Participants read each sentence and answered a forced-choice question (e.g., "Who went on a trip?"). Before the comprehension task, participants completed a spatial span task aimed at measuring WMC. Unlike previous findings, in a pilot study (N = 27) we did not observe a non-local attachment preference (Fig. 2). Moreover, regression analyses revealed no significant effect of the RC-length manipulation. Additionally, while some speaker-level variability is attested, this was not significantly modulated by WMC.

Conclusion. While preliminary, our findings call for a reevaluation of Korean RC attachment. When attachment plausibility was rigorously controlled, participants showed no reliable bias toward either noun, indicating genuine ambiguity. This suggests that earlier reports of strong non-local attachment might be confounded by semantic imbalances in the materials rather than be revealing a processing preference.

[1]**Fodor**. 2002. Prosodic disambiguation in silent reading. [2] **Kim & Christianson**. 2016. Working memory effects on L1 and L2 processing of ambiguous relative clauses by Korean L2 learners of English. [3]**Lee**. 2025. Honorific Agreement Guides but Doesn't Govern in Ambiguity Resolution. Language Research. [4]**Lim**. 2012. Processing of relative clauses in Korean. Korean Journal of Linguistics. [5] **Swets et al.** 2007. The role of working memory in syntactic ambiguity resolution: a psychometric approach.

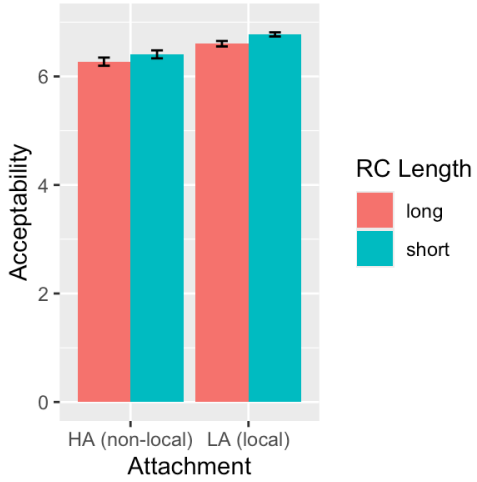

Figure 1: Exp 1. Plausibility rate (max:7).

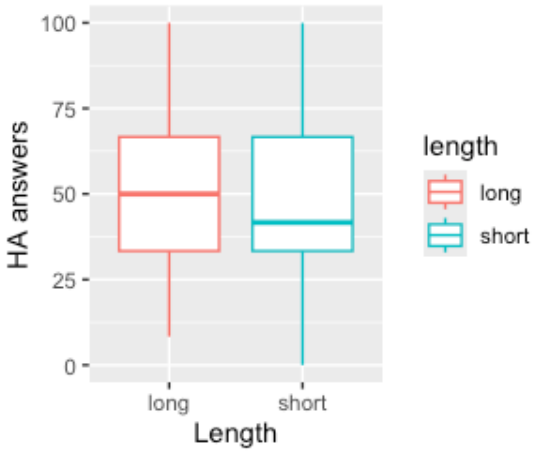

Figure 2: Exp 2. Rate of HA answers in the forced-choice task.

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(>|z|)
(Intercept)	0.04861	0.33665	0.144	0.885
length-short	0.02358	0.18679	0.126	0.900

Table 1: EXP2 Statistical results for HA answer rates in the forced-choice task