THE SYSTEM OF THEME OF KOREAN: AN INTERIM REPORT

Mira KIM
(Macquarie University, Australia)

ABSTRACT: *This paper presents part of my PhD research that has attempted to explore the textual metafunction of the Korean language for the purpose of translation studies. As an interim report on the working project, it mainly focuses on the discussion of methodological issues that have been raised in the process of modelling the system of THEME of Korean.*

KEY-WORDS: *Korean typology, textual metafunction, Theme, and New.*

1. Introduction

This paper presents part of the PhD research that I have been undertaking since 2004 at Macquarie University. The aims of the study are i) to explore the textual metafunction of Korean; and ii) to address translation issues related to the particular metafunction in Korean/English and English/Korean translations. The present paper is mainly concerned with the textual metafunction of Korean, especially the system of Theme. The theoretical framework within which the study is set up is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which provides system networks as the primary theoretical tool for language description. In SFL, Theme is the point of departure of the clause or what the clause is about. It is seen as a universal element; in every language there is a means for identifying what the clause is concerned with. However, how Theme is realized may differ from one language to another. Following the hypothesis that Theme is a universal element, this study has investigated what is the means of identifying Theme in Korean analyzing 17 selected Korean texts. This interim report of the working research project will discuss several important considerations taken in adopting earlier methods that have been used to describe other languages. The analysis has not been completed yet but has revealed some consistent patterns throughout the data. Based on the initial findings, this paper will present a provisional model of the system of Theme in Korean.

33rd ISFC

The main purpose of presenting this paper in the 33rd International Systemic Functional Congress is to receive constructive feedback on the methodological issues and provisional model from a wide audience.

2. The motivation of the study

The study on which this paper is based was motivated by a small-scale pilot study that I undertook in 2003. The study involved using systemic functional grammar (SFG) to analyze texts aiming to shed light on issues in translation teaching. The specific issues that were addressed were identifying translation errors and explaining the nature of errors based on meaning. Korean translations of an English text undertaken by 14 trainee translators were analyzed and categorized into different metafunctions: experiential, logical, interpersonal and textual. The pilot study found that this method of translation error analysis is a very efficient one for providing systematic meaning-based explanations for translation errors or issues, which would, otherwise, be labelled simply as "inaccurate" or "unnatural" (see Kim in press for details).

However, in spite of the findings that shed light on the practical application of SFG-based text analysis for translation and translation teaching, the study had methodological limitations. The most significant of these was the absence of a description of the Korean language from a systemic functional point of view. Largely due to the dominant influence of the American schools of formal linguistics, few attempts have been made to explore the Korean language from a systemic and/or functional point of view. Recently a few text linguists who are influenced by the Prague School have started to attempt a function-based approach to Korean (e.g. Lee 1994 & 2004). It is certainly a positive development in Korean linguistics that the importance of the functions of language and the significance of using texts in use are being gradually recognized. However, no existing study has yet been conducted based on extensive discourse data across a range of registers and has not yet suggested a systemic description of Theme/Rheme in Korean from a paradigmatic perspective.

Faced with limited resources, I chose to explore the textual metafunction of Korean in a follow-up project. The reason for choosing the textual metafunction in particular is that, while the majority of translation errors that belong to either the ideational or the interpersonal metafunction can

be relatively easily explained without a systemic functional description of Korean language, the same cannot be said for those translation errors that belong to the textual metafunction. In other words, it still remains difficult to explain different textual effects caused by different translation choices without a proper understanding of how Theme is realized in both languages.

3. Methodology

3.1. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis chosen for this study is the clause as it is the most fundamental meaning unit, where three different meanings, ideational (as representation), interpersonal (as exchange) and textual (as message) are combined to construe a unique meaning (Halliday 1994: 34).

> "In all human languages so far studied, the clause is the fundamental meaning structure in our linguistic communication with each other."   (Butt *et al* 2000: 33)

Because translating is a meaning-driven, meaning-oriented human activity that involves two different languages, it is assumed that, in the activity of translation, the clause maintains the same status as the fundamental meaning unit.

3.2. Clause delimitation

The main guiding reference that has been used in this study for clause delimitation is *Working with Functional Grammar* (Martin *et al* 1997: 4-6). There are three methods (ideational, interpersonal and textual) suggested in the book to divide up a text into clauses. The main method adopted for this study is the ideational method because it seems a more straightforward method than the other two. The procedure in a summary form is as follows:

> 1. Divide a text into clause complexes;
>
> 2. Identify a verbal group functioning as process;
>
> 3. Delimit the verbal group and whatever is associated with it as the clause.

The initial steps involve the division of a text into clause complexes and

the identification of verbal groups that function as process. Then the clause complexes are divided into clauses by grouping each process with whatever is associated with it experientially (i.e. who did what to whom, where, when, how, why etc.).

This method is, of course, proposed for the analysis of the English language. Naturally, its application in this particular context will demand the resolution of a number of issues related to linguistic features specific to Korean. We shall consider below some features of Korean that have been taken into careful account in delimiting clauses.

3.2.1. Compound verbs

The Korean language tends to represent events "into minute pieces for verbal expressions" (Sohn 1999: 267), by serial verbs or auxiliary verbs. Although Korean linguists have made different claims and arguments about the definitions and categories of such verbs, they seem to agree that such a verb represents a single event (Se 1990: 233-276). This leads to an assumption that those verbs share the same participant and the same circumstance. Based on this assumption, this study has tested if a verbal group is a compound verb that represents one single event or it consists of two (or more) processes that represent separate events, by inserting between the processes, other experiential elements, such as a circumstance. A clause with such a serial verb has been analysed as one clause in this study. Here are some examples of the serial verb structure from the corpus:

Example 1

*enceyna patake swuchul **mwute twuess**-nunte*

always **buried and left** charcoal under the ground and

Example 2

*kulena ilpan semintul-un mwumyengkwa peylo osul **hay ipess**-nunte*,

However, ordinary people **made and wore** clothes made of cotton and hemp and

The main difference between the serial verb and the auxiliary verb is that the auxiliary verb includes a verb that cannot stand alone. For instance, when an auxiliary verb *hapnita* (honorific) or *hanta (non-honorific)* comes after a verbal group ending with a specific suffix *-tago,* the auxiliary verb does not represent any event or experience as process but just adds a feature of evidentiality. Here is an example of such an auxiliary verb from the corpus:

Example 3

———.

onswunhake kiltulyecyess-tako **hapnita.**

(dogs) <u>are said</u> to have been tamed to be gentle**.**

As such, the last verb *hapnita* indicates that the statement is not an expression of the writer's own ideas but is, instead, a report of what others say. A clause with such an auxiliary has been analysed as one clause.

3.2.2. Ellipsed verb

Korean allows sentential elements that are predictable from the discourse context or situation to be omitted and this is a widespread phenomenon (Sohn 1999: 291). The phenomenon is not limited to nominal construction but also to verbal construction. In the following example, the clause complex is divided into three clauses as the ellipsed verb, *said* is recoverable because *said* is often elliptical when a verbal group ending with *–ta* followed by *mye*, conjunctive suffix meaning *and* or *as*.

Example 4

ku-nun nuc-ess-ta

He was late

mye

(he said) and

.

ttwuye naka-ss-ta

(he) ran outside.

3.3.   Theme identificaiton

This study has considered Theme identificaiton methods suggested for English and Japanese. The basic principle of Theme identification that Halliday suggests for English is to draw the dividing line of Theme after the first experiential element at the clause-initial position (See Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: chapter 3 for details). However, the need to extend the Theme boundary a little further has been raised among other systemic linguists. For instance, Berry (1995 & 1996) and Davies (1988 & 1994) argue that the boundary should be extended to include everything before the process. Matthiessen also suggests that when experiential Adjuncts pile up at the beginning of the clause, not only all the Adjuncts but also the Subject has some thematic prominence "within the diminuendo of the thematic wave" (Matthiessen 1992:52). Ravelli confirms that their suggestions are compatible with her interpretation of Theme from a dynamic perspective (Ravelli 1995). However, she indicates that the weight of the topical Theme that is preceded by other topical elements may be different from the weight of the topical Theme that is not. Even though she does not elaborate on this point further, it is indeed a very important observation which may have to be considered for translation.

Meanwhile, it has been believed that Theme in Japanese is marked off by the postposition *wa*. However, the clause-initial position also seems to play a significant role for textual meaning, a notion that is argued for by Thomson (2005) and also recognized by Teruya (forthcoming). Thomson suggests that "Theme in Japanese may be realised by first position in the clause" on the grounds that what to put first in the clause is a matter of choice of the speaker/writer in the "free" ordering language (Thomson 2005: 154-156). Teruya, however, gives more weight to the Theme markers such as *wa* as can be seen in his Theme recognition criteria at the clause rank (Teruya forthcoming: 66):

   a)   whatever precedes the element marked by *wa* or other theme
        markers is unmarked Theme;

b) if there is a marked participant or circumstance, the Theme always extends up to and includes that element marked by *wa* or other Theme markers;

c) If, however, the element described in a) and b) above is absent, the Theme likewise extends up to and includes the topical Theme, which may be marked by *ga*.

A brief survey of Theme boundary criteria proposed for English and Japanese suggests three possible criteria that can be employed to identify Themes in Korean:

1) To extend the Theme boundary to include all the elements up to and including the first experiential element (clause-initial position method);

2) To extend the Theme boundary to include all the elements before the process (pre-process method or Subject-inclusive method);

3) To extend the Theme boundary to include all the elements up to and including the element marked off by the postposition *un/nun*, which is widely accepted as topical marker in Korean linguistics. (Theme marker method).

Among three, the second method will not be applicable for Korean if it is called "pre-process method" because the process always comes at the end of the clause in Korean. So it shall be called "Subject-inclusive method" in this paper.

All three methods have been tried out using the texts collected in the corpus. It is hard to say that any particular method suits every single clause and does not leave any questionable cases. However, the first method seems to be the most suitable method for the purpose of this study. The following section will discuss the reasons for the choice starting with the reasons why the second and third have not been chosen.

3.3.1. Subject-inclusive method

For the convenience of exposition, an example text used in Matthiessen (1992:52) is used again:

Example 5

> **Autumn** passed and **winter** [passed], and **in the spring the Boy** went out to play in the wood. While **he** was playing, **two rabbits** crept out from the bracken and peeped at him.
>
> And **he** found that **he** actually had hind legs! **Instead of dingy velveteen he** had brown fur, soft and shiny, and **his ears** twitched by themselves.

Matthiessen suggests "the Subject (the Boy) still seems to have some thematic value" (*ibid*: 52) as it is chosen as Theme in the subsequent clause. There seems to be no good reason to argue against the interpretation. However, taking the Subject-inclusive method as the sole criterion to analyse all the texts of the corpus is problematic for this study. Here is an example text, for which the Subject-inclusive method does not work efficiently. It is the first part of a short story included in the corpus:

Example 6

Clause no.	Theme	Rheme
1.1	*sinae-nun* While Sinae	*sinay cwungsimkalul kelumye* was walking in the centre of Seoul
1.2	 (Sinae)	. *cengsinul chalil swu epsessta.* couldn't keep her mind focused
2	[[ ]] *[[kunyeka pol swu issnun]] kes-un* What she could see	, , . *salam, kenmwul, catongchappwuniessta.* were only people, buildings and cars.
3	*kelieyse-nun* On the streets	, , . *kirum thanun naymsay, salam naymsay, komwu thanun naymsayka nassta.* smell of burning oil, smell of people, smell of burning rubber emitted.
4	 (It)	. *camsi sese cwuwilul twulle pokito elyewul cengtoyessta.* was so (bad) (for her) to stop for a while to look around.

5.1	*intoey* On the pavement	, *salamtul-i nemchi-ko,* people were overflowing and,
5.2	*chatoey* On the road	. *catongchatul-i nemchyessta.* cars were overflowing.
6	[[ ]] *[[momtwul]] kos-i* A place [[to lay her body]]	. *epsessta.* did not exists.
7	[[ ]] *[[tan myech cho tonganilato kelumul memchwuko wuwulul tallayl]] kos-i* A place [[to stop just for a few seconds to alleviate her low feelings]]	. *epsessta.* did not exist.

By analysing the Themes of the text above, we can understand that in this first part of the story, the spatial scene is being described from the main character's angle. Let us pay attention to a few particular clauses. Clauses 5.1 and 5.2 have two marked Themes (circumstances) which create camera-like effects zooming in on the payment and road respectively. It is clear that *on the payment* and *on the road* function as Theme but *people* and *cars* do not. In such cases, the Subject-inclusive method is not very helpful for translators when they decide what to start the two clauses with unless they take one level deeper analysis of different thematic weights of multiple topical Themes, which is noted by Matthiessen (1992) and Ravelli (1995). In order to investigate whether or not different choices of Theme in translation have impacts on the way in which target readers understand the text, I conducted a survey of target readers' reactions about two different English translations of the same passage. One version has chosen *on the payment* and *on the road* as Themes and the other has chosen *people* and *cars* as Themes. The survey has shown that target readers perceived the same scene significantly differently depending on what was chosen as Theme in the translations (a paper related to this survey in preparation).

From the survey results, it has become clear that this translation-driven

study needs to maintain its core focus on its investigation of the most prominent Theme at the clause level. Once translators have a good understanding of it, they can of course use the Subject-inclusive method as they need.

3.3.2. Theme marker method

A number of Korean linguists have tried to articulate the differences between two particles *un/nun* and *i/ka*. A few of them attempted to explain the differences in terms of the topic and comment. Even though the study of the particles still remains as a "headache" to Korean linguists (Choi 1986: 353), it seems to be a widely held view that *un/nun* is the topic marker. Even though Theme is not a notion that can be used with topic interchangeably, it emerged as the most useful resource to rely on at the initial stage. However, the attempt to try to use *un/nun* as Theme marker caused a few fundamental issues.

First of all, some Subjects placed at the clause-initial position come with *un/nun* but others with *i/ka*. As with *wa* in Japanese, *un/nun* is the most frequently observed at the clause initial-position, as 31% of the clauses have such Subject at the clause-initial position. However, 14.5% of the clauses have Subject plus *i/ka* at the clause-initial position. One question has risen from this observation: does this mean that the second group of clauses does not have a Theme? Secondly, there is another group of clauses that have a circumstance at the beginning of the clause (13 %). It is obvious that they play an important role when analysed from the view point of textual progression. Some of them (56%) come with *un/nun* and others (44%) do not. Thirdly, the largest group of clauses (37%) does not have an explicit Subject. In such cases, Themes are not expressed in wording but are recoverable from the context. They are invisible but certainly have a role to play textually.

3.3.3. Theme identification method of the current study

Due to the issues and problems of the two methods, the current study has chosen to explore patterns of what is put first in the clause-initial position. That is, this study will include everything up to and including the first experiential element of the clause. It is not the best choice when it comes to ease of use because of the frequent omission of Subject in Korean and because Korean, except for the verb (or verbal group) that

should come at the end of the clause, has a relatively flexible word order. For instance, when a circumstance is placed first without an explicit Subject, it is hard to decide whether it is the circumstance that has the textual importance or whether it is the implicit Subject. Considering Korean has SOV structure and the circumstance often has an adverbial form, it has been assumed that a typical structure of experiential elements in Korean may be participant^circumstance^process.

To test the assumption with texts in use, this study has surveyed frequency of i) Subject/participant ^ circumstance and ii) circumstance ^ Subject/participant in the Subject-present clauses of the corpus. As Table 1 shows, Subject/participant ^ circumstance is much more frequently used than the other case by 72% versus 28%.

	No. of clauses	Percentage
Subject-present clauses	119	
Subject/participant ^ circumstance	86	72%
Circumstance ^ Subject/participant	33	28%

Table 1: An element dominantly used at the clause-initial position

In addition, the usage of *un/nun* at the clause-initial position has been observed in both cases. When a Subject/participant is followed by a circumstance, the circumstance is seldom marked off by *un/nun* (only 2%) as shown in Table 2.

	No of clauses	Percentage
Subject/participant ^ circumstance	86	
Subject/participant ^ circumstance+*un/nun*	2	2%

Table 2: Subject/participant ^ circumstance +*un/nun*

Meanwhile 42% of circumstances are marked off by *un/nun*, when the circumstance is followed by a Subject/participant, as shown in Table 3.

	No of clauses	Percentage
Circumstance ^ Subject/participant	33	
Circumstance+*un/nun* ^ Subject/participant	14	42%

Table 3: Circumstance+*un/nun*^ Subject/participant

The statistics confirm that Subject/participant typically comes before the

circumstance. They also indicate a strong tendency for the marking off of circumstance by *un/nun* when it is assigned with textual significance as Theme. However, the tendency is not strong enough to suggest that the circumstance is always marked off by the postposition when it is chosen as Theme. Accordingly, this study has classified the circumstance marked by *un/nun* as Theme in the Subject-less clauses but also classified those without *un/nun* as Theme when they are regarded to have textual significance.

Based on all the considerations discussed above, this study has used the following Theme identification criteria in analyzing the data:

a) The Theme boundary is extended to all the elements up to and including the first experiential element. When the first element is conflated with Subject, it is categorized as unmarked Theme. In all the other cases, it is classified as marked Theme;

b) In Subject-less clauses, a circumstance that is marked off by *un/nun* is categorized as marked Theme;

c) When Subject-less clauses do not have a circumstance that is not marked off by *un/nun*, an implicit Subject/participant is generally regarded as having textual significance. However, a circumstance that is not marked off by *un/nun* may also be analyzed as Theme when it is seen as having an important textual role to play within the text.

4. Corpus

The corpus used in this study comprises 541 clauses from 17 short texts construing three different text types. This study initially started with four text types, expounding, reporting, recreating and exploring, which are dominant text types of written language according to Jean Ure's text typology. However, the final corpus does not include the exploring texts. A main reason for the exclusion is that, in those texts, textual metafunction issues are too closely intertwined with interpersonal metafunction ones. Exploring the interpersonal metafunction is beyond the scope of this study. All the texts in the present study deploy declarative clauses only.

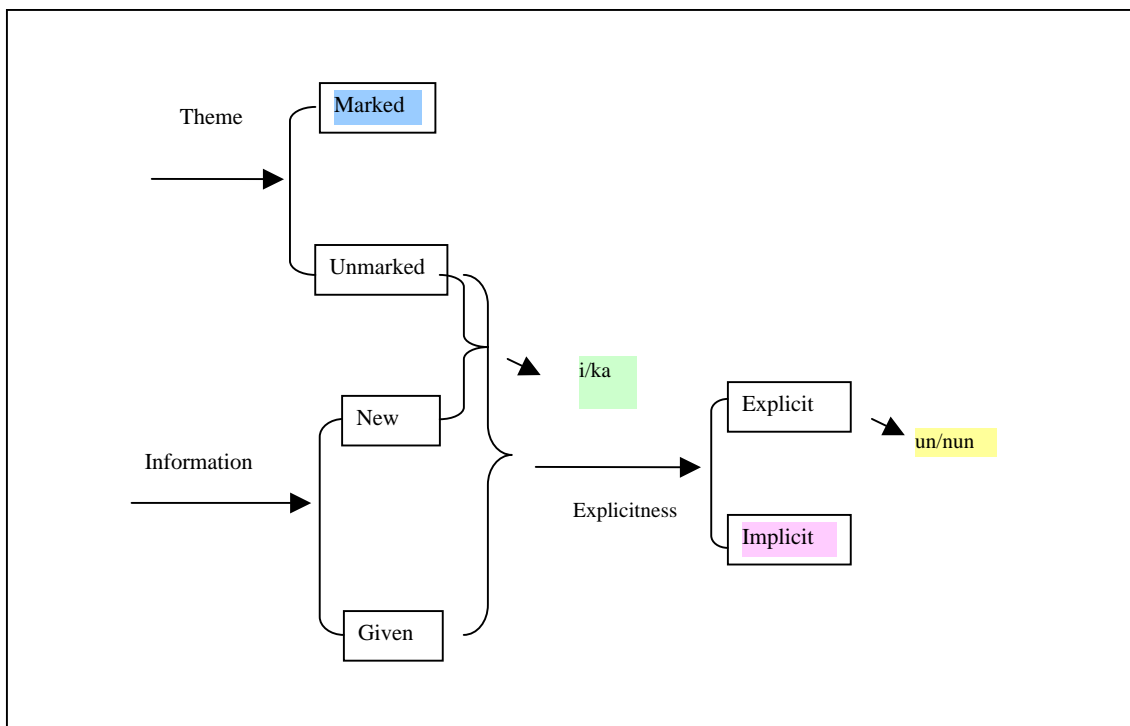| Text types	No. of Texts	No. of Clause complexes	No. of Clauses
Expounding	7	119	212
Reporting	7	98	168
Recreating	3	118	161
Total	17	335	541

Table 3: Statistics by text type

There were a few considerations taken for the selection of the texts. Firstly, the main sources of the texts are textbooks, newspapers, and published books. The reasons are i) one cannot assume that there is no discrepancy of quality in written texts and ii) it seems reasonable to assume that newspapers and published books, including textbooks, are among those which are generally believed to carry high quality texts. Secondly, the selected recreating texts have a simplistic writing style and, as such, deploy a minimum degree of complexity of logical relations. This enables maximum concentration on textual metafunction issues and maximum avoidance of issues related to other metafunctional issues. Thirdly, since the function of expounding texts is to explain a particular item, which is naturally chosen as Theme, such texts enable efficient observation of Theme patterns.

5. A provisional model of the systme of THEME of Korean

A provisional model of the system of THEME in Korean is presented in Figure 1. The model is an outcome of the analysis of the texts collected in the corpus based on the methodological principles discussed above:

Figure 1: A provisional model of the system of THEME of Korean

As this paper's main focus is on methodological issues, I will brifly touch on a few major features of the model rather than discussing it in detail. The system of THEME of Korean works very closely with the system of INFORMATION and the relationship between the two systems is realized by the postpositions, *un/nun* and *i/ka*. When an unmarked Theme is treated as newsworthy information (New), it is marked off by *i/ka*. When an unmarked Theme is treated as given or known information (Given), it is marked off by *un/nun*. It is important to stress that the New and Given status is interpreted as a status assigned by the writer/speaker rather than as something that can be judged objectively. In other words, even when an item has been mentioned earlier and therefore it is no longer new information, it can still be treated as New when the writer/speaker wants to make it a newsworthy item.

One other aspect that is worthwhile to note is concerned with the

dominant portion of implict Theme. In this model, it is included as a sub-system called EXPLICITINESS in the system of Theme of Korean.

The marked Theme is realized by placing a Complement/participant or circumstance at the clause-initial position. It may be marked off by *un/nun* but it is not a compulsory requirement.

6. Concluding remarks

As mentioned in the introduction section, this paper is an interim report of a working research project to explore the textual metafunction of Korean, having the specific purpose of using the knowledge for translation studies. This paper has discussed various methodological issues of the present study and has sketched out a provisional model designed on the basis of the analysis of the Korean text corpus. Although languages may have different system networks from one another and inter-relations within the networks may vary, earlier descriptions of other languages are great resources for exploring a new language. This is evidenced in the present study by the substantial contributions from existing English and Japanese descriptions. I hope that the present study as well as future attempts to describe other languages will, in turn, contribute to enhancing our understanding about language, the most complicated but the most attractive human semiotic system.

REFERENCES

BERRY, M. 1995. Thematic options and success in writing. In: Mohsen Ghadessy. Ed. *Thematic Development in English Texts*. London and New York: Pinter.

_____. 1996. What is Theme? A(nother) personal view. In: Margaret Berry, Christopher Butler, Robin Fawcett and Guowen Huang. Eds. *Meaning and form: systemic functional interpretations*. Norwood: Ablex Publishing.

BUTT, D., FAHEY, R., FEEZ, S., SPINKS, S., and YALLOP, C. Eds. 2000. *Using Functional Grammar*. Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research.

CHOI, S. 1986. Solving the problem of the Korean topic/subject particles nun and ka: a paradigm of a text analysis. *Linguistics* 24: 351-369.

DAVIES, F. 1988. Reading between the lines: thematic choice as a

device for presenting writer viewpoint in academic discourse. *Especialist* 9:173-200.

DAVIES, F. 1994. From writer roles to elements of text: interactive, organizational and topical. In: Leila Barbara and Mike Scott. Eds. *Reflections on language learning*, 170-183. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

HALLIDAY, M. A. K. 1994. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.

HALLIDAY, M. A. K., and Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.

KIM, M. forthcoming. Translation error analysis: A systemic functional grammar approach. In: Dorothy Kenny and Kyongjoo Ryou. Eds. *Across Boundaries:International Perspectives on Translation Studies*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

LEE, H. 1992. *Thema-Rhema-Struckturen im Deutschen und Koreanischen*. PhD Thesis, Freie Universität in Berlin.

_____. 1994. *Kwukeuy 'cwuceypwu/selmyengpwu' kwuco yenkwu* (A Study on the Theme/Rheme structure). *Kwukehak* 24(1):319-351.

_____. 2004. The principle of text structure through the analysis of thematic progression. *Text Linguistics* 17:59-94.

MARTIN, J. R., MATTHIESSEN, C. M. I. M., and PAINTER, C. 1997. *Working with Functional Grammar*. London, New York, Sydney, Auckland: Arnold.

MATTHIESSEN, C. M. I. M. 1992. Interpreting the textual metafunction. In: Martin Davies and Louise Ravelli. Eds. *Advances in Systemic Linguistics: Recent theory and practice*. London: Frances Printer.

RAVELLI, L. 1995. Metafunctional Interaction from a Dynamic Perspective: Implications for the Description of Theme. In: Ruqaiya Hasan and Peter H. Fries. Eds. *On Subject and Theme*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

SE, C. 1990. *Kwuke mwunpepuy yenkwu* (Study of Korean Grammar*).* Seoul: Hankwuk Mwunhwasa.

SOHN, H. 1999. *The Korean Language*. London: Cambridge University Press.

TERUYA, K. forthcoming. *A Systemic Functional Grammar of Japanese*. London and New York: Continuum.

THOMSON, E. A. 2005. Theme unit analysis. *Functions of Language* 12(2):151-179.