From Negative Polarity to Free Choice: Shifting Interpretations of Korean Null Arguments

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Introduction

There has been considerable debate in recent literature on the syntactic status of null arguments in various languages, including Korean:[1]

(1) a. John-un caki-uy chayk-ul ilk-ci anh-nun-ta.
John-TOP self-GEN book-ACC read NEG-PRES-D
'John doesn't read his own books.'

b. Mary-to _____ ilk-ci anh-nun-ta.
Mary-also read NEG-PRES-D
'Mary doesn't either.'

Notably, the null object in (1b) allows a *sloppy reading*, in which it is interpreted as 'Mary's book'. Data similar to (1) have been used as counterevidence against analyzing null arguments as covert pronouns or bare nouns (Hoji, 1998; Ahn & Cho, 2011, 2020), as their overt counterparts allow only *strict* and *non-existential* readings, respectively (cf. Saito, 2007; Funakoshi, 2016).

(1) b'. Mary-to kukes-ul ilk-ci anh-nun-ta.
Mary-also it-ACC read NEG-PRES-D
'Mary doesn't read it, either.'

b". Mary-to chayk-ul ilk-ci anh-nun-ta.
Mary-also book-ACC read NEG-PRES-D
'Mary doesn't read books, either.'

An alternative analysis that has gained support in the literature holds that null arguments are derived from Argument Ellipsis (AE) (Saito, 2007; Takahashi, 2008; Sakamoto, 2018; Tanaka, 2023, *inter alia*). Recent studies have sought to clarify the precise syntactic mechanism underlying AE, proposing analyses such as *external merge after transfer* (Landau, 2023, 2025), *topic deletion* (Mizuno, 2025), *LF-copying of a minimal head noun* (Park & Lee, 2025), etc.

This study aims to contribute to this debate by examining these proposals against a specific set of data drawn from Korean, namely, those involving the polarity-sensitive expression, *etten N-to*. I show that *etten N-to*, interpreted as a Negative Polarity Item (NPI) in the antecedent clause, can be readily interpreted as a Free Choice Item (FCI) in the elliptical clause — and *vice versa*. I analyze this puzzling phenomenon within the *alternatives-&-exhaustification* framework (cf. Chierchia, 2013, *inter alia*), which treats NPIs and FCIs uniformly.

Alternatives & Exhaustification

The expression *etten N-to* is formed by combining the indefinite *etten* 'a/some', a head noun, and the focus particle *to* 'even/also'. Its distribution resembles that of English *any*; it is ungrammatical in affirmative episodic contexts (2a) but acceptable in negative (2b) and modal environments (2c).[2]

(2)   a. *John-un *etten chayk-to*   ilk-ess-ta.
            John-TOP some book-even read-PST-D
       b. John-un *etten chayk-to*   ilk-ci anh-ass-ta.
            John-TOP some book-even read NEG-PST-D
            'John didn't read any book.'
            Semantics: $\neg\exists x \in D : read(John,x)$ (NPI)
       c. John-un *etten chayk-to*   ilk-ul swu iss-ta.
            John-TOP some book-even read way exist-D
            'John can read any book.'
            Semantics: $\forall x \in D : \Diamond read(John,x)$ (FCI)

Chierchia (2013), building on prior work by Kadmon & Landman (1993), Lahiri (1998), among others, offers a unified account of NPIs and FCIs. They are simple indefinites, just like *a* or *some*, except that they generate alternatives that must be *obligatorily* exhaustified. Chierchia (2013) formalizes this requirement in terms of syntactic agreement between the exhaustification operator EXH and NPI/FCI.

(3)   EXH [. . . *etten N-to* . . .]
                   └──────────┘
                      Agree

Under the assumption that *etten N-to* gives rise to both scalar and pre-exhaustified domain alternatives (cf. Fox, 2007), its semantics and distribution follow straightforwardly. In affirmative episodic contexts, exhaustification via EXH yields a semantic contradiction; in negative contexts, it applies vacuously; and in modal contexts, it results in strengthening, i.e. the FC effect.[3] This is illustrated in (4).

(4)   a. EXH $[\exists x \in D : read(John,x)] = \bot$
       b. EXH $[\neg\exists x \in D : read(John,x)] = \neg\exists x \in D : read(John,x)$
       c. EXH $[\Diamond\exists x \in D : read(John,x)] = \forall x \in D : \Diamond read(John,x)$

Before moving on, it is also important to note that EXH can appear independently of the NPI/FCI. For example, a regular indefinite under the scope of modal may give rise to an FC effect.

(5)   You may take a book.
       LF: EXH $[\Diamond\exists x \in D : take(you,x)] = \forall x \in D : \Diamond take(you,x)$

[2] It should be noted that the distribution of *etten N-to* and English *any* are not entirely the same. For instance, while *any* exhibits the distribution of a weak NPI — licensed in a wide range of downward-entailing environments — *etten N-to* patterns as a strong NPI — licensed only in anti-additive contexts (cf. Gajewski, 2011). This difference, however, does not bear on the data and analysis presented in this study.

[3] For reasons of space, I omit the derivation of each case shown in (4); interested readers are referred to Chierchia (2013). What matters for our purposes is that *etten N-to* is underlyingly a simple indefinite, and that both its NPI and FCI uses are accounted for by a uniform mechanism, namely, EXH.

Data

In this section, I present Korean data where *etten N-to* appears in the antecedent clause and its corresponding element is elided in the following clause. Judgments on acceptability and interpretation of the elliptical clause were collected from five native Korean speakers, including myself. For the four speakers other than myself, judgments were obtained through informal, individual elicitation.

Speakers were asked to judge the acceptability of the elliptical clause and indicate whether the elided material was interpreted existentially or universally. Only interpretations from grammatical judgments are reported; for example, (∃: 2, ∀: 2, *: 1) means two speakers favored an existential reading, two a universal reading, and one judged the sentence ungrammatical.

NPI in the Antecedent Clause

We begin with cases where *etten chayk-to* is interpreted as an NPI in the antecedent clause:

(6)   John-un   etten chayk-to   ilk-ci anh-ass-ta.
      John-TOP some book-even read NEG-PST-D
      'John didn't read any book.'

    a.   Mary-nun _____ ilk-ess-ta.
           Mary-TOP   read-PST-D
           'Mary read.' (∃: 4, *: 1)

    b.   Mary-to   _____ ilk-ci anh-ass-ta.
           Mary-also   read NEG-PST-D
           'Mary didn't read, either.' (¬∃: 5)

    c.   Mary-nun _____ ilk-ul swu iss-ta.
           Mary-TOP   read way exist-D
           'Mary can read.' (∀: 4, *: 1)

    d.   Kulena John-un   _____ ilk-ul swu iss-ta.
           but   John-TOP   read way exist-D
           'But John can read.' (∀: 5)

We observe a strong preference for interpreting the elided object existentially in episodic contexts — both affirmative (6a) and negative (6b) — and universally in modal contexts (6c) & (6d). While the grammaticality of (6a) is unexpected if, for instance, we assume that *etten chayk-to* has undergone ellipsis, speakers may have instead interpreted the sentence existentially by positing a simple indefinite.[4] It is noteworthy that the majority of speakers interpreted the elided material universally in modal, i.e. FC, contexts. The most straightforward analysis in this case would be AE of *etten chayk-to*.

[4] Similar patterns are observed with English VP ellipsis, as in "John didn't read any book, but Mary did." Such examples have traditionally been analyzed as involving *some* ("but Mary did ~~read some~~ book.") in the literature.

FCI in the Antecedent Clause

Below are cases where *etten chayk-to* is interpreted as an FCI in the antecedent clause:

(7) John-un   etten chayk-to   ilk-ul swu iss-ta.
    John-TOP some book-even read   way exist-D
    'John can read any book.'

   a. Mary-nun _____ ilk-ess-ta.
      Mary-TOP   read-PST-D
      'Mary read.' (∃: 2, ∀: 2, *: 1)

   b. Mary-nun _____ ilk-ci anh-ass-ta.
      Mary-TOP   read NEG-PST-D
      'Mary didn't read.' (¬∃: 3, *: 2)

   c. Kulena John-un _____ ilk-ci anh-ass-ta.
      but   John-TOP   read NEG-PST-D
      'But John didn't read.' (¬∃: 5)

   d. Mary-to _____ ilk-ul swu iss-ta.
      Mary-also   read way exist-D
      'Mary can also read.' (∀: 5)

Native speaker judgments seem extremely unclear when the elliptical clause is affirmative episodic (7a). Importantly, however, the uncertainty concerns not the sentence's acceptability but its interpretation: while most speakers found the sentence grammatical[5], they varied in how they interpreted its quantificational force. On the other hand, most speakers interpreted the elided material existentially in negative contexts (7b) & (7c) and universally in the modal context (7d).

Taking stock, we observe the following generalizations: (i) elliptical clauses in affirmative episodic contexts show considerable inter-speaker variation in interpretation; (ii) NPI > NPI and FCI > FCI cases yield clear and consistent judgments; and (iii) cross pairings (NPI > FCI and FCI > NPI) are readily recoverable — though more robust when the subjects of the antecedent and elliptical clauses are identical. We now turn to the analysis of these patterns.

Analysis & Discussion

Under the simple assumption that AE involves either PF-deletion or LF-copying of the entire NP, *etten N-to*, generalizations (ii) and (iii) are explained straightforwardly. This is because the presence of *etten N-to* triggers EXH, which in turn forces an existential interpretation in negative contexts (NPI use: ¬∃) and a universal interpretation in modal contexts (FCI use: ∀◊). I illustrate this below with the NPI > FCI case:

[5] The speaker who judged (7a) ungrammatical is the same one who rejected (6a). This speaker may have interpreted the ellipsis site by strictly reconstructing its linguistic antecedent, i.e. *etten chayk-to*.

(8)   NPI > FCI

 a. John-un etten chayk-to ilk-ci anh-ass-ta.
   John-TOP some book-even read NEG-PST-D
   'John didn't read any book.'

 LF: EXH [¬∃x ∈ D : read(John,x)]

 Semantics: ¬∃x ∈ D : read(John,x)

 b. Kulena John-un ~~etten chayk-to~~ ilk-ul swu iss-ta.
   but   John-TOP   read way exist-D
   'But John can read.'

 LF: EXH [◇∃x ∈ D : read(John,x)]

 Semantics: ∀x ∈ D : ◇read(John,x)

However, this analysis is immediately challenged by generalization (i): elliptical clauses in affirmative episodic contexts can nevertheless be judged grammatical. This is unexpected given the ungrammaticality of (2a). It suggests that speakers may have accessed an alternative strategy — namely, positing an indefinite *pro* in place of the elided material:

(9) Mary-nun *pro* ilk-ess-ta.
   Mary-TOP read-PST-D
   'Mary read *pro*.'

What bearing do these data have on recent proposals such as Landau (2023, 2025), Mizuno (2025) and Park & Lee (2025)? Landau (2023, 2025) argues that elided arguments must be of type *e*. The data presented in this study may serve as counterevidence to his claim. This is because the FC effect observed in elliptical clauses — whether the elided material is *etten N-to* or a simple indefinite — arises only if the elided material is a genuine quantificational expression.[6,7]

 Mizuno (2025) proposes that AE involves movement of the argument to a topic position, followed by its deletion. His argument is based on the generalization that, in Japanese, AE is blocked when the ellipsis site is c-commanded by a *wh*-phrase. However, AE of *etten chayk-to* was judged grammatical even when the ellipsis site was c-commanded by the *wh*-subject *nwuka* 'who'.

(10) a. Nwuka etten chayk-to ilk-ci anh-ass-e?
    who some book-even read NEG-PST-Q
    'Who didn't read any book?'

  b. Pantaylo, nwuka ____ ilk-ul swu iss-e?
    conversely who read way exist-Q
    'Conversely, who can read?' (∃: 3, ∀: 2)

Park & Lee's (2025) proposal offers a new perspective on the present data. They argue that AE involves LF-copying of a minimal head

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[6] FC effects can be understood as a type of semantic strengthening where an existential under the scope of a modal (◇∃) is interpreted as a universal scoping over the modal (∀◇). This analysis does not extend to *e*-type elements, as they cannot participate in scope interactions with modals.

[7] However, as discussed in Landau (2025), NPI and FCI interpretations in elliptical clauses may be analyzed in terms of choice functions.

noun. Interestingly, when a minimal head noun is placed in the ellipsis site in the data above, similar interpretations appear to emerge.[8]

(11) a. Mary-nun chayk-ul   ilk-ess-ta.
       Mary-TOP book-ACC read-PST-D
       'Mary read book(s).' ($\exists$)

    b. Mary-nun chayk-ul   ilk-ci anh-ass-ta.
       Mary-TOP book-ACC read NEG-PST-D
       'Mary didn't read book(s).' ($\neg\exists$)

    c. Mary-nun chayk-ul   ilk-ul swu iss-ta.
       Mary-TOP book-ACC read way exist-D
       'Mary can read book(s).' ($\forall\Diamond$)

While this pattern may be attributed to a generic interpretation of bare nouns, it remains poorly understood. What is striking is its close alignment with the ellipsis data. Yet this analysis faces the same challenge noted earlier: it predicts non-existential readings even in cases where the ellipsis data yield sloppy readings. Park & Lee (2025) suggest that LF-copied minimal head nouns are pragmatically enriched, though the precise mechanism behind this enrichment remains to be clarified.

Conclusion

In this study, I presented novel Korean data on null arguments involving the polarity-sensitive expression *etten N-to*. While somewhat inconclusive, the findings suggest a twofold approach to null arguments — AE and indefinite *pro* — and call for a reevaluation of recent proposals, particularly those of Landau (2023, 2025) and Mizuno (2025). Data involving NPIs and FCIs offer a valuable testing ground for ongoing debates on null arguments, especially concerning the elidability of genuine quantificational expressions. Future work may extend this line of inquiry to items such as *amwu N-to* and *nwukwu-to*, which exhibit distinct properties from *etten N-to*.

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