Animacy hierarchy and argument hierarchy in conflict:
Constraints on Object-Topicalization in Korean

A central issue in contemporary language typology is the impact of different hierarchical concepts of syntactic properties and the interaction between them: (a) the hierarchy of syntactic functions (subject > object), (b) the topicality hierarchy (topic > non-topic), and (c) the animacy hierarchy (animate > inanimate). Optimal constructions result from the harmonic alignment of these hierarchies: consider a sentence in which the subject is animate and topical and the object is inanimate and non-topical. Conflicts between these hierarchies result in constructions that are less typical: consider a sentence with an inanimate and non-topical subject. The world’s languages display several constraints that ban suboptimal constructions of this type, but the kind of constraints and the range of constructions that are banned are highly language specific: hence, it is a task of language description to identify the exact locus of the constraint in the respective object language and the range of constructions that are excluded.

In my paper, I discuss primary data from Korean elicited with native speakers. The relevance of Korean for the typological problem at issue is that (a) it exemplifies a well delimited constraint of this type and (b) that it provides evidence for a possible functional reason for such a constraint in a particular grammar, namely paradigmatic exclusion.

Korean experiencer object verbs typically occur in the word order ‘subject-object-V’. As generally holds for transitive clauses in this language, it is possible to topicalize the undergoer constituent which results in the ‘object-subject-V’ order, as exemplified in (1) and (2). However, when the object outranks the subject in the animacy hierarchy, as exemplified in (3), inanimate subject & animate object, and in (4), 3.SG subject & 1.SG object, the construction of object topicalization is ungrammatical (notice that the constructions that correspond to (3) and (4) without object topicalization are grammatical).

My empirical study shows that there are three factors that influence the topicalization of object constituents in Korean:

A. The first factor is the relative position of the arguments on the animacy hierarchy, as exemplified through the minimal pairs (1) vs. (3) and (2) vs. (4).

B. The second factor is the case marking of the fronted argument. It will be shown that the constraint applies to case-ambiguous topicalized arguments. When the argument bears both a topic marker and a case suffix (as in the case of dative arguments), then there is no restriction on animacy.

C. The third factor is the availability of alternative constructions that may potentially encode the same situation. Examples (1) to (4) exemplify a causative experiencer object verb. Parallel to this paradigm, Korean also displays basic stative experiencer-oriented verbs that may be used with topicalized experiencers. (A sentence completion task performed by eight native speakers provides evidence that speakers choose the basic stative verbs with a topicalized experiencer in relevant contexts.)

Factor A is predictable from the known cross-linguistic preferences: The ungrammatical construction instantiates a case of conflict between the animacy hierarchy, the argument hierarchy and the topicality hierarchy. Without B and C, however, the animacy constraint would look as a random instantiation of universal preferences. Factors B and C elucidate the functional delimitation of the constraint at issue. Factor B shows that there is some interaction with ambiguity: it does not apply to non-ambiguous NPs. Factor C shows that the application of the constraint is motivated through semantic blocking. Since an alternative construction is available for the topicalization of the argument in question, the conflicting constellation does not occur.
(1) haengin-➔n kunin-i kipp➔-ke haess-ta
pedestrian-TOP soldier-NOM happy-ADVR do:CMPL-DECL
‘As for the pedestrian, the soldier made him happy.’

(2) haengin-➔n nae-ka kipp➔-ke haess-ta
pedestrian-TOP 1.SG-NOM please-ADVR do:CMPL-DECL
‘As for the pedestrian, I made him happy.’

(3) *haengin-➔n kamera-ka kipp➔-ke haess-ta.
pedestrian-TOP camera-NOM happy-ADVR do:CMPL-DECL
int.: ‘As for the pedestrian, the camera made him happy.’

(4) *na-n➔n kunin-i kipp➔-ke haess-ta.
1.SG-TOP soldier-NOM happy-ADVR do:CMPL-DECL
int.: ‘As for me, the soldier made me happy.’