

## THE USE OF THE ENGLISH MEDIO-PASSIVE AND LANGUAGE TRANSFER<sup>1)</sup>

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Little attention has been paid to the use of the English medio-passive in foreign/second language acquisition. The medio-passive is defined as: a verb having an active form with a passive meaning (e.g., *A window broke suddenly*). Givon(1993:75) defines the medio-passive as involving the following properties:

- (1) a. The verb involved is inherently a *transitive* verb.
- b. The grammatical subject is a *patient*.
- c. There is no clearly discernible *responsible agent*.
- d. While a discernible agent is absent, the construction is not used primarily as an *agent-demoting* device.

Such criteria are useful for distinguishing the intermediate voice from the opposition of the active and passive sentences:

- (2) a. That store sells the book. (Active)
- b. The book sells very well. (Medio-passive)
- c. The book is sold at that store. (Passive)

Properties (1a) and (1b) differentiate the medio-passive from the active form in that, in the active sentence, the verb is *explicitly* (rather than merely *inherently*) transitive, and the grammatical subject is typically an *agent*. Criteria (1c) and (1d) differentiate the medio-passive from the passive form in that the passive sentence has a responsible agent and is used as an agent-demotion device.

Interestingly, the English medio-passive (2b) and canonical passive (2c) are expressed by one form in Korean. As shown in the following, the Korean verb forms in (2b') and (2c') are exactly the same:

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(2b') Ku chayk-un maywu cal phal-li-nta.  
 the book-TOP<sup>3)</sup> very well sell-PASS-DE

'The book sells very well.'

(2c') Ku chayk-un ku kakey-eyse phal-li-nta.  
 the book-TOP the store-at sell-PASS-DE

'The book is sold at that store.'

Korean has no construction exactly corresponding to the English medio-passive. Thus, the English medio-passive is, in most cases, expressed by the canonical passive form in Korean, as in (3a) below. There are only a few cases (e.g. *develop*, *increase*) where the English medio-passive is expressed by the active form in Korean, as in (3b):

(3) a. Nalssi-ka cacu pakku-i-nta.  
 weather-SM often change-PASS-PRES

'The weather changes often.'

b. Hankwuk-un kupsoktolo palcenhayssta.  
 Korea-TOP rapidly developed.

'Korea has developed rapidly.'

In (a) the verb *pakku-i-nta* 'is changed' has the passive form, while in (b) the verb *palcenhayssta* 'developed' has the active form (medio-passive form).

The difference between the native language forms and target language forms leads one to hypothesize that Korean students may be influenced by the native language when they use the target language. This paper aims to test such a hypothesis by examining how Korean learners use the English medio-passive. Korean learners are likely to have difficulty using the active forms which seem to have passive meanings from the Korean point of view.

## METHOD

A translation task was conducted that involved a controlled writing: translating Korean passages which include some particular passive forms into English.

The data were obtained from college students in Korea, who were English majors or minors, and who were taking English as an elective: English literature

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3) Abbreviations used in this paper: TOP=Topic marker; SM=Subject marker; OM=Object marker; PASS=Passive marker; PRES=Present tense marker; PAST=Past tense marker; DE=Declarative sentence marker

students at Yeungnam University and at Dongguk University.

Two levels of proficiency were considered: the sophomore and junior levels. The freshman level was not considered because these students are not proficient enough to feel free to use passive sentences in their compositions. The senior level was not considered because many seniors do not usually take many classes. The basic reason for the division of the proficiency levels was based on the assumption that the students at the different levels may show a different proficiency for using the medio-passive.

The total number of informants was 186 students: 97 sophomores and 89 juniors. It was generally assumed that the informants would have a great deal of knowledge of English grammar since they had been studying English as a foreign language since middle school in Korea, under the grammar-translation method.

Three passages written in Korean were used containing many Korean passives that would best be translated as medio-passives in English. The informants were asked to translate the Korean passages into English. The three passages were written in such a way that the informants could not determine what the researcher wanted to examine. The assignment for the translation task is provided below:

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다음을 영작하시오 (직역하시오)

(어려운 단어는 제시되어 있으니, 사전을 사용하지 마시오.)

1. 미스터 김은 10 년만에 한국을 방문했다. 그의 마지막 방문 이후, 계절이 수없이 바뀌었다. 한국은 급속히 (rapidly) 발전했고, 많은 것들이 바뀌었다. 대도시에는 많은 고층건물들이 생겼고, 거리도 복잡했다. 유패션도 또한 바뀌었다. 인구도 급격히 증가했으며, 이에 따라 정부는 21세기가 시작되기 전에, 출생률(birth rates)을 제한하려고 노력하고 있다.
2. 어제는 매우 더웠다. 많은 사람들이 더위를 피하기 위해 산으로 바다로 갔다. 많은 가게가 일찍이 닫혔다. 빨랫줄(clothlines)에 걸리어 있는 빨래(laundry)가 매우 빨리 말랐다. 나의 이웃은 차 창문이 갑자기 깨져서 놀랐다. 그리고, 내 동생의 풍선이 갑자기 터져서(burst) 그를 놀라게 했다. 더위로 아이스크림이 매우 잘 팔렸다. 모든 이들이 곧 시원해지기를 갈망한다.
3. 어제 고구마(sweet potatoes) 몇 개를 구워 먹었다(bake). 고구마가 매우 커서, 엄마가 말씀하시기를, "열을 더 높이면 더 빨리 굽힐 것이다." 라고 하셨다. 엄마가 말씀하신 대로 했다. 그러나, 오븐에 너무 오래 두어서 타버렸다.

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Literal translations of the above passages are provided below:

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Put the following passages into English (direct translation)  
(Since difficult vocabulary is provided, do NOT use a dictionary.)

1. Mr. Kim is visiting Korea after a 10 year absence. Since his last visit, the seasons have been changed many times. Korea has developed rapidly, and many things have been changed. In the big cities, there are more tall buildings, and the streets are crowded. Clothing fashions have also been changed. Since the population has increased tremendously, the government is trying to control the birth rates, before the 21st century is begun.

2. It was very hot yesterday. A lot of people went to the mountains and beaches to avoid the heat. A lot of shops were closed early. Laundry being hung on clothlines dried really quickly. My neighbor was surprised when his car window was broken suddenly. My brother's balloon was burst suddenly and scared him. Ice cream was sold very well. Everyone hopes that it will get cooler soon.

3. Yesterday, I decided to bake some sweet potatoes. They were very big potatoes, so mom said, "If you turn the heat up, they will be baked faster." I did what she said, but I left the potatoes in the oven too long. Unfortunately, they burned.

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The first passage is about changes in Korea. The second passage is about the effects of hot weather. The last passage is about a cooking episode. As shown in the underlined parts of the literal English translations, Korean uses the canonical passive<sup>4)</sup> where the medio-passive should be used in English, except for two cases: *develop* and *increase*. For these two verbs, Korean uses the active forms (medio-passive forms). The items which were examined in each passage are listed below:

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4) The term "canonical passive" is used to differentiate it from the medio-passive.

	<u>Korean</u>	<u>English</u>
<u>Passage 1</u>	<i>pakku-i-essta</i> (바뀌었다) 'have been changed'	have changed
	<i>palcenhayssta</i> (발전했다) 'have developed'	have developed
	<i>pakku-i-essta</i> (바뀌었다) 'have been changed'	have changed
	<i>pakku-i-essta</i> (바뀌었다) 'have been changed'	have changed
	<i>cungkahayssta</i> (증가했다) 'have increased'	have increased
	<i>sicak-toy-ta</i> (시작되다) 'is begun'	begins
<u>Passage 2</u>	<i>tat-hi-essta</i> (닫혀있다) 'was closed'	closed
	<i>kel-li-eissta</i> (걸리어있다) 'being hung'	hanging
	<i>kkay-ci-essta</i> (깨지었다) 'was broken'	broke
	<i>the-ci-essta</i> (터지었다) 'was burst'	burst
	<i>phal-li-essta</i> (팔리었다) 'was sold'	sold
<u>Passage 3</u>	<i>kup-hi-ta</i> (굽히다) 'be baked'	bake

Thus, a total of 12 items was examined. This task was conducted in class in an effort to prevent the students from using a dictionary.

All forms of either the canonical passive or the medio-passive were extracted and then the cases which were correctly used (that is, the cases where the medio-passive was used) were calculated out of the total of both canonical passives and medio-passives.

However, the informants did not always use the intended verbs in forming the medio-passive. For example, some informants chose irrelevant patterns where the medio-passive verbs were intended:

- (4) (Intended) Since his last visit, the seasons have changed many times.  
 (Actually used) Many years had passed after his last visit. (Junior #12)
- (5) (Intended) ....the government is trying to control the birth rates, before the 21th century begins  
 (Actually used) ...government was trying to restrict birth rates before beginning of 21th century. (Junior #30)
- (6) (Intended) Laundry hanging on clotheslines dried really quickly.  
 (Actually used) Laundry ∅ on clotheslines dried so early. (Sophomore #50)

In example (4) the medio-passive verb, change, was intended, but the informant used pass, which has nothing to do with the intended medio-passive. In example

(5) the informant used the noun beginning rather than a verb begin. In example (6) the informant simply avoided the intended medio-passive verb, hang. Since cases like these have nothing to do with the intended medio-passive verbs, they were neither considered nor counted as the medio-passive test items.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A total of 1663 verbs were elicited and examined. I sorted those verbs out and determined whether the verbs form the medio-passive (e.g., *change*) or the canonical passive (e.g., *is changed*).

Consider some informants' use of the medio-passive. Compare the original translation task paragraph with a learner's actual use of the medio-passive:

### (7) original translation task paragraph

미스터 김-은 10 년만에 한국-을 방문했다.

Mr. Kim-TOP after a 10 year absence Korea-OM visited

그의 마지막 방문 이후, 계절-이 수없이 바-뀌-었다.

his last visit-since, seasons-SM many times change-PASS-PAST

한국-은 급속히 발전-했-고, 많은 것들-이 바-뀌-었다.

Korea-TOP rapidly develop-PAST-and, many things-SM change-PASS-PAST

대도시-에는 많은 고층건물들-이 생겼-고, 거리-도 복잡-했다.

big city-in many tall buildings-SM existed-and street-too crowded-PAST

옷패션도 또한 바-뀌-었다. 인구-도 급격히 증가-했-으며,

fashion too change-PASS-PAST population-too rapidly increase-PAST-and

이에 따라 정부는 21세기-가 시작-되-기 전에,

therefore government 21 century-SM begin-PASS-before

출생률-을 제한하려-고 노력하고 있다.

birth rates-OM control-to is trying

**Literal translation:** 'Mr. Kim is visiting Korea after a 10 year absence. Since his last visit, the seasons have been changed many times. Korea has developed rapidly, and many things have been changed. In the big cities, there are more tall

buildings, and the streets are crowded. Clothing fashions have also been changed. Since the population has increased tremendously, the government is trying to control the birth rates, before the 21st century is begun.'

(7') a student's actual use

Mr. Kim visited Korea before ten years. After his last visit, seasons were changed very many. Korea was developed rapidly and many of thing was changed. High-building was built in big-city and street was crowded. Cloth-fashion was changed also and population was increased, so government is trying to prohibit birth rates before 21 century begin.

(Sophomore #18)

(8) original translation task paragraph

어제는 매우 더웠다. 많은 사람들-이 더위-를 피하기-위해  
yesterday very hot many people-SM heat-OM avoid-to

산-로 바다-로 갔다. 많은 가게-가 일찍이 닫-히-었다.  
mt.-to beaches-to went many shops-SM early close-PASS-PAST

빨랫줄-에 걸-리-어 있는 빨래-가 매우 빨리 말랐다.  
clothlines-on hang-PASS-is laundry-SM very fast dried

나의 이웃-은 차 창문-이 갑자기 깨-져-서 놀랐다.  
my neighbor-SM car window-SM suddenly break-PASS-because surprised

그리고, 내 동생의 풍선-이 갑자기 터-져-서  
and my brother's balloon-SM suddenly burst-PASS-because

그를 놀라게 했다. 더위-로 아이스크림-이 매우 잘 팔-리-었다.  
him scared heat-because of ice cream-SM very well sell-PASS-PAST

모든 이들-이 곧 시원해지기를 갈망한다.  
Everyone-SM soon cooler hope

**Literal translation:** 'It was very hot yesterday. A lot of people went to the mountains and beaches to avoid the heat. A lot of shops were closed early. Laundry being hung on clothlines dried really quickly. My neighbor was surprised

when his car window was broken suddenly. My brother's balloon was burst suddenly and scared him. Ice cream was sold very well. Everyone hopes that it will get cooler soon.'

(8') a student's actual use

It was very hot yesterday. So many people went to the mountains or the sea for the purpose of averting the hot weather. Plenty of stores were closed early. The laundry hanging on the clothlines became dry very rapidly. My neighbour was surprised because the window of his car broke into pieces all of a sudden and my brother's balloon burst suddenly made him surprised. The ice creams were sold very well due to the hot weather. All of the neighbours are hankering for being chill soon.

(Junior #19)

In the above two paragraphs the medio-passive should be used for all the underlined verbs to be correct. The canonical passive is not appropriate since there is no clear or acceptable agent in the situations described.

Example (7') is the translation task performed by informant, sophomore #18. The learner correctly used begin<sup>5)</sup>, but in every other case incorrectly used canonical passives where medio-passives should be used. This learner clearly does not know how to use the medio-passive.

Example (8') is the translation task performed by informant, junior #19. This informant correctly used the medio-passive of hanging, broke, and burst<sup>6)</sup>. However, the informant wrongly used the cases of were closed and were sold, since the medio-passive forms are supposed to be used instead of the canonical passives. This informant seems to have some knowledge of when to use the medio-passive, but not clearly and consistently.

The results of the use of the medio-passive by the Korean learners of English are listed in the following:

Table 1. The Use of the Medio-Passive

Correct forms (Medio-passives)	Incorrect forms (Canonical passives)	Total

5) This has a subject verb agreement problem, since the verb should be "begins." However, the agreement is not the main focus here. Our main concern here is whether the learners chose the medio-passive or the canonical passive.

6) Although the learner does not know the correct past tense form of burst, he/she does know that the medio-passive should be used in this context.



575 (35%)	1088 (65%)	1663
$Z = 24.468$		$p < .0001$

Table 1 shows that incorrect use of the medio-passive outnumbers correct use, and that the difference is statistically significant. In other words, in a large number of cases, the learners incorrectly used the canonical passive where the medio-passive should be used. This clearly shows that the Korean learners of English have difficulty using the medio-passive, with the difficulty traceable to the differing ways in which Korean and English encode these meanings.

Consider the use of the medio-passive in terms of proficiency levels in the following:

Table 2. The Use of the Medio-Passive by Proficiency Levels

	Correct forms (Medio-passives)	Incorrect forms (Canonical Passives)	Total
Sophomore	285 (32%)	605 (68%)	890
Junior	290 (38%)	483 (62%)	773
Total	575	1088	1663
$Chisq X^2 = 5.5209$		$p < .02$	

As shown in the table, sophomores used correct forms (32%) less often than the juniors (38%). The statistical test shows that the difference is significant. To put it another way, the sophomore students used the canonical passive, where the medio-passive should be used, more often than did the juniors. It is important to note that neither proficiency group had been explicitly taught when and how to use the medio-passive and how it is different from the canonical passive. The predominant use of incorrect forms suggests that the Korean students should be taught when to use the medio-passive.

The medio-passive errors probably stem from insufficient instruction and native language transfer. To convey the meaning of the English medio-passive, Korean uses the passive form except for two verbs, *increase* and *develop*, for which the

active form is used.

Let us consider the results of the use of the medio-passive according to forms:

Table 3. The Use of the Medio-Passive Whose Corresponding Korean Form Is the Passive Form.

Correct forms (Active forms/Medio-passive)	Incorrect forms (Passive forms)	Total
366 (27%)	967 (73%)	1333
$Z = -33.5895$		$p < .0001$

Table 4. The Use of the Medio-Passive Whose Corresponding Korean Form Is the Active Form (Medio-Passive Form) (The case of verbs develop and increase)

Correct forms (Active forms/Medio-passive)	Incorrect forms (Passive forms)	Total
209 (63%)	121 (37%)	330
$Z = 9.4477$		$p < .0001$

Table 3 shows that when the English medio-passive corresponds to the Korean passive form, the learners used the passive form more often than the active form (the medio-passive form). Table 4 shows that when the English medio-passive corresponds to the active (medio-passive) form (*develop*, *increase*), the learners used the active (medio-passive) form more often than the passive form. The results in these two tables are statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the learners' use of the medio-passive, taken together, clearly show that Korean students inappropriately use the canonical passive where the medio-passive should be used. The results also demonstrate that the forms of the native language influence the learners' use of the target language. In this respect, most of the Korean learners' medio-passive errors can be considered cases of

negative language transfer. This kind of interference error is often predictable from a contrastive analysis of the L1 and L2 grammars. Negative transfer may impede language learning in that the native language may "delay the restructuring of a language learner's rule" (Gass 1988). This viewpoint supports Schachter's (1994) new account of language transfer as a *constraint*<sup>7)</sup> imposed by previous knowledge, rather than as a process. In the cognitive view, knowledge of the native language may prevent (or delay) learners from constructing appropriate concepts of the target language, constraining any given hypothesis that a learner can formulate about the target language.

The results also show that students lack knowledge about when to use the medio-passive instead of the canonical passive. This is largely due to insufficient instruction about the medio-passive in the textbooks widely used in Korea. Textbook writers should incorporate this structure in textbooks in some form at the levels where the form would arise naturally in context. Teachers should spend some time discussing the following situations where the medio-passive sentences are preferred to either active or passive sentences (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983):

(9) a. When the agent is irrelevant or very secondary:

*e.g. The store opens at 9 a.m.*

b. When the writer/speaker intends to create an aura of mystery or suspense -- *e.g. We were sitting quietly in front of the fire when suddenly the door opened.*

c. When the subject is something so fragile or unstable that it can break, change, dissolve, etc.: *e.g. Left hanging on the fence, the red balloon suddenly burst.*

d. When it is natural to expect change to occur (i.e. physical, social, or psychological "laws"): *e.g. Mrs. Smith's opinion of Ronald Reagan changed.*

e. When there are too many possible causes to imply a single agent:  
*e.g. Prices increased.*

In addition to these situations, the medio-passive can be used to emphasize *spontaneity*. For example, in the sentence, "*The weather changes often*," the change of weather happens spontaneously and naturally. This is well demonstrated by the grammaticality of the sentence with "by itself," as in "*The weather changes by itself*," and the ungrammaticality of the passive sentence, "*\*The weather is*

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7) Emphasis mine.

*changed.*" These functional guidelines are important, particularly in Korean EFL classrooms, which have placed too much emphasis on grammatical forms.

The significance of this paper lies in providing a useful key to understanding the role of language transfer in accounting for the Korean learners' erroneous use of the English medio-passive. This study will contribute to various sub-areas of study, such as contrastive analysis hypothesis and language transfer. In particular, the finding that the native language has a significant effect on Korean students' use of the English medio-passive will contribute to re-examining and further developing theories of foreign/second language acquisition.

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