A Study of “Degree Inchoative States” in Korean
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This paper examines a class of predicates in Korean (e.g. *nulk ‘old’, *hwana ‘angry’, *malu ‘thin’), which refer to a property holding continuously in time, but crucially also to the onset of the described property (i.e. an initial boundary). These predicates are referred as “inchoative states” (henceforth INS) which have been reported in languages such as Salish languages (Bar-El 2005, Kiyota 2008), Japanese (Kiyota 2008), Korean (Chung 2005, Lee 2006, Choi 2015), Niuean, Stá’îmcets (Davis 2012, Matthewson 2013, 2014), Spanish (Marín & McNally 2011 for discussion of reflexive psychological verbs) and Chinese (Chang 2003). As illustrated in (1a-b), an INS can yield, in the absence of an inchoative morpheme corresponding to ‘become’, an “inchoative interpretation”, according to which the property described by the predicate starts to hold at the reference time. The semantics of INSs proposed by Bar-El (2005) and Kiyota (2008) is given in (2).

    Chen t’ayaŋ’. Taoru-ga nure-tei-ru.
    1.SG ANGRY towel-NOM wet-PFCT-PRES
    ‘I got tired.’ ‘The towel got wet.’

(2) b. INSs: Ae.e1e2 e=e1⊕e2 and e2 immediately follows e1 and
    [[BECOME P]](e1) = 1 and [[P]](e2) = 1. (cf. Bar-El 2005 Kiyota 2008)

Following from the previous studies of INSs in other languages, this paper aims to investigate deadjectival INSs in Korean, which, as I shall argue, are in fact “degree inchoative states” (henceforth DegINSs), that is, INSs associated with a degree parameter.

DegINSs in Korean exhibit gradability in that they can occur in the comparative and can also be modified by degree modifiers, just like gradable adjectives (cf. Kamp 1975, Croft 1991, Larson & Segal 1995) as shown in (3a-b).

(3) a. Sue-ka maywu nulk-ess-ta.
    Sue-NOM very old-PFCT-DEC ‘Sue is very old.’
 b. Sue-ka Yuna-orta (te) nulk-ess-ta.
    Sue-NOM Yuna-than more old-PFCT-DEC ‘Sue is older than Yuna.’

DegINSs in Korean are typically lexicalized as verbal predicates. It has been traditionally argued that, to describe on-going eventualities, verbal predicates in Korean take the overt non-past morpheme –*nun, while non-verbal predicates do not take it (cf. Han 1996, Chung 1999, Song 1999, Yoon 1996).

    Minho-TOP now apple-ACC eat-NON.PAST-DEC [verb]
    ‘Minho is eating an apple now.’
 b. Minho-nun cikum pikonha-Ø/*nun-ta.
    Minho-TOP now tired-NON.PAST-DEC [adjective]
    ‘Minho is tired now.’
 c. Minho-to enceynkunun nulk-nun/*Ø-ta.
    Minho-also someday old-NON.PAST-DEC [DegINS]
    ‘Minho also gets old someday.’

DegINSs such as *nulk ‘old’ in (4c) can felicitously combine with the overt non-past marker –*nun just like other verbal predicates, yielding an interpretation where Minho is not old at utterance time, but he will surely get old in the future.

Based on the properties observed in (3a-b, 4c), I claim that DegINSs in Korean are verbs derived from gradable adjectival roots [Adj state] via zero affixation of a null inchoative morpheme BECOME. As such, they give rise to gradability effects.
Interestingly, DegINSs modified by in/for x time adverbials yield three different readings: (i) a change of state reading, as in (5a); (ii) a resultant state reading as in (5b), and (iii) a process of iterated changes reading where throughout a period of x time, iterated changes of the property described by the DegINS take place, as in (5c).

   Juno-NOM one-year-in fat-PFCT-DEC
   ‘Juno got fat in a year.’

   Juno-NOM one-year-for fat-PAST-DEC
   ‘Juno had got fat and was fat for a year.’

   Juno-NOM one-year-for fat-PFCT-DEC
   ‘Juno got fatter and fatter for a year.’

To account for the readings shown in (5a-c), I argue that a DegINS in Korean can alternate between two senses: ‘become S’ or ‘become S-er’, thus making a parallel with degree achievements (henceforth DA; e.g. cool, lengthen; cf. Dowty 1979, Hay et al. 1999, Kennedy & Levin 2008 among many others) which show a similar pattern, on Abusch (1986) and Kearns (2007)’s analysis. Crucially, however, I argue that DegINSs in Korean differ from DAs: On their telic reading,DegINSs are associated with a scale that has a lower-bound – that is, a minimal value of the relevant property –, unlike DAs which are associated with an upper-bound scale corresponding to a maximal value. The idea is that the change of state described by a DegINS is the change that leads to the attainment of a minimal value of the relevant property which can be seen as the onset of the described state (cf. Choi & Demirdache 2014). Accordingly, a telic DegINS is interpreted as ‘become (minimally) S’ (i.e. standard telos; Kearns 2007), unlike a telic DA which is interpreted as ‘become maximally S’ (i.e. maximal telos; Hay et al. 1999). This proposal correctly predicts that on the telic reading, the property described by a DegINS could progress further on the relevant scale after reaching the telos, as shown in (6).

(6) Sue-ka twu-tal-maney (manhi) malu-ess-ta.
    Sue-NOM two-month-in much thin-PFCT-DEC
    Kulena taithu-lul kyeysokha-myen te malu-l-swuto-iss-ta.
    But diet-ACC continue-if more thin-FUT-could-be-DEC
    ‘Sue got (very) thin in two months, but if she keeps the diet up, she could be thinner.’

The continuation in (6) expresses that it is possible to proceed to a higher value on the relevant scale; this is coherent because the telos of DegINS is not provided by a maximal scale degree.

Assuming that sentences containing DegINSs should be evaluated with respect to a degree parameter that constitutes a minimal value of the relevant gradable property, I account for the readings shown in (5a-c) of DegINSs induced by in/for x time adverbials, as follows. The DegINS in (5a) is interpreted as ‘become S’ and allows modification by the in a year adverbial measuring the time it takes to attain (at least) a minimal degree of Juno’s fatness. The DegINS in (5b) interpreted as ‘become S’ also allows modification by the for a year adverbial measuring the duration of the eventuality of Juno’s being fat. Finally, I derive the ‘become S-er’ reading of the DegINS in (5c) from the semantics of a basic INS given in (2), just assuming two additional semantic operations: (i) a TO SOME DEGREE operator that can be applied to a basic INS, giving us a predicate describing changes of state that result in possession of the relevant property to some degree or other; (ii) a REPEATEDLY operator that can apply to a predicate of eventualities, giving us a predicate describing iterated eventualities. The analysis will be provided in detail.