

Separating Licensing from Interpretation: A Reassessment of Korean Null Arguments

Hee-Don Ahn¹ & Sungeun Cho^{2*}

¹Konkuk University, ²Yeungnam University

ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines the interpretive and distributional asymmetries between Korean null arguments and overt pronouns identified by Kang (2019). We argue that these asymmetries do not, by themselves, demonstrate that null arguments and overt pronouns have distinct grammatical representations. Such an inference conflates two independent dimensions of grammatical knowledge: omission licensing, which determines when an argument may remain unexpressed, and omission interpretation, which determines how an omitted argument is understood. Once these dimensions are distinguished, many apparent asymmetries can be explained by the interaction between grammatical constraints on omission and discourse-based interpretation. Interpretive preferences and distributional restrictions alone therefore cannot decisively distinguish among competing analyses of Korean null arguments. We conclude that the Korean facts are compatible with a pronoun-based (*pro*) analysis and support a broader methodological framework for evaluating null arguments.

Keywords: Korean null arguments, *pro*, omission licensing, omission interpretation, discourse-based interpretation

1. Introduction

The status of Korean null arguments has long occupied a central position in debates concerning anaphora, argument omission, and the syntax–discourse interface. A fundamental question is whether Korean null arguments should be analyzed as pronominal elements such as *pro* whose interpretation is largely determined through discourse, or whether the interpretive properties of null arguments require a different grammatical analysis. While numerous studies have

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† Corresponding author: scho1007@ynu.ac.kr



addressed this question, the issue remains controversial because Korean null arguments exhibit both similarities to overt pronouns and a degree of interpretive flexibility that often appears to exceed that of their overt counterparts.

Previous work by Ahn and Cho (2013, 2019, 2020) argues that Korean null arguments are best analyzed as *pro*. A key observation supporting this view is that null arguments and overt pronouns frequently exhibit striking interpretive parallelism. For example, the null argument in (1B) receives essentially the same interpretation as the overt pronoun *kukes* ‘it’ in (1C).

- (1) A: Na-nun ccacangmyen-ul _____ coahay.
 I-Top black.bean.sauce.noodle-Acc like
 ‘I like black-bean-sauce noodle.’
 B: Na-to _____ coahay.
 I-also _____ like
 ‘I like, _____ too.’
 C: Na-to kukes-ul coahay.
 I-also it-Acc like
 ‘I also like it.’(Ahn & Cho 2013:530)

Importantly, both (1B) and (1C) permit a sloppy interpretation. Under this reading, the object understood in B’s response need not be identical to the one referred to in A’s statement. Rather, the sentence may simply mean that B also likes ‘black-bean-sauce noodles’, potentially different ones from those liked by A. The availability of the same sloppy interpretation with both the null argument and the overt pronoun suggests that the two constructions behave similarly in interpretation and therefore supports a pronoun-based analysis of Korean null arguments.

Similar parallelism emerges in quantified environments. Ahn and Cho (2020) show that null arguments and overt pronouns exhibit comparable interpretive behavior in the presence of quantified antecedents.

- (2) A: Na-nun khemphyuthe sey tay-ka _____ philyohay.
 I-Top computer three Cl-Nom need
 ‘I need three computers.’
 B: Na-nun _____ philyohaci anha.
 I-Top _____ need not
 ‘I don’t need any computers.’

B': Na-nun kukes-i philyohaci anha.
 I-Top that-Nom need
 'I don't need them.'

Importantly, both (2B) and (2B') permit a generalized interpretation roughly paraphrasable as 'I do not need any computers.' Evidence for this interpretation comes from the infelicity of the continuations in (3).¹⁾

(3) A: Na-nun khemphyuthe sey tay-ka philyohay.

I-Top computer three Cl-Nom need

'I need three computers.'

B: #Na-nun ____ philyohaci anha. Twutay-myen tway.

I-Top need not two.Cl-if enough

'I don't need. Two computers are enough for me.'

B': #Na-nun kukes-i philyohaci anha. Twutay-myen tway.

I-Top that-Nom need not two.Cl-if enough

'I don't need it. Two computers are enough for me.'

If (2B) and (2B') simply meant 'I do not need three computers,' the follow-up statement 'Two computers are enough for me' would be perfectly coherent. Instead, both continuations are degraded because the preceding sentence is naturally interpreted as expressing a stronger proposition, namely that the speaker does not need computers at all. The resulting contradiction demonstrates that the null argument and the overt pronoun pattern alike in permitting a generalized, non-specific interpretation.²⁾

1) One reviewer points out that the sentence becomes considerably more acceptable when the overt pronoun is accompanied by the degree expression *ku-mankhum* 'that much', as in *Na-nun ku-kes-i ku-mankhum philyohae* 'I need it that much'. This observation raises the possibility that Korean employs a proform consisting of both an anaphoric pronoun and a degree expression in recovering quantified nominal reference. However, the incompatibility between the missing-object construction in (3B) and the corresponding follow-up sentence makes this analysis unlikely as a general account of the contrast under discussion. Since the present paper is concerned primarily with the interpretation of omitted arguments rather than the internal structure of nominal proforms, we leave this issue for future research.

2) Another argument for a pronoun-based analysis comes from the systematic interpretive parallelism between null arguments and overt pronouns in Korean (Ahn & Cho 2009, 2011, 2022, 2023).

(i) A: Na-nun motun chamkaca-lul mannaci mos hayssta.

I-Nom all participant-Acc meet Neg did

'I didn't meet all the participants.' (all > neg, neg > all)

These observations suggest that Korean null arguments and overt pronouns share important semantic properties and are therefore compatible with a pronoun-based analysis. At the same time, however, they also exhibit systematic interpretive asymmetries. Kang (2019) argues that these asymmetries challenge a pronoun-based analysis because null arguments and overt pronouns do not always receive the same interpretations. In particular, the fact that certain bound-variable, referential, and indefinite interpretations are more readily available with null arguments than with overt pronouns raises the question of whether the two expressions should receive different grammatical representations.

This paper reexamines these issues from a broader theoretical perspective. We argue that previous discussions have often conflated two logically independent questions:

- (i) Under what grammatical conditions is argument omission licensed?³⁾
- (ii) How is an omitted argument interpreted once omission has been licensed?

The first question concerns the grammatical availability of omission and is determined by lexical, structural, and language-specific licensing conditions. The second concerns the interpretation assigned to an omitted argument and depends on discourse accessibility, contextual recoverability, anaphoric resolution, and pragmatic inference. Although these two dimensions frequently interact, they are conceptually independent and should not be conflated. Consequently, interpretive differences do not necessarily imply differences in grammatical representation, nor do distributional differences, by

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- B: Na-to __ mannaci mos hayssta.
 I-also meet Neg did
 '(Lit.) I didn't meet, either.' (all > neg only)
- B': Na-to ku-tul-ul mannaci mos hayssta.
 I-also they-Acc meet NEG did
 '(Lit.) I didn't meet them, either.' (all > neg only) (Ahn & Cho 2011:465)

The null object in (iB) and the overt pronoun in (iB') permit only the wide-scope interpretation of the quantified antecedent (all > neg). Under PF-deletion or LF-copying analyses, however, the null argument in (iB) should preserve the internal structure of the antecedent clause in (iA) and thus allow both scope readings. Instead, it patterns with the overt pronoun rather than the antecedent clause. This systematic parallelism is naturally explained if the null argument is *pro* (deep anaphora), but is unexpected under ellipsis-based accounts.

- 3) A brief terminological clarification is in order. Much of the recent literature employs the term *argument ellipsis* for constructions involving missing arguments. Since this term presupposes a deletion analysis, we instead adopt the more theory-neutral term *argument omission*, referring simply to the absence of an overt argument without committing to any particular grammatical analysis. Likewise, the term licensing is used throughout this paper to refer specifically to the grammatical conditions under which argument omission is permitted, as distinct from the interpretation of the omitted argument.

themselves, determine the syntactic nature of omitted arguments.

From this perspective, the principal contribution of this paper is methodological rather than merely descriptive. Previous studies have frequently treated interpretive and distributional asymmetries as direct evidence for distinct grammatical representations. We argue instead that such asymmetries should not, by themselves, be regarded as decisive because they may arise independently from lexical semantics, discourse interpretation, or omission licensing. More reliable diagnostics are structural phenomena whose predictions genuinely differ across competing analyses, including extraction, island effects, antecedent-contained deletion, connectivity, and related structural properties. Distributional evidence is not uniform in its diagnostic value. Some facts establish only whether an argument may remain phonologically unexpressed in a given environment, whereas structure-sensitive diagnostics—such as subextraction, island sensitivity, connectivity, and antecedent-contained dependencies—test whether the silent site contains articulated internal structure. Both are aspects of syntactic distribution, but the latter more directly distinguish among competing representations of the null argument.

The Korean facts examined here thus motivate a broader framework for evaluating null arguments rather than merely a reinterpretation of the data discussed by Kang (2019). By distinguishing omission licensing from omission interpretation, we argue that many apparent asymmetries previously taken as evidence against a pronoun-based analysis are more naturally understood as reflecting the interaction of independent grammatical and discourse-related factors. The Korean facts are therefore compatible with a pronoun-based (*pro*) analysis of null arguments.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reexamines the interpretive asymmetries discussed by Kang (2019) and argues that they can be explained without abandoning a pronoun-based analysis. Section 3 examines distributional asymmetries between null arguments and overt pronouns, arguing that they reflect independent licensing conditions on null elements rather than distinct grammatical representations. Section 4 discusses the broader theoretical implications of these findings and argues that omission licensing and omission interpretation should be treated as independent dimensions of grammatical knowledge.

2. Interpretive Asymmetries: Kang (2019)

Kang (2019) argues that several interpretive asymmetries between overt pronouns

and null arguments pose challenges for a pronoun-based analysis of Korean null arguments. In particular, he identifies differences involving bound-variable interpretations, referential interpretations, and indefinite readings, and argues that null arguments and overt pronouns do not always exhibit identical interpretive behavior. These observations raise the question of whether the two expressions should be assigned the same grammatical representation.

In this section, we reexamine the empirical basis of Kang's arguments. We argue that the relevant asymmetries do not necessarily require distinct grammatical representations. Rather, many of the observed contrasts arise from differences in interpretation and contextual recoverability. We therefore suggest that the phenomena discussed by Kang (2019) are compatible with a pronoun-based analysis of Korean null arguments.

2.1 Bound-variable and referential interpretations

Kang (2019) observes that overt pronouns and null arguments pattern similarly with respect to bound-variable interpretations.⁴⁾

- (4) a. Manhun haksayng-tul-i_i ku-tul-i_i ttokttokhata-ko sayngkakhanta.
 many student-Pl-Nom they-Nom intelligent-C think
 'Many students think that they are intelligent.'
- b. Manhun haksayng-tul-i_i pro_i ttokttokhata-ko sayngkakhanta.
 many student-Pl-Nom intelligent-C think
 'Many students think that they are intelligent.'

Both the overt pronoun *kutul* 'they' in (4a) and the null argument in (4b) allow a bound-variable interpretation. Kang argues, however, that the two constructions differ with respect to referential interpretations. In particular, the overt pronoun readily permits a deictic interpretation referring to a salient group distinct from the quantified antecedent, whereas the corresponding interpretation is less readily available with the null argument. From this observation, he concludes that overt

4) One reviewer observes that many speakers would naturally prefer the reflexive-like expression *caki-tul* rather than *ku-tul* in the intended discourse context. We agree that *caki-tul* is often the pragmatically preferred form in quantified environments. The present discussion, however, is intended to illustrate that different overt pronominal forms exhibit different lexical and discourse biases. This lexical competition is independent of the broader question addressed here, namely whether Korean null arguments require a grammatical representation distinct from pronouns.

pronouns and null arguments do not behave identically and therefore may not belong to the same grammatical category.⁵⁾

The empirical observation itself is important, but its theoretical significance is less straightforward. The crucial question is whether the observed contrast reflects a difference in the grammatical representation of overt pronouns and null arguments or merely a difference in their preferred interpretations. Only the former would constitute evidence against a pronoun-based analysis.

The same reasoning applies to referential interpretations. Kang's observation that overt pronouns more readily support deictic readings does not, by itself, establish a difference in grammatical representation. Rather, the contrast concerns how overt and omitted arguments contribute to reference resolution. Both require discourse-based interpretation, but they differ in the amount of lexical information they contribute to that process.

Overt pronouns are lexically specified: their phonological realization explicitly encodes grammatical and referential information, such as person, number, deixis, and anaphoric dependency. These lexical cues guide reference resolution by narrowing the range of possible interpretations. Null arguments, by contrast, lack overt lexical realization and therefore rely more heavily on discourse accessibility, contextual recoverability, and pragmatic inference. The contrast thus reflects differences in lexical specification rather than differences in grammatical representation.

5) While Hong (1985) and Choe (1988) argue that the Korean pronoun *ku* differs from English *he* in not allowing bound-variable interpretations, Kang (1988; see also Suh 1990, Koak 2008) presents a number of examples suggesting otherwise:

- (i) a. Chelswu-ka nwukwu-eykey_i ku-ka_i mengchengi-la-ko malhayss-ni?
C.-Nom Who-Dat he-Nom fool-COP-C said-Q
'To whom did Chelswu say that he is a fool?'
- b. Chelswu-nun nwukwu-eykeyna_i Yenghi-ka ku-lul_i ttaylilkesila-ko malhayssta.
C.-Top everyone-Dat Y.-Nom he-Acc hit.will-C said
'Chelswu said to everyone that Yenghi would hit him.'
- c. Nwukwuna_i ku-lul_i ccochao-nun salam-ul silhehanta.
everyone he-Acc chase-Rel person-Acc hate
'Everyone hates the person who chases him.'

Based on examples such as (i), Kang argues that *ku* can receive a bound-variable interpretation under appropriate discourse and pragmatic conditions. The availability of such readings therefore appears to be a matter of contextual felicity rather than a categorical grammatical restriction. If so, the contrast between overt pronouns and null arguments cannot be reduced to the claim that only the latter permit variable binding. Rather, both overt pronouns and null arguments appear capable of supporting bound-variable interpretations, although the availability and naturalness of such readings may vary depending on discourse and lexical factors.

This proposal is fully compatible with discourse-based approaches such as Carminati's (2002) Position of Antecedent Hypothesis.⁶⁾ Carminati is concerned with how speakers select an antecedent from among competing discourse referents, whereas the present proposal concerns how the lexical specification of an expression constrains interpretation once the process of reference resolution has begun. The two accounts therefore address complementary aspects of anaphora rather than competing explanations of the same phenomenon.

Under this view, the contrast between overt pronouns and null arguments is best understood as one of interpretive preference rather than grammatical representation. Both permit bound-variable and referential interpretations, but they differ in the degree to which their lexical realization biases interpretation toward particular discourse referents. The asymmetries observed in (4) therefore arise naturally from the interaction between a shared grammatical representation and independent principles of discourse interpretation, and do not constitute evidence against a pronoun-based analysis.

Kang further observes that singular overt pronouns may pattern differently from null arguments in quantified contexts.

- (5) a. *Nwukwuna_i ku-ka_i ttokttokhata-ko sayngkakhanta.
 everyone he-Nom intelligent-C think
 'Everyone thinks that he is intelligent.'
- b. Nwukwuna_i e_i ttokttokhata-ko sayngkakhanta.
 everyone intelligent-C think
 'Everyone thinks that he is intelligent.'
- c. Nwukwuna_i caki-ka_i/ku-casin-i_i ttokttokhata-ko sayngkakhanta.
 everyone self-Nom/self-Nom intelligent-C think
 'Everyone thinks that he is intelligent.'

At first glance, the contrast between (5a) and (5b) appears problematic for a pronoun-based analysis: the singular pronoun *ku* resists a bound-variable interpretation, whereas the corresponding null argument permits one. This asymmetry, however, need not indicate a fundamental grammatical difference between overt and null pronouns. Rather, it appears to reflect an independent property of the Korean pronominal system.

6) We thank a reviewer for pointing us to this work, which has helped clarify the issues discussed here.

Unlike English *he*, Korean *ku* exhibits substantial interspeaker variation in its interpretive possibilities. Some speakers permit a bound-variable interpretation, whereas others restrict *ku* largely to demonstrative, referential, or discourse-anaphoric uses (Hong 1985; Kang 1988; Choe 1988; Suh 1990; Koak 2008; Kim 2016; Kim and Han 2016; Kim 2025). The degradation of *ku* in quantified contexts should therefore not be regarded as a categorical property of Korean. In such contexts, forms such as *caki* and *ku-casin* are generally preferred for expressing variable binding. The relative degradation of *ku* in (5a) may thus reflect competition among available pronominal forms rather than a categorical distinction between overt pronouns and null arguments.

Although *caki* and *ku-casin* readily support bound-variable interpretations, their availability does not establish that they grammatically block either *ku* or a null argument. Indeed, experimental studies reveal substantial interspeaker variation in the acceptability of quantifier-bound *ku*, as well as a correlation between the acceptance of bound *ku* and the availability of sloppy readings for null objects (Kim and Han 2016; Han et al. 2020). The contrast in (5) is therefore better understood as speaker-dependent than as a categorical opposition between overt and null pronouns. Determining whether the remaining differences arise from lexical properties, interpretive preferences, or distinct grammatical mechanisms requires controlled experimental investigation.

The contrast between (5a) and (5b), then, does not demonstrate that null arguments and overt pronouns belong to distinct grammatical categories. Instead, it shows that members of the Korean pronominal system differ in their interpretive biases. Once these independently motivated differences are taken into account, the asymmetries identified by Kang (2019) provide considerably weaker evidence against a pronoun-based analysis of Korean null arguments.

2.2. Indefinite and weakly specified interpretations

Kang (2019) further argues that null arguments permit interpretations that are not readily available with overt pronouns.

- (6) a. Tom-un caymiissnun chayk-ul hankwen ilkessta.
 T.-Top interesting book-Acc one.CL read
 ‘Tom read an interesting book.’

b. Mary-to kukes-ul ilkessta.

M.-also it-Acc read

‘Mary read it too.’

c. Mary-to ___ ilkessta.

M.-also read

‘Mary read ___ too.’

According to Kang, the overt pronoun in (6b) strongly favors a definite interpretation referring to the same book that Tom read, whereas the null argument in (6c) permits a weaker interpretation in which Mary need not have read that particular book. This contrast is taken to suggest that null arguments and overt pronouns differ in their interpretive properties.

The existence of the contrast itself is not in dispute. The question is how it should be explained. Kang’s discussion implicitly assumes that if a null argument allows an interpretation unavailable to an overt pronoun, then the two expressions must differ in their grammatical representation. However, this conclusion does not necessarily follow. A difference in interpretation need not imply a difference in syntactic structure.

A closer look at (6c) suggests that the relevant interpretation is not simply one in which Mary read a different interesting book. Rather, the omitted object often receives a more weakly specified interpretation. The sentence may simply convey that Mary also participated in the event of reading, leaving the identity of the object largely unspecified. In this respect, the interpretation of the omitted object resembles the interpretation of omitted arguments more generally, where the precise identity of the referent is often left open and recovered only to the extent required by the discourse.

By contrast, the overt pronoun *kukes* ‘it’ or ‘that’ naturally directs the hearer toward a discourse-familiar referent. Because it overtly encodes an anaphoric relation, it strongly favors identification with the antecedent book introduced in the previous sentence. Consequently, the interpretation of (6b) is more specific and more strongly anchored to the preceding discourse. The difference between (6b) and (6c), therefore, concerns the degree of referential specificity associated with the two expressions rather than a categorical contrast between definite and indefinite interpretations.

More generally, the contrast illustrated in (6) suggests that interpretive differences should not be taken as evidence for distinct grammatical representations. Once argument omission has been licensed, the interpretation of the omitted argument is determined by the interaction of contextual information, discourse structure, and pragmatic inference. Overt pronouns likewise require discourse-based interpretation,

but their lexical realization provides stronger cues for antecedent selection and referential continuity. The observed asymmetry therefore reflects differences in interpretive preference rather than underlying grammatical representation.

This account also yields a testable prediction. If the contrast between overt pronouns and null arguments arises from discourse interpretation rather than grammatical representation, it should vary with the amount of contextual support available. When the discourse strongly favors a particular interpretation, the contrast should diminish or disappear. Conversely, when the discourse leaves the intended interpretation relatively underspecified, null arguments should exhibit greater interpretive flexibility than overt pronouns. The proposal therefore predicts gradient variation in interpretive preferences across discourse contexts rather than categorical grammatical differences between the two forms.⁷⁾

3. Distributional Asymmetries

A frequently raised objection to the pronoun analysis of Korean null arguments

7) Consider first a weakly constraining context:

- (i) Context A: Tom and Mary visited a library containing many interesting books. Tom read an interesting book.
 - a. Mary-to kukes-ul ilkessta.
M.-also it-Acc read
 - b. Mary-to ___ ilkessta.
M.-also read
'Mary read (it), too.'

In this context, the overt pronoun strongly favors the book read by Tom, whereas the null object more readily permits a weakly specified or different-book interpretation.

Now consider a context that identifies a unique book:

- (ii) Context B: There was only one copy of the assigned book. After Tom finished reading it, he handed it directly to Mary.
 - a. Mary-to kukes-ul ilkessta.
M.-also it-Acc read
 - b. Mary-to ___ ilkessta.
M.-also read
'Mary read (it), too.'

Here, both the overt pronoun and the null object are naturally understood as referring to the same uniquely salient book. The contrast between them is therefore expected to diminish. Conversely, if each participant has been assigned a different book, the null object should more readily receive a participant-dependent interpretation. The proposal thus predicts context-sensitive and potentially gradient judgments rather than an invariant contrast between the two forms.

concerns their more restricted distribution relative to overt pronouns. At first glance, this asymmetry appears to suggest that the two forms belong to different grammatical categories. If null arguments were simply phonologically null pronouns, one might expect them to occur wherever overt pronouns are licensed. Their exclusion from environments such as modification, coordination, and other contexts requiring overt realization has therefore often been taken as evidence against a pronoun-based analysis.

This inference, however, assumes that distributional restrictions directly diagnose grammatical representation. We question this assumption. Distributional restrictions identify the grammatical conditions under which argument omission is licensed, but they do not, by themselves, determine the syntactic identity of the omitted element. As argued in Section 1, omission licensing and omission interpretation are independent dimensions of grammatical knowledge. Once this distinction is recognized, distributional asymmetries become evidence about the conditions governing omission rather than direct evidence for a particular grammatical representation.

This issue lies at the heart of competing analyses of Korean null arguments. The restricted distribution of omitted arguments has motivated analyses in terms of ellipsis, LF-copying, and other non-pronominal mechanisms (e.g., Kim 1999; Park & Bae 2012; Park & Oh 2013; Lee 2014; Park 2014). Although these approaches differ in important respects, they share the assumption that at least some Korean null arguments require grammatical mechanisms other than *pro*. Our goal here is not to evaluate these competing analyses exhaustively, but to ask a more limited question: whether the interpretive and distributional asymmetries discussed in the literature, by themselves, constitute decisive evidence against a pronoun-based analysis.

More generally, this inference is not supported by broader crosslinguistic evidence. Many languages distinguish between strong and weak pronouns, overt and null expressions, or fully specified and structurally deficient forms that make essentially the same semantic contribution while differing substantially in their syntactic distribution. Such asymmetries therefore need not reflect distinct grammatical representations; they may instead result from independent constraints on the realization of reduced expressions.

From this perspective, the Korean facts are best understood as evidence about the licensing of omission rather than the grammatical identity of omitted arguments. Distributional restrictions specify where omission is permitted, but they do not, by themselves, determine whether the omitted element is a pronoun, the product of ellipsis, or some other grammatical object. Consequently, the existence of distributional asymmetries does not inherently favor an ellipsis analysis over a pronoun analysis.

Instead, the Korean pattern fits a broader typological tendency for structurally reduced expressions to exhibit more restricted distributions than their overt counterparts.

Along these lines, consider the contrast in (7):

- (7) a. *calsayngkin ni-ka kala.*
 handsome you-Nom go.IMP
 ‘You, who are handsome, go.’
 b. **calsayngkin ____ kala.*
 handsome go.IMP
 Intended: ‘You, who are handsome, go.’

The contrast in (7) shows that a null argument cannot be modified in the way an overt pronoun can.⁸⁾ At first glance, this asymmetry might seem to suggest that the two elements belong to different grammatical categories. If the null argument were simply a silent counterpart of the overt pronoun *ni* ‘you’, one might expect both forms to occur in the same syntactic environments. The fact that modification is possible with the overt pronoun but impossible with the null argument has therefore been taken by some researchers to indicate that Korean null arguments are not ordinary pronouns.

Such a conclusion, however, is not straightforward. Crosslinguistically, pronominal expressions with reduced or deficient structure often resist modification, coordination, and other constructions requiring syntactic independence, despite retaining a pronominal interpretation (Cardinaletti 1994; Cardinaletti and Starke 1994, 1999; Martins 2003; Fenger 2018; Ritter and Wiltschko 2019; Slofstra and

8) One reviewer suggests that the unacceptability of (7b) may partly reflect independent lexical properties of Korean pronominal modifiers rather than the behavior of null arguments themselves. This possibility cannot be ruled out. At the same time, Korean pronominal modifiers can occur independently in appropriate discourse contexts, as illustrated by fragment answers:

- (i) Q: *Mary-nun etten namca-lul cohaha-ni?*
 Mary-Top what-kind-of man-Acc likes-Q
 ‘What kind of man does Mary like?’
 A: *acwu calsayngkin.*
 very handsome
 ‘(Someone) very handsome.’

More importantly, our argument does not depend on the status of this single example. Comparable distributional restrictions are found in other environments, including coordination (Section 3), as well as among structurally deficient pronouns in a variety of languages. The example in (7b) is therefore intended as one illustration of a broader distributional pattern rather than as a decisive diagnostic in itself.

Hoekstra 2021). Thus, the inability of a null argument to support modification does not necessarily indicate that it belongs to a fundamentally different grammatical category. It may instead reflect independent restrictions associated with structurally deficient pronominal forms.

Similar restrictions are found in other languages. Fenger (2018), for example, observes that ordinary pronouns permit appositive modification, whereas impersonal pronouns do not:

- (8) a. *Wij*, de studenten, werken hard.
 we, the students, work hard.
 b. **Men*, de studenten, werken hard.
 IMP, the students, work hard.
- (9) a. We, the students, work hard.
 b. *One, the students, work hard.

The contrasts in (8) and (9) show that ordinary pronouns such as Dutch *wij* and English *we* can occur with appositive modifiers, whereas impersonal pronouns such as Dutch *men* and English *one* cannot. Crucially, this distributional difference is not generally taken to show that impersonal pronouns are non-pronominal. Rather, it is attributed to their structural deficiency.

These facts illustrate a broader point relevant to Korean: restrictions on modification do not necessarily diagnose a difference in grammatical category. They may instead reflect the degree of structural independence available to a particular pronominal form. From this perspective, the contrast in (7) is compatible with the view that Korean null arguments are highly reduced members of the pronominal system rather than elements derived through a fundamentally different grammatical mechanism.

A similar asymmetry arises with coordination. While overt pronouns can function as conjuncts, null arguments cannot:⁹⁾

9) Following a reviewer's suggestion, the examples have been recast in dialogue form to provide a more natural discourse context. This revision improves the pragmatic naturalness of the examples without affecting the intended grammatical contrast.

- (i) A: Tongswu hokun Yenghi-ka ol keya.
 T. or Y.-Nom come will
 'Either Tongswu or Yenghi will come'
 B: Aniya Chelswu hokun kenye-ka ol keya.
 No, C. or she-Nom come will

- (10) a. Chelswu hokun kunye-ka ol kesita.
 C. or she-Nom come will
 ‘Either Chelswu or she will come.’
 b. *Chelswu hokun ____ ol kesita.
 C. or come will
 Intended: ‘Either Chelswu or she will come.’

Coordination has long been regarded as a diagnostic of syntactic independence. Conjuncts are typically required to be fully licensed constituents capable of participating in a symmetric syntactic relation. The contrast in (10) therefore suggests that Korean null arguments lack some property necessary for independent occurrence as conjuncts. However, this observation does not by itself determine the nature of the null element involved.

Comparable restrictions are attested for structurally deficient pronouns in other languages. For example, German impersonal *man* cannot appear as a conjunct (Ritter & Wiltschko 2019):

- (11) *Man und seine Gäste
 one and his guests

Significantly, the ungrammaticality of (11) is not generally interpreted as evidence that *man* is not a pronoun. Rather, it is taken to reflect the reduced structural status of impersonal pronouns. In other words, the inability to participate in coordination is a property that may follow from structural deficiency independently of an element's referential or pronominal nature.

Taken together, the modification facts in (7) and the coordination facts in (10) reveal a common pattern: Korean null arguments are excluded from environments that require a relatively autonomous syntactic representation. Similar restrictions characterize weak, deficient, and impersonal pronouns in a variety of languages. Consequently, the

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- ‘No, Chelswu or she will come.’
 (ii) A: Tongswu hokun Yenghi-ka ol keya.
 T. or Y.-Nom come will
 ‘Either Tonswu or Yenghi will come’
 B: Aniya Chelswu hokun ____ ol keya.
 No, C. or come will
 ‘No, Chelswu or she will come.’

We thank the reviewer for this helpful suggestion.

relevant question is not whether Korean null arguments display a more restricted distribution than overt pronouns—they clearly do—but whether such restrictions should be interpreted as evidence for a fundamentally different grammatical analysis.

Importantly, the answer is not obvious. The restricted distribution of null arguments does not, by itself, support any particular theory of argument omission. Under an ellipsis analysis, one must still explain why ellipsis is unavailable in precisely the environments illustrated in (7b) and (10b). These restrictions do not by themselves rule out ellipsis, LF-copying, or related analyses. An ellipsis-based account may attribute them to independent constraints on nominal or argument ellipsis, just as a pronoun-based account may attribute them to the structural deficiency of *pro*. The crucial issue is therefore not whether each analysis can stipulate or invoke a licensing restriction, but whether that restriction is independently motivated and makes predictions that distinguish the analysis from its competitors. In the absence of such evidence, the modification and coordination facts establish that omission is unavailable in particular environments, but do not uniquely determine the representation of the omitted argument. Distributional asymmetries therefore do not directly discriminate among competing analyses. Rather, they raise a more general question concerning the grammatical constraints that regulate the occurrence of structurally reduced expressions.

A useful comparison comes from the literature on weak and deficient pronouns. Cardinaletti (1994) and Cardinaletti and Starke (1994) argue that weak pronouns often exhibit a more restricted distribution than strong pronouns despite sharing essentially the same referential function. Across languages, weak pronouns characteristically resist modification, coordination, topicalization, and other constructions requiring a relatively independent syntactic representation. Crucially, such restrictions are not normally taken to indicate a distinct grammatical category. Instead, they are understood as consequences of structural deficiency.

From this perspective, the Korean facts are considerably less surprising. The inability of null arguments to occur in modification and coordination structures need not reflect a fundamentally different underlying representation. Rather, it may indicate that null arguments constitute the most reduced members of the pronominal system. On this view, their restricted distribution follows from their structural impoverishment, while their interpretive properties continue to align with those of ordinary pronouns. The asymmetries therefore bear on the licensing and distribution of null forms, not directly on the question of whether Korean argument omission should be analyzed in terms of pronouns, ellipsis, or some other grammatical mechanism.

Comparable asymmetries are also found with other classes of null elements. Consider the distribution of null versus overt complementizers:

- (12) a. (?) It was widely believed [_{CP} C [_{IP} he liked linguistics]].
b. It was widely believed [_{CP} that [_{IP} he liked linguistics]].
- (13) a. *[[_{CP} C [_{IP} he liked linguistics]] was widely believed.
b. [[_{CP} that [_{IP} he liked linguistics]] was widely believed.

As (13a) illustrates, a null complementizer cannot appear in all of the environments in which its overt counterpart is licensed. Importantly, this asymmetry does not normally lead researchers to conclude that null complementizers belong to a fundamentally different grammatical category from overt complementizers. Rather, following Pesetsky (1992), Bošković and Lasnik (2003), and Kim (2009), the contrast is generally attributed to independently motivated constraints governing the licensing and distribution of null complementizers. The relevant point is that the absence of phonological realization may impose additional structural requirements that do not apply to overt forms.

The significance of these facts extends beyond complementizers. They illustrate a more general methodological point: differences in distribution do not necessarily imply differences in underlying grammatical representation. Null and overt forms may share the same basic grammatical status while differing in the environments in which they can be licensed. Consequently, the existence of distributional asymmetries cannot by itself determine whether a null element should be analyzed as a pronoun, an instance of ellipsis, or some other grammatical object.

The Korean facts can be understood in precisely these terms. The inability of null arguments to participate in modification or coordination structures does not, by itself, argue against a pronoun-based analysis. Rather, it indicates that null arguments, like weak pronouns, impersonal pronouns, and null complementizers, are subject to licensing conditions that do not apply to their overt counterparts. The relevant generalization therefore concerns the environments in which null forms may occur, not their underlying grammatical nature.

This distinction is methodologically important. Distributional restrictions identify the conditions under which argument omission is grammatically licensed, but they do not, by themselves, determine the representation or interpretation of the omitted argument. Competing analyses—including pronoun, ellipsis, and LF-copying approaches—all must explain why omission is unavailable in particular syntactic

environments, even though they differ fundamentally in how the omitted argument is represented and interpreted.¹⁰⁾

Distributional restrictions concern the grammatical licensing of omission, whereas interpretive asymmetries concern the interpretation of omitted arguments. By the grammatical licensing of omission, we mean the lexical and syntactic conditions under which an argument required or permitted by a predicate may lack overt phonological realization while the resulting expression remains grammatically well formed. This concerns whether omission is possible, not how the omitted argument is represented or interpreted once omission has occurred. Since these are independent dimensions of grammatical knowledge, neither type of evidence, considered in isolation, uniquely determines grammatical representation.

This distinction has important methodological consequences. Competing analyses of Korean null arguments should be evaluated by combining ordinary licensing facts with structure-sensitive diagnostics. Licensing facts establish where an argument may remain unexpressed, whereas diagnostics such as subextraction, island sensitivity, connectivity, and antecedent-contained dependencies test whether the silent site contains the internal structure posited by a particular analysis. The two types of evidence are therefore not opposed: both concern syntactic distribution, but they differ in how directly they distinguish among competing representations. Interpretive and distributional evidence remains essential, but its theoretical significance lies in identifying the conditions governing omission and interpretation rather than in serving as direct diagnostics of grammatical representation.

Interpretive preferences and restrictions on the distribution of omission remain essential evidence. However, neither type of evidence uniquely determines the representation of a null argument. Their significance must be assessed together with diagnostics whose predictions differ across pronoun-based, ellipsis-based, and LF-copying analyses.

4. General Implications and Concluding Remarks

The principal contribution of this paper lies not only in its reinterpretation of the

10) We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that LF-copying analyses do not posit a structural gap or deletion operation in the omitted position. Our claim is therefore not that LF-copying requires deletion, but rather that any account—including LF-copying—must explain why the relevant interpretive mechanism fails to apply in the environments discussed here.

data discussed by Kang (2019), but also in the broader methodological framework it proposes for evaluating Korean null arguments. Previous studies have often treated interpretive and distributional asymmetries as direct evidence for distinct grammatical representations. We have argued that this inference conflates two conceptually distinct dimensions of grammatical knowledge: omission licensing, which determines when an argument may remain unexpressed, and omission interpretation, which determines how that argument is understood once omission has been licensed. Distinguishing these dimensions clarifies the theoretical significance of the evidence examined here and provides a more general framework for investigating null arguments across languages.

From this perspective, the interpretive asymmetries identified by Kang (2019) need not reflect differences in grammatical representation. They are compatible with a common pronominal analysis under which overt pronouns contribute richer lexical information to reference resolution, whereas null arguments depend more heavily on contextual recovery and pragmatic inference. Similarly, the restricted distribution of Korean null arguments may follow from independent constraints on omission licensing rather than from the grammatical identity of the omitted element. Interpretive preferences and distributional restrictions thus illuminate different aspects of argument omission, but neither alone provides decisive evidence for choosing among pronoun-based, ellipsis-based, LF-copying, and other competing analyses.

This distinction has important methodological consequences. Competing analyses should be evaluated primarily through structural diagnostics that yield genuinely different predictions about grammatical representation. Evidence that may independently follow from lexical semantics, discourse interpretation, or omission licensing cannot by itself determine the underlying representation of a null argument.

We therefore conclude that the phenomena discussed by Kang (2019) are compatible with a pronoun (*pro*) analysis of Korean null arguments. More broadly, distinguishing omission licensing from omission interpretation provides a principled framework for evaluating competing analyses: it separates evidence concerning when omission is permitted and how omitted arguments are understood from evidence that bears more directly on their grammatical representation.

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Hee-Don Ahn (First Author)

Professor Emeritus

Department of English

Konkuk University

120 Neungdong-ro, Gwangjin-gu, Seoul 05029, Korea

E-mail: hdahn@konkuk.ac.kr

Sungeun Cho (Corresponding Author)

Professor

Department of English Education

Yeungnam University
280 Daehak-ro, Gyeongsan, Gyeongbuk 38541, Korea
E-mail: scho1007@ynu.ac.kr

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