Intervention Effects in Korean: Experimental L1 Evidence
Jiyoung Choi and Hamida Demirdache

1. Introduction

This paper brings experimental evidence to bear on the issue of intervention effects with wh in-situ in child as well as adult Korean. As is well-known, in wh in-situ languages such as Japanese and Korean, when a wh-phrase is commanded by a certain class of operators, called interveners, such as quantifiers and Negative Polarity Items (NPIs), it cannot be interpreted in-situ ((1a)). The ungrammaticality of (1a) can be rescued by scrambling the wh-phrase above the intervener as shown in (1b) (cf. Beck 1996, Beck and Kim 1997 among others).

(1) Japanese (data from Tomioka 2007)
   a. ?*Dare-o nani-o yom-ana-katta-no?
      anyone what-ACC read-NEG-PAST-Q
      Intended: ‘What did no one read?’

   b. ✓Nani-o_i dare-mo t_i yom-ana-katta-no?
      what-ACC anyone read-NEG-PAST-Q
      ‘What did no one read?’

This paper takes up the question of whether Korean children are sensitive to intervention effects for wh in-situ argument questions triggered by a focus-sensitive item, that is, by the NPI amwuto ‘anyone’ in Korean. Do 5-year-old children know that a question with a wh in-situ falling in the scope of an intervener cannot be interpreted as a wh-interrogative, while the corresponding question with the wh scrambled over the intervener can? Since judgments for intervention effects are notoriously subtle and as such, difficult to elicit, we have chosen not to use a truth-value judgment task, but rather to design an original production task.

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1 The following abbreviations are used for the data in this paper: ACC: accusative case; CI: ‘ci’-marker (complementizer); LOC: locative case; NEG: negation; NOM: nominative case; PAST: past tense; Q: question marker.

verifying under controlled discourse contexts the interpretation of in-situ wh-phrases in questions with an (NPI) intervener in Korean.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses the phenomenon of intervention effects observed in Korean and experimentally investigated in the present study. Section 3 presents the experiment that we designed and carried out with monolingual children and a control group of adults, all native speakers of Korean, together with our results. Section 4 discusses our experimental findings and section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Theoretical background

In Korean, in-situ wh-phrases can optionally undergo scrambling, be it in a positive or a negative question. Examples of negative wh-questions with an in-situ wh object vs. a scrambled wh object are given in (2a-b).

(2) a. ✓Sue-ka mwues-ul mek-ci anh-ass-ni?
    Sue-NOM what-ACC eat- CI NEG-PAST-Q
    ‘What did Sue not eat?’          SOV (in-situ)

b. ✓Mwues-ul, Sue-ka ti mek-ci anh-ass-ni?
    what-ACC Sue-NOM eat- CI NEG-PAST-Q
    ‘What did Sue not eat?’          OSV (scrambled)

Both (2a) and (2b) are grammatical negative wh-questions yielding the same meaning (i.e. ‘What did Sue not eat?’).

Crucially, replacing the subject Sue-ka in (2a) by a focus-sensitive item (e.g. the NPI amwuto ‘anyone’) yields an intervention effect, as shown in (3a).

(3) a. ?*Amwuto mwues-ul mek-ci anh-ass-ni?
    anyone what-ACC eat- CI NEG-PAST-Q
    On the intended reading: ‘What did no one eat?’    SOV (in-situ)

b. ✓Mwues-ul, Sue-ka ti mek-ci anh-ass-ni?
    what-ACC Sue-NOM eat- CI NEG-PAST-Q
    ‘What did no one eat?’          OSV (scrambled)

The sentence (3a) where the object wh-phrase mwues-ul remains in-situ in the scope of the NPI intervener is unacceptable on a wh-question reading. The effect observed in (3a) can be described as follows:

(4) “S-structure” generalization (schema from Beck & Kim 1997):
    *[… [NPI……[… wh-phrase…]]…Q]²

² Since Korean is a head-final language, the Q morpheme base-generated in C° appears at the right edge of the clause.
Beck (1996) accounts for the empirical generalization in (4) with a restriction on the binding of LF traces: the *Minimal Negative Structure Constraint* (MNSC), according to which Negation Induces a Barrier, and any NIB node dominating a *wh*-trace at LF cannot exclude the binder of the trace. Assuming that the in-situ *wh*-phrase in (3a) moves covertly at LF to Spec CP, the resulting LF will be filtered by the MNSC since the VP node is an NIB (because it dominates Neg) excluding the binder of the trace as shown in (5a). (3a) is consequently ruled out as a *wh*-question.

\[(5)\]

a. LF for (3a):

\[\ast \text{What did no one eat?}\]

b. LF for (3b):

\[\text{What did no one eat?}\]

\[\begin{array}{c}
\text{a. LF for (3a):}\\
*\text{What did no one eat?}'\\
\end{array} \]

\[\begin{array}{c}
\text{b. LF for (3b):}\\
\text{What did no one eat?}'\\
\end{array} \]

As Beck (1996) and Beck & Kim (1997) show, intervention effects can be avoided if the in-situ *wh*-phrases scrambles above the NPI intervener, as the example in (3b) shows. In (3b), the object *wh*-phrase *mwues-ul ‘what-ACC’ scrambles across the NPI subject, adjoining to VP. After scrambling, the NIB node (VP) dominates neither the *wh*-trace created at LF, nor its binder, thus satisfying the MNSC, as shown in (5b). (3b) is consequently grammatical on a *wh*-question reading.

Crucially, Korean questions with an (NPI) intervener subject and an in-situ *wh*-object, such as (3b), are not ungrammatical altogether. That is, they are ungrammatical (unacceptable) on a *wh*-question reading, but grammatical (acceptable) on a *yes/no*-question reading (cf. Beck & Kim 1997, Kim 2002, Song 2008). (3a), repeated in (6) below, is thus accepted as the *yes/no*-question ‘Did no one eat something?’, where the in-situ *wh*-phrase is interpreted as an existential.

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\end{array} \]

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3 *Minimal Negative Structure Constraint* (MNSC; Beck (1996)):

If a Logical Form (LF) trace $\beta$ is dominated by a NIB $\alpha$, then the binder of $\beta$ must also be dominated by $\alpha$.

(NIB: The first node that dominates a negative quantifier, its restriction, and its nuclear scope is a Negative Induced Barrier)
(6) Amwuto mwues-ul mek-ci anh-ass-ni?
       anyone what-ACC eat-ci NEG-PAST-Q
  ‘Did no one eat something?’

Summarizing so far, in Korean, canonical questions with a non-intervener subject and a wh object, be the latter in situ ((2a)) or scrambled ((2b)), yield a wh-question reading. In questions with an (NPI) intervener subject, the in-situ wh object yields a yes/no-question reading ((3a)) due to the intervention effect triggered by the c-commanding NPI. Scrambling the wh-phrase voids the intervention effects and yields a wh-question reading ((3b)).

3. Experimentally investigating intervention effects in L1 Korean

We designed a novel experimental task to examine whether Korean children are sensitive to intervention effects triggered by an (NPI) intervener. Our goal was twofold. We sought to experimentally probe intervention effects in adult Korean since, to our knowledge, the only experimental study of intervention effects found in the literature is the L2 Acquisition study of Song (2008), also carried out on Korean. We also sought to find out whether children have the adult pattern of distribution for intervention effects, distinguishing in-situ wh-phrases from scrambled wh-phrases in questions with an intervener. That is, do children know (and at what age do they know) that an in-situ wh-phrase in the scope of an NPI intervener cannot be interpreted as an interrogative (e.g. what), but only as an existential (e.g. something)? Our research questions are summarized in (7) below.

(7) In questions with an (NPI) intervener subject,
  Question 1: Do Korean children know that the scrambled wh object must be construed as a wh-phrase, yielding a wh-question interpretation?

  Question 2: Do Korean children know that the in-situ wh object must be construed as an existential, yielding a yes/no-question interpretation?

3.1. Method
3.1.1. Participants

The study included 25 monolingual children aged from 5;1 to 7;11 (mean age = 6;7) and 27 adults aged from 24 to 36 as a control group. All children and adults who participated in the task are native speakers of Korean. The experiment was run with child participants in a kindergarten in the Seoul area and was run online with adult participants.

3.1.2. Materials and procedure

Judgments for intervention effects are notoriously subtle and as such, difficult to elicit. We thus chose not to use a truth-value judgment task, but rather to design
an original *production* task verifying the interpretation of in-situ *wh*-phrases in questions with an (NPI) intervener in Korean. The production task for the participant was to answer negative *wh*-questions in both SO\textsubscript{Wh}V order (*wh* in-situ) vs. O\textsubscript{Wh}SV order (*wh* scrambled). Crucially, the target questions were embedded in controlled discourse contexts (stories with a picture) licensing both a *wh*-interpretation and a yes/no-interpretation of the given question.

Four experimental conditions were constructed in a 2x2 design with word order (SOV vs. OSV) and question type (question without vs. with an NPI intervener) as factors:

(8) a. Question WITHOUT an NPI intervener in SOV order – 4 items  
   b. Question WITHOUT an NPI intervener in OSV order – 4 items  
   c. Question WITH an NPI intervener in SOV order – 4 items  
   d. Question WITH an NPI intervener in OSV order – 4 items

Two types of *wh*-phrases (*mwues* ‘what’ and *nwukwu* ‘who’) and the NPI *amwuto* ‘anyone’ were used in the test sentences.

Examples of the experimental stimuli translated into English are given in (9-12) below.

(9) Condition 1: Question WITHOUT an NPI intervener in SOV order

a. Context: *A naughty cat who always hits his friends showed up in the field!*  
   *The cat hit the rabbit who was eating a carrot. He also hit the bird who was sitting. But, the cat didn’t hit the hedgehog because he was afraid he would get his hand pricked by the hedgehog’s spines.*

b. Test sentence: **in-situ wh object** (SOV)  
   Koyangi-ka tulphan-eyse nwukwu-lul tlayli-ci anh-ass-eyo?  
   cat-NOM field-LOC who-ACC hit-CI NEG-PAST-Q  
   ‘Who didn’t the cat hit in the field?’

   Expected answer: hedgehog (DP-answer)
Condition 2: Question WITHOUT an NPI intervener in OSV order

a. Context: Mina, Juno and their father went to the market for grocery shopping. Dad bought milk, bananas and tomatoes in the market. But, Dad forgot to buy some sugar in the market.

b. Test sentence: scrambled wh object (OSV)

Mwues-ul matu-eyse appa-ka sa-ci anh-ass-eyo?
what-ACC market-LOC father-NOM buy-CI NEG-PAST-Q

‘What didn’t Dad buy in the market?’

Expected answer: sugar (DP-answer)

(9) and (10) illustrate a canonical wh-question with a non-intervener subject. As we have just seen, both the in-situ wh object in (9b) and the scrambled wh object in (10b) yield a wh-question reading. Notice, however, that context provided in (9) (and likewise (10)) licenses the target wh-question construal for which the expected answer is the DP “hedgehog”, as well as a non-target/ungrammatical yes/no-question construal. Participants are thus expected to produce DP-answers, no matter what word order on both of these conditions.

Condition 3: Question WITH an NPI intervener in SOV order

a. Context: Mina, Juno and mother went to the cake shop. Mom said that Mina and Juno could buy a chocolate donut and a chocolate cake in the shop. Juno bought only a chocolate donut because he was not very hungry. However, Mina does not like a chocolate so she did not buy anything in the cake shop.
b. Test sentence: **in-situ wh object (SOV)**

Amwuto keikhu-kakey-eyse mwues-ul sa-ci anh-ass-eyo?
anyone cake-shop-LOC what-ACC buy-CI NEG-PAST-Q
‘Did no one buy something in the cake shop?’
?*‘What did no one buy in the cake shop?’

Expected answer: No (yes/no-answer), Juno bought a chocolate donut
*chocolate cake (DP-answer)

(12) **Condition 4:** Question WITH an NPI intervener in OSV order

a. Context: *Minsu and Juno do not like to eat vegetables. But, today, Mom said that they have to eat the carrots and broccoli she prepared for lunch. Minsu is an amenable child and he tried to eat his vegetables. He ate his carrots up, but he could not eat the broccoli. Juno, on the other hand, really hates vegetables, so he did not eat any of his vegetables.*

b. Test sentences: **scrambled wh object (OSV)**

Mwues-ul siktak-eyse amwuto mek-ci anh-ass-eyo?
what-ACC table-LOC anyone eat-CI NEG-PAST-Q
‘What did no one eat at the table?’
*‘Did no one eat something at the table?’

Expected answer: Broccoli (DP-answer)

(11) and (12) illustrate a wh-question with an intervener subject and either an in-situ wh object ((11)) or a scrambled wh object (12)). Yet again, the context provided licenses a wh-question construal (*What did no one buy in the cake shop? What di no one eat at the table?*) for which the expected answer is the DP “chocolate cake/broccoli”, as well as a yes/no-question construal (*Did no one buy something in the cake shop? Did no one eat something at the table?*) for which the expected answer is No (*because Juno bought a chocolate cake/Minsu ate his carrots*). The crucial condition is the one given in (11) with SOV order. Since the in-situ wh object falling in the scope of the NPI intervener cannot be interpreted as a wh-interrogative, only as an existential, (11) can only be construed as a yes/no-question and the participants are thus expected to volunteer only yes/no-answers. In contrast, under the OSV condition given in (12), the scrambled wh
object must be interpreted as a *wh*-interrogative and the participants are thus expected to volunteer only DP-answers.

Predictions for each experimental condition are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Predictions for experimental conditions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question type</th>
<th>Word order</th>
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<td></td>
<td>in-situ <em>wh</em></td>
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<td>(SOV)</td>
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<td>Q without an NPI intervener</td>
<td>DP-answers (9b)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q with an NPI intervener</td>
<td>yes/no-answers (11b)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>scrambled <em>wh</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>(OSV)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DP-answers (10b)</td>
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In sum, our experimental design allows us to check for intervention effects in negative questions with *wh* in-situ without relying on truth-value judgments which are difficult to elicit, but rather on the answers volunteered by participants for negative questions under controlled discourse contexts. A DP-answer on the critical NPI intervener subject condition (illustrated in (11)) tells us that the participant does not have any intervention effects, while a *yes/no*-answer tells us that (s)he does indeed have intervention effects.

Each participant was presented with 16 test items interspersed with 16 fillers, for a total of 32 items. Fillers were positive *wh*-questions (e.g. ‘What did Sue buy?’) and *yes/no*-questions (e.g. ‘Did father eat a cake?’) with two orders (SOV/OSV) respectively.

Children were tested individually in a separate room by the experimenter. In order to avoid any possible effect of particular intonation pattern, test sentences were given as visual-stimuli, but not as audio-stimuli.

### 3.2. Results

The production rate of DP-answers or *yes/no*-answers was the dependent variable in the experiment. All participants including children performed well on the fillers: they correctly produced DP-answers to positive *wh*-questions, and *yes/no*-answers to *yes/no*-questions, in both SOV and OSV orders. The participants’ target-like behavior with the fillers allowed us to establish that children have no problems interpreting scrambled *wh*-questions.

Figure 1 below presents the results for questions without an NPI intervener for each group of participants.
As we can observe, all participants performed at ceiling for canonical questions with a non-intervener subject: children, as young as five, just like adults, produced only DP-answers no matter what word order, correctly assigning a *wh*-question reading on both the in-situ *wh* object and the scrambled *wh* object, as expected.

The results for questions with an NPI intervener are presented in Figure 2 below.

As shown in Figure 2, in questions with an intervener subject, both children and adults showed the expected behavior with respect to the scrambled *wh* object (OSV) since they volunteered DP-answers at near ceiling levels: 95% of the time for children and 99% for adults.
Interestingly, the results under the crucial NPI intervener condition (SOV) are surprising: children, just like adults, volunteered both the target yes/no-answers (54.2% for adults and 58% for children) and the non-target DP-answers (45.8% for adults and 42% for children). These results show that the unacceptability of questions with an intervener on a wh-question reading was not as strong as one might expect. Indeed, the statistical analyses showed that the participants did not significantly differentiate between DP-answers and yes/no-answers under SOV order ($\chi^2(1)= 0.667, p = .414$ for adults; $\chi^2(1)= 2.560, p = .110$ for children).

However, the statistical analyses also revealed that they significantly distinguished between the in-situ wh-phrase (SOV) and the scrambled wh-phrase (OSV) with respect to the production of DP-answers ($t(26)= -5.858, p < .001$ for adults; $t(24)= -7.025, p < .001$ for children), suggesting that children, just like adults, do in fact know that the NPI subject triggers an intervention effect for the in-situ wh object. We will come back to these unexpected results in the next section.

Summarizing the results obtained, Korean children and adults showed the expected target-like behavior under three of the four conditions. In canonical questions with a non-intervener subject, they volunteered only DP-answers to both the in-situ wh object and the scrambled wh object. In questions with an NPI intervener subject and a scrambled wh object, they volunteered DP-answers. However, on the critical condition with an intervener subject and an in-situ wh object, they volunteered the target yes/no-answers as well as the non-target DP-answers. At first glance, it might seem that both children and adults are answering randomly since the percentage of yes/no-answers is 54.2% for adults and 58% for children. However, as we shall see below, the variation is across subjects, not across answer types.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Let us go back to our research questions in (7), repeated below.

(7) In questions with an (NPI) intervener subject,
   Question 1: Do Korean children know that the scrambled wh object must be construed as a wh-phrase, yielding a wh-question interpretation?
   Question 2: Do Korean children know that the in-situ wh object must be construed as an existential, yielding a yes/no-question interpretation?

The answer to Question 1 is straightforwardly yes since children, like adults, produced DP-answers with the scrambled wh object (95%). Turning to Question 2. Our results show that children produced yes/no-answers with the in-situ wh object only 58% of the time, while adults produced yes/no-answers only 54.2% of the time. We can at least safely conclude from these patterns of response that children behave just like adults. What is surprising, however, is that both adults
and children also volunteered DP-answers to the in-situ wh object falling in the scope of the NPI intervener (45.8% for adults and 42% for children, which was not expected. These results suggest that the unacceptability of questions with an intervener on a wh-question reading was not as strong as one might expect. This pattern, moreover, is not surprising in so far as grammatical judgments for intervention effects are reported in the literature to be graded (ranging from ‘*’ to ‘?*’) and to show widespread variability among native speakers (Lee & Tomioka 2001, Ishihara 2002, Kitagawa & Fodor 2003, Kitakawa & Tomioka 2003, Tomioka 2007 among others). The question then in the literature has been how to explain the source of this graded unacceptability for intervention effects with wh in-situ. To our knowledge, there have been very little experimental studies to bear on this question. Given our experimental results (roughly 55% of yes/no-answers across children as well as adults), the issue at hand is whether the subjects are answering randomly at chance level?

Looking at the results by individual subjects, we found that this graded unacceptability was not across items or answers, but across subjects for 96% of the adults and 88% of the children. That is, 26 out of 27 adults showed a systematic pattern of response with respect to intervention effects: on the critical NPI intervener condition (Condition 3 where the wh-object appears in-situ), 15 adults showed intervention effects (volunteered yes/no-answers for at least 3 out of 4 test items), 11 showed no intervention effects (volunteered DP-answers for at least 3 out of 4 test items), only 1 adult answered at chance level (volunteered yes/no-answers for 2 out 4 items). Likewise, 22 out of 25 children showed a systematic pattern of response with respect to intervention effects: on Condition 3, 14 had intervention effects (volunteered yes/no-answers for at least 3 out of 4 test items), 18 showed no intervention effects (volunteered DP-answers for at least 3 out of 4 test items), 3 children answered at chance level (volunteered yes/no-answers for 2 out 4 items). Figure 3 below illustrates the distribution of subjects across these three patterns of response for Condition 3.

![Figure 3](image.png)

**Figure 3.** Distribution of subjects across 3 patterns of response for Condition 3
In sum, overall, we find that out of 52 participants, 29 show intervention effects, while 19 do not. How do we explain this variability across both child and adult speakers? What does the coexistence of these two systematic patterns of response with respect to intervention effects across speakers tell us about the grammar \textit{wh} in-situ in Korean?

We can make sense of this surprising finding, if we assume that there are two strategies of interpretation available for \textit{wh} in-situ in Korean, just as has been claimed for \textit{wh} in-situ in English (multiple questions) by Kotek (2014) and Erlewine & Kotek (2014), building on Beck (2006) and Pesetsky (2000) – namely, Covert movement and Focus-Alternatives computation (FA). These authors propose the use, within the same language, of both covert movement and FA to interpret \textit{wh} in-situ. The starting assumption is Beck’s claim that covert movement is immune to intervention effects. The latter occur only when a focus-sensitive operator at LF c-commands a \textit{wh}-phrase interpreted in-situ using Rooth-Hamblin alternatives (Hamblin 1973, Rooth 1985). Kotek thus takes the lack of intervention effects as a diagnostic for the occurrence of covert \textit{wh}-movement in the derivation. Intervention effects occur whenever a focus-sensitive operator such as negation intervenes between an in-situ \textit{wh}-phrase projecting alternatives and the C° that must interpret them, thus preventing the alternatives from reaching C° and causing the derivation to crash. Covert movement of a \textit{wh}-phrase over the intervener, on the other hand, voids the intervention effect (just as overt movement/scrambling of a \textit{wh}-phrase over an intervener does in Korean). These two strategies are illustrated with the schemas in (13).

(13) From Kotek (2014): only the FA strategy is sensitive to intervention effects

\begin{itemize}
  \item a. Covert Movement
  \item b. Focus-Alternative computation
\end{itemize}

Based on these assumptions, we take the variability across speakers relative to intervention effects with \textit{wh} in-situ to show that there are two groups of speakers in Korean: those who use FA to interpret \textit{wh} in-situ, and those who use covert movement to interpret \textit{wh} in-situ. More precisely, we have established that 55.6% of adults (15/27) and 56% of children (14/25) show intervention effects since they systematically volunteered \textit{yes/no}-answers for an in-situ \textit{wh}-phrase falling in the scope of an intervener. By hypothesis, this group of speakers uses the FA strategy (13b) to interpret \textit{wh} in-situ. In contrast, 40.7% of adults (11/27)

\footnote{In the schemas (13), straight arrows indicate movement, and curly arrows indicate areas of in-situ focus-alternative computation.}
and 32% of children (8/25) show no intervention effects since they systematically volunteered DP-answers for an in-situ wh-phrase falling in the scope of an intervener. By hypothesis, this group of speakers uses the covert movement strategy (13a) to interpret wh in-situ. We thus conclude that even in canonical wh-in-situ language such as Korean, both the covert movement and the FA strategies are available for interpreting in-situ wh-phrases.

5. Conclusion

This paper has provided experimental evidence from child as well as adult Korean bearing on the issue of intervention effects with wh in-situ. In particular, we sought to experimentally probe the question of whether children know that an in-situ wh-phrase, falling in the scope of an NPI intervener, cannot be interpreted as a wh-interrogative (e.g. what), but only as an existential (e.g. something). Our findings revealed that children, just like adults, know that a question with a wh scrambled out of the scope of an NPI intervener is construed as a wh-question.

However, when the wh remains in-situ in the scope of the intervener, two patterns of behavior were observed across both adult and child Korean: roughly 56% of the speakers showed intervention effects (assigned the target question a yes/no-question construal), while 44% of the speakers showed no intervention effects (assigned the target question a wh-question construal). Adopting the proposal that there are two strategies for interpreting wh in-situ, covert movement and FA computation, and moreover, that intervention effects serve as a diagnostic to identify the strategy used (Kotek 2014, Beck 2006 and references therein), we conclude that roughly 56% of our child/adult speakers of Korean interpret the wh in-situ via the FA strategy, while 44% resort to covert movement to interpret wh in-situ.

We close this paper by recapitulating our findings: (i) We have designed an experimental task for probing comprehension of wh-questions with an NPI intervener that does not rely on grammaticality judgments. (ii) Our results provide experimental evidence for intervention effects in adult as well as child Korean. (iii) Children as young as 5 the adult pattern of distribution for intervention effects. (iv) Grammatical judgments for intervention effects, as reported in the literature, are graded and as such, delicate to evaluate. Our experimental findings, however, show that the variability is systematic across subjects, not across items. (v) We take this conclusion to provide evidence for the use of both covert movement and FA as strategies to interpret wh in-situ, even in a canonical wh in-situ language such as Korean.

References


