Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Composition of German and Japanese email requests

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Reference data:

The aim of the study outlined in this article is to improve the communicative writing skills of Japanese GFL (German as a foreign language) students by comparing native and target language text composition patterns. For this purpose, 200 German and Japanese request emails were collected and compared according to functional and linguistic categories. The focus of this article is to establish which parts of the text are employed to form an appropriate email request in the languages under investigation. Based on the comparison of German and Japanese composition styles, suggestions for GFL teaching are made.

　本稿でその概要を記述するこの研究の目的は、母語と学習言語のテキスト構成上のパターンの比較を通じ、ドイツ語を学習する日本人学生のコミュニカティブなライティング技能を向上させることである。そのため、それぞれ200通のドイツ語および日本語の依頼メールを収集し、それらを言語機能上および言語学上の分類基準に基づいて分析した。この論文の焦点は、分析対象となった言語(すなわちドイツ語および日本語)で書かれたテキストの中の依頼を取り巻くどの部分がEメールでの適切な依頼を支えるために使われているかを立証することである。本稿では、ドイツ語と日本語の文章構成上の様式の比較に基づき、ドイツ語教育に有益ないくつかの提案も行っている。

The focus of this study is a linguistic comparison between German and Japanese request emails. According to Dürscheid (2007), email is a multifunctional *communication form*, which may serve to deliver different *text types*, such as requests, congratulations, greetings, and orders. Linguistic properties of German emails, such as the use of spoken discourse styles in writing, have been described by Schmitz (2007). Schmitz concluded that, while it may not be possible to make claims about language use in email as a whole, it is possible to describe the linguistic properties of particular text types. Thus, the study outlined below sets out to describe the language and composition styles of this communication form as realised specifically in the text type *requests*.

Email requests have been studied by Hartford (1996), who looked at readers' perception of politeness in emails written by native speakers of English and by ESL learners to their teachers. However, most studies of requests focus on spoken discourse. In terms of its importance to the field, mention should be made to the "Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns" by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) which revealed cross-cultural differences among requests in Hebrew and other European languages (including German). Comparisons of requests between Asian and European languages other than English are rare.

In Harting (2008), I have compared German and Japanese written requests in emails by analysing text parts in which the speech act of requesting (the so-called *head act*) is performed. The focus of this article is to investigate the other text parts employed in requests in support of these head acts. Ultimately, these insights are intended to help GFL teachers to understand the differences between German and Japanese email composition styles and to help them to utilize this knowledge to improve instruction in writing.

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected through an experimental design based on a study of German and Japanese apologies (Harting, 2006). At a German and a Japanese university, 200 students – 100 native speakers of German and Japanese respectively – were asked to write emails according to writing tasks, the aim of which was to elicit requests. In total the writing tasks consisted of ten request situations that frequently occur in a university context. Each student was given one writing task only. In this article only the eight writing tasks listed in Table 1 will be considered.

To categorize situational variation I employed Brown and Levinson's (1978) parameters of *power (P), social distance (D),* and *rank of imposition (R)*. According to the authors, each of these three dimensions is universal in any request situation and varies along its own continuum. That is, power relations between interlocutors, how well they know each other, and the degree of imposition of the request range from no power relations (i.e., between peers) to strong power relations (i.e., teacher-student), from intimate friends or family members to complete strangers, and from highly imposing requests to low-imposition requests.

In this study, requests were classified as either positive (+) or negative (-) according to where they exist on each continuum. Requests were thus categorized on the *power* dimension as either *P-* (between fellow students) or *P+* (when students addressed teachers). Requests were operationalized on the *distance* dimension depending on whether students addressed the email to a well known teacher or student (*D-*) or to a teacher or student whom the writer only knew by sight (*D+*). In terms of *rank of imposition*, requests requiring a large investment of effort and time (situations 2, 4, 6, and 8 in Table 1) were classified as *R+*, while less effortful and time-consuming request tasks (situations 1, 3, 5, and 7) were labelled as *R-*. These classifications appear in the right-hand columns of Table 1.

Table 1. Writing tasks for eliciting requests

Situation	To ask the addressee …	P	D	R
1	… to pass on a message to a teacher.	−	−	−
2	… to explain the contents of a missed lesson to the writer.	−	−	+
3	… to change the date of a presentation of the writer.	+	−	−
4	… to correct an L2 letter of the writer.	+	−	+
5	… to provide information concerning studying abroad.	−	+	−
6	… to explain a computer program to the writer.	−	+	+
7	… to lend the writer a book.	+	+	−
8	… to help the writer filling several L2 forms.	+	+	+

Note: P= Power; D = Distance; R = Rank of Imposition

For each situation ten emails were collected per language, which constitutes a total of 200 emails. The emails were subsequently subjected to a formal, content, and linguistic analysis. The approach employed in the analysis is based on a technique Mayring (2003) calls *structuring*. This technique attempts to describe the structure, or order, of text content by allocating elements of the text to previously defined categories. To carry out the analysis of the 200 emails under investigation I set up eight functional categories after examining authentic emails containing requests. These categories were further classified into specific functional subcategories (such as *wishes*), content subcategories (such as *personal information*), and linguistic subcategories (such as *address terms*). These subcategories and examples of each

are listed in Table 2. The assignment of individual text parts to these categories was based on the text parts' functions within the text and by interpreting the writers' intentions.

Table 2. Categories of email analysis

Category	Subcategory	Example
Greetings	greetings	Hello …
	address forms	Dear …
	titles	Mr., Mrs., Dr. Professor
Writer-related text parts	personal information	My name is…
	accounts on experiences / feelings	I've been very busy lately.
Reader-related text parts	questions	How are you doing?
	wishes	Have great time in Kobe!
Grounders	reasons for the request	I'd like to use your book for my paper.
Apologies	performative expressions	I am sorry for ...
	implicit expressions of concern	I hope it doesn't bother you, but …
Thanks	performative expressions	Thank you so much for …
	implicit expressions of gratitude	It would be really nice if you...
Promises	offers of compensation	I'll treat you to a coffee
	minimizing the imposition	I'll return it as soon as possible
Farewell-statements	farewell statements	Regards

Items which fell into the categories outlined in Table 2 were copied from the emails and pasted into a corresponding table to be further analysed. Tokens in each category were tallied, percentages were calculated, and linguistic properties of these items were described qualitatively. In the following section, analyses of the results are presented for each category. Due to space limitations, the category *grounders* (reasons for the request), which did not reveal significant differences in the languages under investigation, will not be included below.

Results and discussion

The results of the analysis are presented according to the individual content categories outlined above. Quantitative results for both the main categories as well as the subcategories are provided in percentages and refer to the total of 100 German and 100 Japanese emails respectively. In order to demonstrate linguistic patterns in each language and to substantiate quantitative findings, quotes from the data will be provided and translated into English. The code at the end of each quote refers to the language and situation from which the quote was taken, thus G3 is a sample from a German email written in Situation 3 (Table 1). Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study, implications for the teaching of German to Japanese students are provided at the end of each section.

Greetings

Based on the data of this study, the introductory part of German emails is always (100%) formed by an address to the reader, while in Japanese (70%) such addresses seem to be less compulsory. This text part is often realised by greetings (German 62%, Japanese 45%), such as the set expressions *Hallo (G1), Hi (G6)* or *Grüß' dich (G1)* in German and *konnichi wa (J5)* in Japanese. Also address terms like the English *dear ...* are also quite common in German (39%), as in the more formal *Sehr geehrte/r ...* or the less formal *Liebe/r ...*, while in Japanese address terms such as *...e* are rather rare (9%). Titles like *Herr* and *Frau* in German were exclusively used to address teachers, while the Japanese equivalent *–san* was also used for students. A further difference between the languages under investigation is that titles as well as address forms precede the addressee's name in German, while in Japanese they follow the name. German writers either use the first *or* the surname of the addressee, depending on their relationship, while Japanese writers sometimes use both, the surname preceding the first name. Also, in addressing German teachers the writers are required to use their respective academic titles like *Dr.* and/ or *Professor*, while in Japanese it is appropriate to mark the social rank by using the title *sensei*. In total 40% of German and 36% of Japanese emails contained titles of the addressee.

For those involved in the field of GFL teaching, the empirical findings imply that Japanese students should be made aware of the fact that almost all German emails include an address to the reader. In order to write these addresses appropriately, the students also need to know which address terms and titles to choose in which situation.

Writer-related text parts

Writer-related text parts appeared in 33% of German and 68% of Japanese emails. In German they were usually found at the beginning of the email, while in Japanese they were sometimes also found at the end. Particularly in Japanese emails, this category mainly consisted of formal details about the writer, such as his/her name (German 11%; Japanese 65%), phone number (German 3%; Japanese 9%), email address (German 1%; Japanese 18%), student number (German 0%; Japanese 8%), degree course (German 12%; Japanese 51%), and year of study (German 4%; Japanese 26%), as in:

> *Watashi wa hiroshima daigaku sôgôkagakubu yonen no [surname, first name] to îmasu. Genzai gengo no zemi o ukete imasu.* [My Name is [surname, first name] and I am a fourth year student of general sciences at Hiroshima University. I am currently taking the linguistics seminar] *(J6)*.

This category, although only used in German when the addressee is not well-known, may be realised as *Mein Name ist [first name], ich studiere Wirtschaftsrecht und bin im 5. Semster* [My name is [first name] and I am studying business law in the fifth semester] *(G6)*.

German writers tend instead to give personal accounts of their activities and feelings (German 16%; Japanese 4%) which may make up a large proportion of the entire email. The function of such accounts may be to inform the reader about the circumstances which have lead to the request, or to reinforce the relationship to the reader. In doing so the writer tries to get the reader's sympathy and willingness to comply with the request. Such text parts often contain expressions like *Wie du ja weisst* [as you know]. In Japanese, such accounts are rather rare. An example is:

> *Taichôfuryô de zemi o sanshû mo yasunde shimai, go-shinpai kakemashita ga, yôyaku kaifuku shite kimashita. Raishû kara fukki dekiru to omoimasu.* [Since I haven't been feeling so well, I have missed three weeks of our seminar] *(J2)*.

As far as GFL teaching is concerned, learners should be made aware of the fact that, for establishing or maintaining the relationship to the reader, it is quite common in German email correspondence to include accounts of personal feelings or activities. Formal details about the writer, on the contrary, are redundant unless they are necessary to identify the writer or to enable the reader to contact the writer.

Reader-related text parts

While Japanese emails contained twice as many writer-related text parts, German emails contained twice as many reader-related ones (German 40%, Japanese 20%). In both languages these text parts are usually realized by references to the first contact between the reader and the writer (German 31%; Japanese 19%), as in the German example:

> *Ich weiß nicht, ob Du Dich noch an mich erinnerst? Wir saßen beiden im X-Seminar bei Y im letzten Semester!? Daher habe ich auch Deine E-Mail-Adresse…* [I am not quite sure if you remember me. We both attended Y's X-seminar last semester. This is how I got your email address] *(G6)*.

A comparable Japanese unit from this category is: *Senpai no mêruadoresu o zemi no meibo de shiri mêru wo okurasete itadakimashita.* [I got your email address from the seminar's name list, and so I wrote this mail to you] *(J6)*.

Other reader-related text parts include questions (German 7%; Japanese 1%), usually referring to the well-being of the reader, such as *Wie geht es dir? Wie läuft es in der Uni?* [How are you doing? Are things going well at uni?] *(G2)*. The only item of this category found in the Japanese data was *genki ni shiteru?* [Are you doing alright?] *(J2)*. Another category which was common in German, but could not be found in the Japanese emails are wishes to the reader (German 6%; Japanese 0%) such as *Schönen Abend dir* [have a nice night] *(G2)* or *ich hoffe, dass du die letzten drei wochen gut ohne mich überstanden hast* [I hope you were doing alright without me during the last three weeks] *(G2)*.

These findings indicate how important it is in German request emails to include references to the reader-writer relationship (by asking questions or making wishes), in particular, when the writer is a friend. GFL teachers should emphasize this point in their teaching and show students ways to establish or to maintain relationships with their readers in the target language.

Apologies

Apologies for the impending imposition of the request are very common in Japanese but only marginally used in German. In Japanese, 88% of the emails contained one or more apologies, usually preceding the request; in German only 15% with varying positions. Japanese apologies are

often (44%) syntactically connected with the request, as in *Waruin dakedo sensei ni ikenai koto o tsutaete kuren?* [Sorry, but can('t) you tell the teacher, that I cannot come] *(J1)*. In German only one such connection was found: *Ich weiß, dass du viel beschäftigt bist, aber es wäre wirklich wichtig!* [I know that you are quite busy, but it would be really important] *(G2)*.

In particular, Japanese apologies often contained so-called Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), linguistic elements that indicate or delimit the illocutionary force of an utterance (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). For example, in order to perform an apology the writer may use *sorry* or *excuse me*. In Japanese, 73% of the emails contained one such IFID and 21% displayed two or even more such tokens for the speech act of apologising. Uses of apologies depended on the addressee and the request situation. Examples included *honma gomen ne (>_<*)* [so sorry] *(J2)* and *makoto ni môshiwake nai no desu ga,* [I am terribly sorry] *(J3.4)*. In German, only 4% of emails contained IFIDs, realised in expressions such as *Entschuldigung das ich dich einfach so anschreibe* [Sorry to address you by email] *(G5)* or *Für die Ihnen entstehenden Unannehmlichkeiten möchte ich mich schon im Vorfeld entschuldigen.* [For any impending inconveniences I would like to apologize in advance] *(G3)*.

In 35% of the Japanese and 5% of the German emails writers apologized for sending the email, as in *Ich hoffe es ist ok, dass ich dir einfach so maile.* [I hope it is ok to send this email] *(G6)* or *Totsuzen no mêru o sumimasen* [Sorry for the sudden mail] *(J6)*. Sixteen percent of Japanese writers and 5% of German writers apologized for general inconveniences,

as in *Ich hoffe, es macht nicht zu großen Aufwand* [I hope it doesn't cause you too much effort] *(G4)* or *Chotto meiwaku kakesô nandakedo.* [It might be a bit troublesome] *(J1)*. Also, 26% of the Japanese and 1% of the German writers apologized more specifically for time inconveniences. In Japanese, this is often realised by the token *o-isogashî* as in *o Isogashî tokoro shitsurei itashimasu.* [I am sorry, to disturb you when you're so busy] *(J8)*. In German, the only item was *Mir ist bewusst, dass Ihre Zeit knapp bemessen ist.* [I know that your time must be quite limited] *(G4)*.

With regard to these quantitative differences, GFL learners should be made aware of the fact that apologies are rather uncommon in German request emails and that they should refrain from translating formulae routinely from their L1. Rather they should acquire target language expressions of thanks and gratitude which fulfil the same function in German as do apologies in Japanese (Beebe & Takahashi, 1990).

Thanks

In contrast to apologies, expressions of gratitude are used more commonly in German (78%) than in Japanese (20%). In German they usually appeared towards the end of an email, either before or after contact references, while in Japanese no preferred location could be detected. Like apologies, thanks are often syntactically connected to the request by conditional clauses (in German 26% and in Japanese 41% of all thanks), as in *Es wäre schön, wenn Du das für mich erledigen könntest.* [It would be nice if you could do that for me] *(G1)* or *Me o tôshite itadakeru to ureshî desu.* [I would be happy if you could have a look at it]

(J3). In German, 52% of expressions of gratitude contained an IFID (4% contained two) realised as in *Vielen Dank schon mal* [many thanks] *(G4)*, *Danke dir.* [thank you] *(G2)*, or *Ich wäre Ihnen dankbar, wenn* [I would be grateful if] *(G3.2)*. The two IFIDs found in the Japanese data were *arigataisu (J1.2)* and *Itsumo o sewa ni nari, arigatô gozaimasu.* [I always owe you so much, thank you so much,] *(J2)*.

Expressions of gratitude without an IFID (German 61%; Japanese 21%) were in German often realised by a conjunctive form as in *Über eine baldige Antwort würde ich mich sehr freuen!* [I'd be happy to receive a reply soon] *(G8)* or *Sie würden mir damit sehr helfen.* [In doing so, you would help me very much] *(G7)* or by a conditional clause as in *Es wäre toll, wenn Du sie mir (so weit es geht) beantworten könntest.* [It would be nice if you could answer my questions] *(G2)*. Also, we often find anaphoric references to the request containing *das* as a subject as in *Das wäre super lieb von dir.* [That would be very kind of you] *(G1)*. In Japanese, expressions of gratitude are similarly realised as the German examples G7 and G8, for example *Me o tôshite itadakeru to ureshî desu.* [I would be happy if you could have a look at it] *(J3)* or *Hontô ni tasukaru.* [It would help me a lot] *(J1)*. If the addressee is a teacher or a senior student, Japanese writers also often use the phrase *Itsumo o sewa ni natte imasu.* [I always owe you so much] *(J4)* for which there is no equivalent in German.

From a GFL teaching point of view, students should be taught the important function expressions of gratitude fulfil in German request emails. In order to realise them linguistically, they need to acquire different expressions for various situations and to various addressees.

Promises

Promises, which were quite common in German emails (27%), were hardly found in Japanese ones (6%). In German, they usually followed the request or its reason, while in Japanese they appeared more at the end of the email. Most of the promises found in the data were offers of compensation (German 19%, Japanese 4%) for the request, as in *Als Dank gehen wir schön essen, oder was auch immer!* [To show my appreciation I will treat you to a dinner or something] *(G2)*. While German writers often offered a coffee or a meal as compensation, Japanese writers remained more vague, as in *Kondo nani ka ogoru wa* [I'll treat you to something next time] *(J1)*. Also, there were offers to minimize the imposition (German 8%; Japanese 2%), like the following which appeared in situation 3 (changing the date for a presentation): *Ich bin natürlich bereit, jeden anderen Termin stattdessen zu übernehmen* [I would be ready to take any other date instead] *(G3)* or *î mono ni shiageyô to omotte imasu. Iya, shiagemasu* [I will do my best to do a good presentation] *(J3)*.

Since promises are rather rare in Japanese request emails, GFL students should be made aware of the fact that these text parts are quite common in German request emails. In order to realise them linguistically, they need to know conventionalized linguistic expressions in order to perform them.

Farewell-statement

As was the case with addresses to the reader at the beginning of an email, German writers also see the farewell statement as an obligatory part of an email (95%). Such statements were extremely rare in Japanese emails (8%). In German, set expressions for farewells such as *Bis dann (G1)* and *Liebe Grüße (G2)* to friends, and *Mit freundlichen Grüssen (G4)* and *Beste Grüße* [best greetings] *(G4)* to teachers, seem to be compulsory. Among the few items found in the Japanese data were fixed expressions such as *soredewa (J2)* to status equals and *soredewa shitsurei shimasu* [I must be going then] *(J7)* to superiors. Apart from the farewell statement, 88% of the German emails and 36% of Japanese emails contained the name of the writer at the end. Japanese emails sometimes only contained the writer's surname or surname and first name (in this order), both of which are rather uncommon in German. German writers usually only wrote the first name (in the case of fellow students as addressees) or the first name followed by the surname in the case of teachers as addressees.

The empirical findings suggest that when teaching GFL the students should be made aware that mentioning the name at the end of a German request email is just as much expected as the farewell statement. To be able to compose this text part appropriately, learners need to know adequate expressions for different contexts and different addressees.

Summary and conclusion

The analysis of German and Japanese request emails revealed some interesting differences in their composition styles. German request emails strictly contain reader addresses at the beginning and farewell statements at the end, concluded with the name of the writer. Japanese request emails seem to be less bound in this sense: routine formulae

for greetings and farewell statements, which frequently occur in German emails, are rather rare. Likewise, mentioning the reader's name in the address or the writer's name at the end does not seem to be compulsory.

As far as reader- and writer-related text parts are concerned, German writers tend to emphasise their relationship to the reader by giving personal accounts on their feelings and activities and by directing questions to the reader or by wishing him well. Placing such emphasis on the reader-writer relationship is rather rare in Japanese. Another quantitative difference lies in the use of speech acts such as apologies and thanks, both of which have the function of minimizing the imposition of the request. German writers tend to express their gratitude for the requested action by making extensive use of thanks, while Japanese writers prefer to express their awareness of the imposition by making apologies.

These findings reveal cross-cultural differences in text composition styles and have clear implications for the teaching of foreign language writing. For example, GFL teachers should attempt to raise Japanese students' awareness of these differences. They must also teach the vocabulary and structures necessary to compose email in accordance with the target language norms uncovered here. The qualitative results of this study may be used as an empirical basis to create teaching materials that may assist GFL learners to write requests in the target language more appropriately.

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