

TYPICAL ERRORS IN ENGLISH MADE BY JAPANESE ESL STUDENTS

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Abstract

There are several kinds of errors in English which Japanese ESL students often make: 1) interlingual (i.e., mother-tongue, or L1) errors; and 2) intralingual (or L2) errors, which are usually the result of misinterpretation and of syntact overgeneralization. While most errors committed are L2 errors, it is the L1 errors which most hinder communication. Based on a survey of L1 and L2 errors contained in some 200 English essays written by Japanese ESL students, the present study seeks to identify those English structures (morphological, syntactic, semantic, and stylistic) which present special difficulties for Japanese ESL students.

The grammatical errors which Japanese ESL students usually make in English are typically of several different kinds. Some of those errors are interlingual (i.e., mother-tongue, or L1) errors, the interference arising from an unconscious attempt to transfer to English certain native Japanese structures. Another major type of mistakes made by this group

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are intralingual (or L2) errors, which are often the result of misinterpretations, and of syntactic overgeneralization (with resultant grammatical simplification) of English grammar rules (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1969; Richards, 1971a, 1971b). This type of L2 errors is to be distinguished from so-called developmental errors, which the ESL learner would normally make as a native-born, English-speaking child in the course of learning to speak his mother tongue.

While it may be true that the majority – or, at least, many – of the errors committed by ESL learners are L2 errors (Scott and Tucker, 1974), it is nevertheless also true that it is usually the L1 errors which do the most to hinder comprehension and clear communication, and which most confuse the native anglophone listener. This being the case, the primary focus of this paper will be on certain L1 errors frequently made by Japanese ESL students, with only a brief mention of several L2 errors commonly made.

Based upon an analysis of L1 and L2 errors found in some 200 English essays written over a three-year period by different groups of Japanese university students enrolled in our Intensive English summer program at Western Washington University, the present study deals with a broad range of morphological, syntactic, semantic, and stylistic errors made by these students, all of whom had previously studied English for a minimum of six years in Japanese schools. In presenting these findings, it is our aim to identify certain English structures which are, frequently, areas of particular difficulty for Japanese ESL students.

I. Interlingual (L1) Errors

In this section are discussed certain mistakes made in English which would appear to be the result of, and directly traceable to, the intrusion of the mother tongue, Japanese.

Typical Errors

Following convention, an asterisk (*) indicates that a specimen sentence is ungrammatical. Corrections are written in superscript italics.

A. Incorrect Omission of Definite and Indefinite Articles

- (1) *"Everything is ^a symbol of life or ^a symbol of death. For example, ^{the} soldier(s), ^{the} sun and ^{the} cannon, ^{the} snake, ^{the} flower(s), ^{the} blood, ^{the} river, ^{the} spider, and everything else."

This type of mistake is frequently encountered, especially among Asian and Slavic students, many of whom speak languages in which definite and indefinite articles do not exist. In these languages, the noun stands alone, often being modified only by descriptive and/or limiting adjectives (i.e., possessive adjectives, relative adjectives, interrogative adjectives, demonstrative adjectives, and indefinite adjectives). This is not to say that nouns in English are always and necessarily preceded by definite or indefinite articles. They are not, as is well known. But in the example given above in sentence (1), both types of articles (definite and indefinite) are indeed required modifiers. The indefinite article *a* is used, in this case, to single out a quality, action, object, or individual from among a number of class of similar things. Thus, since there is more than one symbol of life, just as there is more than one symbol of death, the phrase *"Everything is symbol of life or symbol of death" must be corrected to read: "Everything is *a* symbol of life or *a* symbol of death."

The anaphoric definite article *the*, which points back to a thing or person already mentioned, specifies, identifies, and individualizes the various things which serve as symbols of life and death in a film which the student had seen: *the* soldiers, *the* sun, *the* cannon, *the* snake, *the* flowers, *the* (man's) blood, *the* river, and *the* spider. Without these definite

and indefinite articles, sentence (1) would be not only grammatically incorrect in English, but also extremely vague and nonspecific, and thus not a adequate linguistic expression for the thought behind it.

B. No Singular/Plural Differentiation

(2) *“(A) Few month(s) later . . .”

(3) *“(I think *that* human being (s) must live fully.”

In sentence (2), it will be seen that the word *month* must be pluralized, that is, must bear the plural “s” since the preceding indefinite adjective *few* modifies only plural nouns in English. Similarly, the indefinite adjectives *some* and *several* also qualify only plural nouns. Sentence (3), on the other hand, presents several different problems. Not only is the subordinating conjunction *that* missing (it being usually necessary, in formal English prose, in order to introduce a subordinate clause), but also the subject of the subordinate clause, *human being*, may be used, with modifiers when necessary, in either the singular or in the plural, depending upon the intended meaning.

If the term *human being* is used in the singular, as in an aphorism, then it must be preceded by the indefinite article *a*. If, on the other hand, the term *human being* is used in the plural, then it will not be preceded by an indefinite article and must, at the same time, be made plural, i.e., *human beings*. Thus, it would be correct to write either of the following sentences:

(4) “I think that a human being must live fully.”

(5) “I think that human beings must live fully.”

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C. Incorrect Inflection of the Verb

- (6) *"It seem(s) that this film show(s) the contrast between life and death."

In this incorrectly written sentence, the writer has failed to attach the proper inflection to the verbs *seem* and *show*. This error is probably due to the fact that the writer apparently temporarily forgot that, in contra-distinction to Japanese, which does not inflect the verb to show person and number, English does indeed do so. This is true especially in the third person singular of the present indicative, with its characteristic verb endings of *-s* and *-es*. Naturally, this does not apply to the modal auxiliaries (*may, might, can, could, shall, should, will, would, must, and ought*), which make no distinction at all between persons.

D. Incorrect Verbal Aspect

- (7) *"Each things in the film were showing the characteristics of the scene very well."
- (8) *"I don't know his mind but I think that he is loving her."
- (9) *"He is also playing ping-pong well."
- (10) *"A person who is checking hearing aids and inspecting ears is an audiologist."

In these sentences, we have examples of some very common mistakes which Japanese ESL students frequently make in English. With regard to example (7), one can immediately see that, although the use of the past tense of the verb is

correct, in this instance the student has used the wrong form of the verb, having chosen the past progressive, rather than the past nonprogressive or simple past form. The problem here is to understand what it is, in the semantic context of this particular sentence, that requires the simple past tense of the verb rather than the past progressive form. Involved here of course, is the question of aspect, which is a verbal category which indicates whether the state or action denoted by the verb is viewed as being momentary and instantaneous, repetitive, or enduring, as being completed or as being in progress and, thus unfinished. Concerning the sentence in question, sentence (7), the main interest lies not in describing the actual duration of the activity, or its incomplete status, but rather in making a simple predication about what each thing in the film did; i.e., show the characteristics of the scenes. To state this fact, and also to indicate that what is important to know is that the activity in question was finished or completed and not in progress at the time of writing, the student should have used a simple past tense to convey his thoughts about the film. This should have been done in order to show that the student was viewing the activity reported as a punctual act, rather than as a durative act.

That the student did not use the simple past tense is understandable, however, if one considers this question from the point of view of Japanese syntax. As is well known, it is not at all uncommon to find such progressive-form structures in Japanese as *tabete iru* ("he is eating") or *hanashite iru* ("he is talking"). By the same token, it is not uncommon to find structures like *aishite iru* (*"he is loving"), *shitte iru* (*"he is knowing"), and *misete iru* (*"he is showing"). As these examples demonstrate, Japanese extends the notion of progressive aspect into the semantic domain of verbs which indicate not only mental activity (e.g., *love*, *know*), but also sensation or perception (e.g., *see*, *hear*, *show*). As a rule, this extension is not possible in English unless the verbs are being

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used as present participles (e.g., "Knowing the truth, he left without a word") or as gerunds (e.g., "Loving someone is a beautiful experience"). In Japanese, on the other hand, it is quite possible to use verbs in this way, and when native speakers of Japanese do so, they fully understand that what is being expressed is a progressive, enduring state of affairs, and that this is the progressive form of the verb which they are using to express their thoughts. In relation to this particular syntactic device, then, one may say that there is definitely not a one-to-one correspondence existing between Japanese and English, and that what is perceived as being aspectually progressive in one language may not be so perceived in another language.

This type of mistake being a fairly common one, the student, whether describing present or past events, should be especially mindful of this progressive/nonprogressive dichotomy, and of the precise aspectual meaning of each component of the dichotomy.

What is important for the ESL student to understand about English grammar is that the progressive form of the verb is required only in certain contexts, while the simple, or nonprogressive, form is required in others. These linguistic contexts are, for the most part, mutually exclusive. That is to say, the progressive and nonprogressive forms of the verb are, generally speaking, context-specific and do not normally co-occur. In particular, the progressive form of the verb is the only one usually employed to express habitual activity in a *limited* period of time, whereas the nonprogressive form is normally used to express habitual, iterative activity in an *unlimited* period of time.

Concerning sentences (8), (9), and (10), the basic problem again is one of aspect. That is to say, the progressive form of the verb, which indicates duration and, as was just mentioned, habitual activity in a limited period of time, has been incorrectly used in the sentences under discussion instead of

the nonprogressive form, the correct form. The nonprogressive present-tense form is the correct one for the simple reason that the activity referred to in each of these sentences is habitual, iterative activity in an unlimited, rather than a limited, period of time. In example (8), as we can see, there is no need of a progressive form of the verb *love* to indicate duration since a sense of duration is already implied by the lexical meaning of the word. Love is usually, by its nature, durative. The other problem with this sentence has to do with the wrong choice of idiom. In English, one may say "I don't know what's on his mind," or "I can't read his mind," but not *"I don't know his mind." This is not to say that it has never been said, or that it cannot be said, but it would be an extremely rare occurrence in any dialect of English with which the author is familiar. In sentence (10), the subject of the sentence, *A person*, presumably engages in the activity mentioned on a daily basis, over an unlimited period of time. These same remarks may apply also to sentence (9), whose subject presumably plays table tennis or ping pong well, all of the time.

It may be useful, at this stage of our discussion, to restate the English verbs which are not commonly used in the progressive form. First, there are the verbs which indicate a state or condition: *belong, contain, consist, cost, deserve, have* (meaning "to own"), *mean, matter, own, please, and resemble*. Next, the verbs which denote mental activity: *believe, forget, know, like, love, need, prefer, remember, seem, understand, want, and wish*. Finally, the verbs which indicate sensation or perception: *hear, see*, and, when used intransitively, *feel, smell, and taste*. In spite of the foregoing, however, it will be remembered that all of these verbs may be used as gerunds or as present participles, as was mentioned above (p. 0).

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E. Incorrect Use of Impersonal "IT"

(11) "*Futari wa tagai ni shitashiku nari hajimeta.*"

(11.1) "*Futari wa tagai ni yujo o mochi hajimeta.*"

(11.2) *"It began to have a friendship with each other."

When composing this incorrectly written sentence about friendship, the student writer may quite possibly have had sentence (11) or sentence (11.1) in mind. Following a not uncommon Japanese linguistic procedure, the student has dropped the putative subject in sentence (11.2), incorrectly replacing it with the so-called Impersonal "IT" to serve as the subject of the sentence. There are, in fact, many situations in which Impersonal "IT" would be perfectly appropriate as the subject of the clause but, in this instance, such is not the case. In English, semantically speaking, only human beings are, ordinarily, deemed to be capable of having friendship with others. Since Impersonal "IT" normally refers only to inanimate objects or to nonhuman animate objects, it cannot therefore be the subject of this particular sentence, which should read: "They began to have a friendship with each other," or, perhaps, "They became friends," or, even "They struck up a friendship with each other."

F. Incorrect Omission of Locative Preposition

(12) *"A few years ago, they travelled *to* Paris."

In the above sentence, as can be seen, the preposition *to* has been omitted, thus making ungrammatical the locative phrase *travelled to Paris*. In English, this particular preposition is regulated by the preceding directional verb *travel*,

and must occur between the verb and the place mentioned towards which the action is directed. In colloquial Japanese, of course, this omission of the locative particles *e* and *ni* is not only tolerated but seems to occur rather frequently. Thus, one could say: “*Tokyo ikimashita*” instead of the more formal “*Tokyo e ikimashita.*” It is strictly a matter of language and style, in Japanese, whereas in English it is a matter of grammaticality and correctness.

G. Incorrect Subjective Complement

(13) *“Frank’s part-time job is a newsboy.”

The main problem with this sentence is that it is not logical; it makes no sense, from a semantic point of view. The reason is that Frank’s job is not – and cannot be – a newsboy. Frank is the newsboy; not his job. The noun *newsboy* is what is called a “Predicative Appositive” by Curme (1947). According to this grammarian, a predicate appositive comments on the statement of which it is a part, or completes, explains, or modifies it, often being preceded by an *as*-phrase or an *as*-clause, both of which point to a following explanatory remark. Be that as it may, sentence (13) should properly read: “Frank has a part-time job as a newsboy,” or “Frank is a part-time newsboy.” There really are no other ways to say it correctly, and still use the word *newsboy* in the predicate.

H. Unnecessary Emphasis

(14) *“Eyes can say a person’s mind. I believe it.”

In this example, there are two problems to be considered. The first problem has to do with the verb *say*, which requires a human subject. It would be much better English to use the verb *reflect*, rather than *say*, when the subject of the verb is

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eye or *eyes*. This is simply a matter of English usage. Although eyes are part of a human body, they are not the whole, thinking person who can *say* something and, thus, they cannot therefore be the subject of the verb *say*.

The main stylistic mistake in sentence (14), however, lies in the second sentence: "I believe it." In Japanese, it would be perfectly proper and natural to say this (*So, shinji masu*), in order to emphasize the preceding proposition; i.e., that eyes can reflect a person's mind. In English, however, it adds a jarring note of unexpected and unwarranted emphasis. It would be much more natural in English to say something like: "I believe that eyes can reflect a person's mind." Since this type of stylistic error sounds so strange in English, it would be better for the student to avoid it completely. To be sure, English contains linguistic and stylistic devices to express emphasis, but this is definitely not one of them.

I. Unidiomatic Reversal of Negative Clause

(15) *"I thought he couldn't live."

(16) *"I think that humans must not kill other humans."

In sentences (15) and (16) there is nothing that is really incorrect, from a grammatical point of view, but they are, nevertheless, very strange-sounding to the native speaker of English. This is so because of a reversal of the negation clause. In English, generally speaking, native speakers of English usually prefer to negate the verb of the main clause (in this case, *think*), thus allowing the subordinate clause to express a positive or affirmative, rather than a negative, predication. Thus, the sentence "I didn't think that he could live" is preferable to the sentence "I thought he couldn't live." Similarly, the sentence "I don't think that humans should

kill other humans" is preferable to the sentence "I think that humans must not kill other humans." In Japanese, on the other hand, the situation is just the reverse. Stylistically, it would be preferable in Japanese to say "*Ikanai to omoimasu*" than to say "*Iku to omoimasen.*" Just as in English, both types of sentences are possible in Japanese also, but the one type is much more popular than the other. The exact reason for this particular English stylistic and semantic preference is unclear, at the present time, and awaits clarification through further research in this area.

J. Misplacement of "I think" Judgmental Clause

- (17) *"The equality for women is ^a good thing, I think."

Again, we have a problem concerning the expression *I think*, of *to omoimasu*, and again we have a problem concerning misplacement of a clause. In Japanese, of course, placing *to omoimasu* at the end of the sentence is the correct grammatical thing to do. But in English, placing the expression *I think* at the end of the sentence, in apposition as shown in example (17), has the effect of weakening the validity of the whole predication. In English, it is certainly possible to have this expression in apposition, as shown in the example above, but having it in this particular position implies that the speaker has grave doubts about the assertion which he has just made. Thus, positioning *I think* at the end of the sentence is a practice to be avoided, unless the student, for some reason, purposely wishes to weaken the impact of his statement. Otherwise, the sentence should read: "I think that equality for women is a good thing," with the expression *I think* as the main clause and first element of the sentence. This makes for a much more positive assertion.

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II. Intralingual (L2) Errors

In this final section are included several grammatical mistakes from the essays which are more the result of confusion within English itself (i.e., misinterpretation or overgeneralization, with resultant simplification), than the consequence of language transfer, or interlingual interference.

A. Incorrect Verb Tense

(18) *"She wondered what her boyfriend wants."

(19) *"If I was in the same situation as Phoebe, I *would* tell someone about it."

(20) *"If she *had* had such friends, she didn't need to be troubled."

(21) *"I have stayed with the Jones family from July 25th to August 2nd."

In this section, we shall discuss several common mistakes in verb tense which students often make. First, in sentence (18), we note that the verb of the main clause, *wondered*, is in the past tense, whereas the verb in the subordinate clause, *wants*, is in the present tense. If the situation described by the action were universally true, or were a habitual one, then *wants* would probably be the correct form of the verb to use. However, since this is not the case, a different tense must be employed; namely, the past tense, in this case. This is so because in English, generally speaking, the verb in the subordinate clause usually agrees in tense with the principal verb of the main clause, especially if it is simultaneous action that is to be expressed. Naturally, if anterior action is what is to

be expressed, then the subordinate-clause verb must express action happening prior to that expressed by the principal verb of the main clause. This is called "the sequence of tenses." More precisely:

(22) "She *says* that her father *is* ill."
(PRESENT) (PRESENT)

(23) "She *said* that her father *was* ill."
(PAST) (PAST)

(24) "She *said* that her father *had been* ill."
(PAST) (PLUPERFECT)

Thus, as we can see, sentence (22) expresses present simultaneity; sentence (23), past simultaneity; and sentence (24), past anteriority. That is to say, the girl's father had been ill before she spoke of it.

The second common mistake that Japanese ESL students often make has to do with expressing unreal, nonexistent, or contrary-to-fact events, facts, or situations, as exemplified in sentences (19) and (20). To express a present unreal situation in English, the verb in the "IF," or "Condition," clause is regularly put into the past tense, while the verb of the main clause, or "Result" clause, is put into the conditional tense. Thus:

(25) "If I *had* enough money, I *would travel* around the
(PAST) (CONDITIONAL)
world."

Of course, the two clauses could exchange places if one so wished, so that the same sentence would read:

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- (26) “I *would travel* around the world if I *had* enough
(CONDITIONAL) (PAST)
money.”

Except for emphasis, in which the first element may be seen as being somewhat more important than the second element, there is no appreciable difference in meaning of these two sentences. It will be noted that the only formal difference is one of punctuation, the comma disappearing when the “Condition” clause comes last in the sentence. The verb tenses remain as they are, with no change of relative position in the inverted sentence.

Similarly, to express a past unreal, nonexistent, or contrary-to-fact situation in English, the verb in the “IF,” or “Condition,” clause is put into the pluperfect, or past perfect tense. Thus:

- (27) “If I *had had* enough money, I *would have travelled*
(PLUPERFECT) (CONDITIONAL PERFECT)
around the world.”

Some grammarians have called this the “tense of regret,” for it frequently does, indeed, express regret that a certain action, event, or situation did not take place, or that one had not followed a certain course of action. As in sentences (25) and (26), the two clauses in sentence (27) may exchange places without any essential loss of meaning. It will also be noted that, in sentence (20) above, the verb phrase in the main clause (*wouldn't have been troubled*) is in the passive, rather than the active, voice, the verbal adjective *troubled* describing a state of being, the result of prior action.

Concerning sentence (21), the problem is one of time relations. The student-author, using the present perfect tense of the verb *stay*, wrote “have stayed,” instead of “stayed,” which is the past tense of *stay* and which is the proper form of

the verb to use in this particular sentence. This problem could have been avoided had the writer but realized that such adverbial phrases as *last month* or *yesterday*, or the one in question, *from July 25th to August 2nd*, regularly occur with past (perfect) tense verb forms only, and never with the present perfect tense, which is not used with adverbials indicating purely past time (Palmer, 1974).

Summing up, it is essential that the ESL student, when using English verbs in a complex sentence, pay close attention to: 1) the sequence of tenses of the verbs; and 2) the reality or the unreality of the predication as it is expressed in the sentence.

B. Incorrect Use of the "S-Genitive"

(28) *"If she tells her school's teacher . . ."

(29) *"I think that the boy lived in his imagination's world."

Generally speaking, present-day English restricts the "S-genitive" to animate objects, living things, whereas the "OF-genitive," the usual form used with lifeless things and objects, may also be used with living things, as well. Thus, while we may say either "that boy's family" or "the family of that boy," we most often, in so-called Choice English, say "the wings of the airplane," rather than "the airplane's wings." It goes without saying that this rule does not always hold true in general, colloquial English. To be sure, there are exceptions to this living-versus-lifeless rule. Such phrases as *for safety's sake*, *the plane's passengers*, and *the yacht's crew* are common enough. Furthermore, there are survivals of older usage in the so-called genitive of measure; e.g., *a day's journey*, *a stone's throw*, *a dollar's worth*, *a minute's notice*, an

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hour's delay, and so forth. Finally, there are certain metaphorical expressions in which the idea of life is pictured in a figurative sense; e.g., *at death's door*, *the ocean's roar*, etc. Notwithstanding these exceptions, however, the general rule that says that the "S-genitive" is restricted to living things still stands, and the non-native speaker of English would be well-advised to follow it.

Thus ends our survey of various mistakes in English grammar which Japanese ESL students frequently make. While the present sample does not, obviously, contain all of the errors discovered in the corpus, it is hoped that those presented and discussed herein are representative, and that their having been highlighted will ultimately be of use to ESL teachers and writers of ESL materials alike.

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