There's No or There Aren't Any? Teaching English Negative Existentials

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Different languages reveal different conceptual bases that are fundamental to users. One such case is statements of existence. In English, a fundamental distinction is made between singular and plural existence. In Japanese a fundamental difference is made between animate and inanimate existence. The distinctions are preserved in expressions of negative existence in both languages. However, while Japanese maintains a directly parallel animate/inanimate system for negation, in English the system is much more elaborate, with multiple options being available for singular, plural and non-count negation. This paper describes an action research project carried out with undergraduate Japanese students of English. The results indicate that for Japanese students of English, statements of negative existence are problematic and that even after explicit instruction, expressions of negative existence are still prone to systematic errors, with singular negation being the most accessible, and plural and non-count referent negation being less so.

言語が異なれば、ユーザーにとっての基本的な概念基盤も異なる。そのひとつが存在の記述である。英語には単数形と複数形の区別がある。日本語では、生物的存在と無生物的存在の基本的区別がある。この区別は、どちらの言語でも否定的存在の表現において維持されている。しかし、日本語では否定表現において生物・無生物の直接的な並列システムが維持されているのに対し、英語では単数否定、複数否定、数えられない否定の複数の選択肢があり、システムははるかに精巧である。本稿では、日本の英語学部生を対象としたアクション・リサーチ・プロジェクトについて述べる。その結果、日本人英語学習者にとって否定的存在の表現は問題であり、明示的な指導を受けた後でも、否定的存在の表現において系統的な誤りを犯しやすいことが示された。

Learning a foreign language requires the learner to learn and remember a large number of words and also to learn, remember, and apply a large number of grammatical rules in order to produce utterances that convey an intended meaning. There is a readily observable fact that as the learner proceeds through a course of study, they will generally move from simple, core vocabulary to more nuanced, abstract and specialized words. Similarly, they will generally move from basic sentence structures to more complex constructions(See discussion in Ellis, 2015, pp. 67–115). However, what is considered basic, fundamental, and easily graspable in one language may be, depending on the L1 of the learner, complex, counter-intuitive, abstruse and opaque to the learner. That is to say, not all language targets are equal. Similarity to the L1 may mean that relatively little time and effort is needed for rapid uptake and incorporation of the target into the knowledge base of the learner. In contrast, vocabulary or grammar structures that are alien to the L1 system, that highlight nuances and contrasts that are not attended to in the L1, are very likely to require more focus, greater teacher engagement and multiple revisits before learners can understand and use (See chapters on L1 interference in Swan & Smith, 2001). One such case is the expression of negative existence in English as a target for L1 Japanese speakers studying English .

Negation and Existential Negation

Negation is a language universal. That is, "All human systems of communication contain a representation of negation." (Horne, 2001, p. xiii). However, the ways that languages express negation is open to a large amount of variation. The literature on negation starts with what is termed 'standard negation' which is "that type of negation that can apply to the most minimal and basic sentences" (Payne, 1985, p.198). A fundamental distinction in standard negation is between symmetrical and asymmetrical negation (Miestamo, 2013). Symmetrical negation refers to the case where the difference between a basic affirmative sentence and its negated counterpart is solely the presence

of a negator word or particle in the negative sentence. This is illustrated in the German sentence below.

(1) Ich singe — Ich singe nicht
1 Pers singular, sing — 1 Pers singular, sing, Neg
I sing. — I don't sing
(Miestamo, 2013).

In this case the insertion of the negator *nicht* is the sole step required to negate the affirmative sentence.

The case of asymmetrical negation is illustrated by the example from Finnish below.

(2) Finnish

tule-n — b. *e-n* *tule*
come- 1sg — neg-1sg come. conneg. pres

'I am coming' — 'I am not coming'
(Miestamo, 2013)

In this case, person marking (*n*) on the verb (*tule*) in the affirmative sentence is stripped away from the verb and attached to the inserted negator in the negative sentence, demonstrating asymmetrical negation.

According to Miestamo (2013), Japanese is classified as having asymmetrical standard negation while English is classed as having a mixed system of standard negation. The Japanese case is illustrated in the following showing changes to the form of the verb in addition to the insertion of the negator.

(3) Japanese (Personal knowledge)

Taro wa sushi wo taberu — b. Taro wa sushi wo tabe-nai
Taro. Tp. sushi Obj. eat. — Taro Tp. Sushi Obj. Eat. Neg.
Taro eats sushi. — Taro doesn't eat sushi.

In contrast, in English the system of standard negation is mixed. In cases where the sentence has an auxiliary verb ("be" in continuous constructions and "have" in perfect constructions) the negator "not" (or its clitic form "n't") is suffixed to the auxiliary to give symmetric negation. In sentences with no auxiliary, such as simple present and simple past constructions, the auxiliary "do" is inserted preverbally, tense and person marking are stripped from the main verb and applied to the auxiliary and the negator "not" or "n't" is suffixed to this marked form of "do". See Appendix A. It is clear from this very brief outline that the standard negation systems of English and Japanese differ from each other in fundamental ways.

In addition to standard negation, in a study of negative existential constructions, Veselinova (2013, p. 107) notes, "It is found that there is a strong cross-linguistic tendency to use a special negation strategy in these predications." That is, languages have special means for expressing the idea that some entity is not in existence, whether this be locational, temporal or universal in nature, as illustrated by the following.

(4) There is no beer in the fridge. (Locational – there is beer on the balcony)

(5) There are no buses after nine p.m. (Temporal – there are buses before nine p.m.)

(6) There is no such thing as zombies. (Universal – at no time and in no place do zombies exist)

In statements of existence, Japanese makes a distinction between animate and inanimate entities, using the existential verb *iru* for animates and the existential verb *aru* for inanimate objects.

(Notice that singular or plural referent is not marked in Japanese)

(7) Japanese (Personal knowledge)

a. Neko ga iru — b. Kuruma ga aru
Cat Tp. exist (animate) — Car Tp. exist (inanimate)
There is a cat/are cats — There is a car/are cars

The distinction is carried over symmetrically into statements of negative existence, with *inai* and *nai* being used for negative existence of animates and inanimates respectively. In the case of English, the animate and inanimate distinction is disattended to, but the singular/plural distinction for countable referents is obligatorily marked in both affirmative and negative existential statements.

(8a) There is a book in my bag. — (8b) There isn't a book in my bag.

(9a) There are some books in my bag. — (9b) There are no books in my bag.

The first thing to note here is that while a singular/plural distinction seems

straightforward in affirmative constructions, the negative existential constructions are somewhat counterintuitive. That is, in both 8b and 9b, the number of books is actually zero, but the speaker has the choice to mark these zero referents as either singular or plural. For speakers of a language like Japanese, which largely disattends to plural forms, the conceptual underpinnings of singular or plural expressions of zero number are quite challenging. In addition, there is another dimension of difference that is relevant in English, but not in Japanese, namely the count/mass distinction. A further point to note is that although the affirmative expressions have two and only two forms, i.e., "there is" versus "there are", the negated forms have a wider variety of available forms to express the concept of zero existence. This will be the subject of the next section.

Negative Existence Constructions

For standard negation in English sentences, the negator is "not" or its clitic form "n't". However, for negative existential expressions, there are two possible negators – "not" or "no". "Not" can be used in full or reduced to a clitic, (reduced, inseparable suffix, i.e., *n't*) while "no" is only used in its full form. Expressions of negative existence primarily differentiate between singular and plural by the form of the existential verb "be" and the morphology of the noun. This existential verb can also be reduced to a clitic on the word "there" ("there's" or "there're"). Either the existential verb or the negator "not" can be clitic, but not both. That is, such double clitic constructions as "there'sn't" are not permissible. A further aspect is the use of the word "any" which collocates with use of the "not" negator, but not with the "no" negator. Thus, there is a complex set of alternative forms for speakers to select from when expressing negative existence. The full set of negative existential expressions are laid out in table 1.

Table 1

Negative Existential Forms in English

		Full	Reduced negator	Reduced verb
Singular	*Not*	There is not a	There isn't a	There's not a
	No	There is no	---	There's no
Plural	*Not*	There are not any	There aren't any	There're not any
	No	There are no	---	There're no
Uncountable	*Not*	There is not any	There isn't any	There's not any
	No	There is no	---	There's no

For Japanese learners of English, this array of options poses a significant cognitive challenge. Firstly, Japanese speakers must attend to the singular/plural distinction and also the mass/count distinction, both of which are not attended to in Japanese. Secondly, the Japanese speaker must be familiar with the choice of "not" or "no" as a negator – with the concomitant grammatical rules regarding usage of the word "any" that ensues when choosing "not" rather than "no". Corpus investigations suggest that "not" generally appears in its clitic form when used in expressions of plural or non-count negation, while using "no" tends to trigger the reduction of the verb "is" in singular negative existential statements. See data in Campbell-Larsen (2024). A final complication for learners is the tendency of native speakers to violate verb agreement in fast speech and use a singular verb form (only in reduced form) with a plural referent, as in:

(10) There's a lot of people here tonight.

In sum, the expression of negative existence in English is complex, nuanced, and challenging for Japanese learners from the point of view of typological and cognitive differences between the two languages.

The Study

Noticing the complexities of negative existential constrictions, I decided to carry out an action research project that would identify if such constructions were problematic for learners, whether there were any systematic differentials in the learners' ability to

use the constructions and whether focused instruction could remedy these issues. A pre-teaching test was carried out to ascertain the ability of Japanese learners of English to form negative existential statements in English. All participants (N= 17) were native Japanese speakers enrolled at a private university in Japan. They were undergraduate students majoring in English and ranged in age from 18 to 20 years old.

Prior to teaching negative existential constructions, a printed handout was given to all students. See Appendix B. Students were asked if any of the pictures were unclear or difficult to understand. If any difficulties were reported, the teacher explained the picture in Japanese so as not to prime the students with any hints in English. For example, in item 10, showing two buses with negative markers (a cross), the teacher explained in Japanese that there are two buses an hour during the day, but after nine p.m. there are no buses. Producing the plural expression 'there are no buses/there aren't any buses (after nine p.m.)' is the goal of this item. After checking that all pictures were understandable, the students were asked to write the positive or negative existential expression on the paper. The exercise was completed individually by students, and after all students had finished writing, the papers were collected.

Following the collection of the papers, the existential system of English was explained to students using a concept-checking methodology to explicate the options for singular, plural and non-count existence and negative existence. Blank copies of the test handout were distributed and the students, working with partners, could fill out the correct answers next to each picture and the teacher could check and correct the answers.

In a subsequent class, four weeks after the initial teaching, the same test paper was re-distributed, and the students re-took the test under the same conditions. The test papers were collected, and the results were compared with those of the first test.

Results

The following tables show the results for selected items from the Pre test. The sample of items reflects the overall trend in singular, plural and non-count responses in positive and negative existential statements.

Table 2

Results of the Pre and Post tests (Selected Test Items. Item no. in Circle)

	Positive					
	Singular		Plural		Non-Count	
	Well-formed	Ill-formed	Well-formed	Ill-formed	Well-formed	Ill-formed
Pre ①	17	0	10	7	⑤ 5	12
Post ①	17	0	12	5	⑤ 6	11
	Negative					
	Singular		Plural		Non-Count	
	Well-formed	Ill-formed	Well-formed	Ill-formed	Well-formed	Ill-formed
Pre ⑦	13	4	③ 7	10	② 7	10
Post ⑦	13	4	③ 14	3	② 11	6
Pre ④	11	6	⑥ 7	10	⑫ 7	10
Post ④	13	4	⑥ 11	6	⑫ 14	3
Pre					⑬ 9	8
Post					⑬ 12	5

In the initial test, there was a wide variety of responses ranging from well-formed to clearly ill-formed. For example, item 14, the correct and possible answers were:

- There are people.
- There are some/ three people.

That is, there must be a plural verb form, plural noun form and the optional inclusion of a number word or quantifying word or expression. Some ill-formed answers were:

- There are three peoples.
- There are three person.

It seems that conceptually positive plural existence was accessible, but the plural morphology of the noun caused problems.

For item 3, well-formed examples were:

- There are no classes in June.
- There aren't any classes in June.

Examples of ill-formed answers were:

- There is not class.
- There are no class on next month.
- There not Thursday's class on June.
- There aren't any class in June.

For Item 4, well-formed examples were:

- There's no class next week.
- There isn't a class next week.

Examples of ill-formed answers were:

- There is not class next week.
- There is a no next class.

It will be seen from the results that for positive expressions of existence there is a hierarchy. Positive singular referent expression (Item 1 'There is a convenience store') was the most well-understood and producible construction, with all students producing a well-formed expression. Next are expressions of plural existence and finally expressions of existence with non-count referents. This hierarchy was visible in both the Pre and Post tests. Expressions of positive existence were not the main focus of this study, and the inclusion of these data is primarily to add context.

It will be seen in the Pre data that a similar hierarchy existed in expressions of negative existence. Although the students' grasp of negative singular referent existence (There's no bus/There isn't a bus and There's no class/There isn't a class) was not as firm as expressing positive singular existence, this was still the construction that was most likely to be well-formed by students. The cases for plural non-existence and non-existence of non-count referents were very similar in that more than half of the students produced ill-formed expressions for situations that sought responses like: There are no convenience stores/There aren't any convenience stores (around here), or, There's no milk/There isn't any milk (in the fridge). The exception was for the expression regarding time, with slightly over half of the students producing a well-formed answer i.e., There's no time/ There isn't any time.

In the Post data, the expression of positive existence was very similar to the Pre data. For expressions of negative existence, there were very small increases in the number of well-formed singular constructions. In the expression of negative plural existence (There are no classes (in June)/There aren't any classes (in June); There are no convenience stores (around here)/There aren't any convenience stores (around here)), there was a change in the number of well-formed responses, with an increase from 7 to 14 and 7 to 11 for items 3 and 6 respectively. An increase in the ability to produce well-formed negative existential statements with non-count referents was also observed, although the Pre to Post change was not as pronounced as with plural negative existential constructions. All in all, it seemed that explicit teaching does have an effect on the ability of students to produce well-formed negative existential constructions, but some students still have systematic problems with this aspect of English grammar, even after explicit teaching. There appears to be an accessibility hierarchy with both positive and negative existentials in English, with the order being singular, followed by plural followed by expressions with non-count referents.

Discussion

It is the prototypical case that L2 learners already have a functioning L1and that this L1 will likely affect the L2 learning process in many ways. In the case of languages that are closely related "…learners find it easier to learn an L2 that is similar to their own language" (Ellis, 2015, p. 397). Concomitantly, languages which are distant from each other in terms of phonotactics, lexis, grammar, typology, cognitive factors and pragmatics – languages such as Japanese and English – will probably be harder for students to acquire. Statements of negative existence are an interesting illustration of this tendency. It can hardly be said that stating existence or non-existence are cases of marginal, peripheral or seldom-used parts of any language. Indeed, the way(s) to express existence often feature as lesson targets in beginner and introductory textbooks for learners. However, while expressions of positive existence – there is/there are – are usually explicated clearly in texts, the negation of these constructions are often relegated to a sidenote. For example, in the mass market ESL text designed for CEFR A1

level learners, Touchstone 1 (McCarthy et al. 2014, p. 55) the grammar section for this target features nine examples of positive existential statements and two examples of negative statements, both of which use only *no* as the negator, avoiding the alternative *not* negator and usage of the word *any*. In the accompanying teacher's manual (p. T55) there are no explicit instructions concerning teaching negated existence. This is a common occurrence in textbooks in the author's experience. It is the case that the negative existential construction is more complex than the positive construction, but it is common for textbooks to devote more attention to the simpler construction and treat the more complex one in a reductive manner, if at all. This perhaps reflects a general tendency to view negation as "second order affirmation" (Horn, 2001, p.3) and thus somehow subordinate to and dependent on affirmation.

There exist deep typological differences between Japanese and English on many levels. Standard negation operates differently in the two languages, and this difference may underlie some of the difficulties that students may face. In the case of statements of existence, and non-existence, Japanese and English differ in terms of animate/inanimate, singular/plural, count/non-count distinctions. In addition to these differences, when it comes to expressing negative existence, the multiple variants that are available for Japanese learners can be challenging and confusing. Furthermore, these differences may not be readily available to metacognition by native speakers or proficient L2 speakers of English, and the issue may be brushed over.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of the study is the difficulty in using picture prompts to elicit statements of non-existence. The negative countable prompts were designed to indicate either singular or plural non-existence, but for the negative plural referents, the inclusion of a fixed number of items was confusing as students were not clear whether they should account for there not being, for example, two convenience stores or there not being any convenience stores. "There aren't two convenience stores" as a statement could entail there being one, three or none. Explications for unclear picture items had to be carried out in Japanese to avoid priming the students, with all the pitfalls of translation that ensue. A further limitation was the labeling of certain answers as 'ill formed'. In this case, a small number of answers such as 'I don't have time' or 'We don't have cheese' were labelled as ill-formed because they resorted to a possessive construction with 'have' as opposed to the elicited existential one. It is in a very narrow, test internal sense, that these responses are considered ill-formed despite their broad appropriateness in discourse terms.

Another limitation is the small sample size presented here. It should be pointed out here that it was an action research project and thus not specifically concerned with statistical analyses. Rather, the project was carried out to verify that there were shortcomings in learners' knowledge of the construction in question, whether there were any differentials in the difficulties and whether direct instruction could address these issues. The results seem to support an affirmative response to these points. It must also be stated that the entire project was initiated based on several decades of teaching these constructions and having a tacit awareness of the difficulties.

A further limitation is the somewhat decontextualized nature of the target constructions. In spoken discourse, the expression of negative existence as either singular or plural may be primed by the position in the sequence and other contextual factors. Givon (2001) states,

> NEG–assertion is thus a distinct speech act, used with different communicative goals in mind than affirmative assertions. In using NEG-assertion, the speaker is not in the business of communicating new information to the hearer. Rather s/he is in the business of correcting the hearer's misguided beliefs. (p. 372)

This may be true in some cases, but the pragmatics of negative existence may be more nuanced than this simple correction function. When appearing in the first turn in an inform/acknowledge sequence, negative existence can be non-corrective, and the bare statement may be either singular or plural.

A: There are no buses after 9:00 p.m.

B: Right, we'll have to take a taxi.

This stands in contrast with a second turn that is responsive and in opposition to a prior statement and may be primed by the first turn.

A: Let's take the 9:30 bus.

B: Actually, there's no 9:30 bus. In fact, there aren't any buses at all after 9:00 p.m.

A further contextual influence may be the expression of non-existence in response to a question where the form of the question primes the form of the answer.

A: Is there a castle in your hometown?

B: No, there's no castle but there's a famous cathedral.

The pragmatics of negation and the types of sequence environments that statements of negative existence occur in were not addressed in this study. Future research may address some of these issues.

Conclusion

This small-scale study has shown that for Japanese learners of English there are some difficulties in producing grammatically accurate statements of existence and non-existence. There seems to be a hierarchy, with positive existential statements being easier to produce than negative statements and singular being the easiest form to produce followed by plural, followed by non-count referents for both positive and negative constructions. The overall point is to highlight the fact that some language targets, even supposedly elementary ones, are more challenging for students than others. Teachers should be aware of these challenging items and prepare syllabi, lessons, materials and test instruments accordingly. The ability to clearly explicate English negative existential constructions, perhaps through concept checking strategies, should be part of any teacher's repertoire. Teachers could also, if possible, devote an entire lesson to these constructions in their own right, rather than viewing them as mere side-issues to the default positive existential constructions. Preparing lesson materials such as the handout in appendix B could facilitate student learning of this point. The importance of both teachers and students gaining nuanced understanding of very basic elements of the target language cannot be overstated. This paper has, I hope highlighted a gap in English language pedagogy and will spur teachers to examine assumptions about what to teach and how to teach.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Symmetric/Asymmetric Standard Negation in English

Tense	Positive Construction	Negative Construction	Symmetric/ Asymmetric
Present Simple	He fights	He does not fight	Asymmetric
Present Continuous	He is fighting	He is not fighting	Symmetric
Past Simple	He fought	He didn't fight	Asymmetric
Past Continuous	He was fighting	He was not fighting	Symmetric
Present Perfect	He has fought	He has not fought	Symmetric
Present Perfect Continuous	He has been fighting	He has not been fighting	Symmetric
Past Perfect	He had fought	He had not fought	Symmetric
Past Perfect Continuous	He had been fighting	He had not been fighting	Symmetric
Future	He will fight	He will not fight (won't)	Both
Future continuous	He will be fighting	He will not be fighting	Symmetric
Future perfect	He will have fought	He will not have fought	Symmetric
Future Perfect Continuous	He will have been fighting	He will not have been fighting	Symmetric

Appendix B

Test Instrument