SOURCES OF ERROR:
THE THIRD PERSON SINGULAR PRESENT IN JAPANESE LEARNER ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper examines the errors in the third person singular (z) morpheme, using data from longitudinal studies of the spontaneous speech of adult Japanese learning English. Sentence length and grammatical complexity were found to be significant factors in the error rate, as was phonological interference (production of word final consonants and clusters) and lexical choice. Some of the implications for teachers are discussed.

この論文は、英語を学ぶ大人の日本人の自発的な話し言葉に対する縦断的研究から得られたデータを使って、三人称単数 {－2} 形態素の使用における誤りを考察しています。誤用率の重要な要因として、音韻上の干渉（語尾の子音と子音連結の発音）や語いの選択と同様、文の長さ及び文法の複雑さもあげられることがわかります。英語教師のためのヒントもあつかわれています。

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Introduction

Error in the use of the third person singular present tense marker of verbs is a common feature of the spoken and written English of many EFL learners, including Japanese. The source of the difficulty which underlies this error is often ascribed to one or both of two explanations. The first of these involves the notion of interference from the native language: in most languages (including Japanese) verbs do not conjugate for person and number as English verbs do, and thus it is claimed that the EFL learner will have difficulty in internalising the new distinction between the (ϕ) morpheme required for most of the present tense and the third person singular marker (z) (hereinafter referred to as 3S). The second explanation relates to learnability: as the marker is largely redundant (in most cases it can be omitted without affecting the meaning at all), the learner is more likely to omit it as he/she is focusing attention on the content rather than the form of the communication. These explanations are vague generalisations which do not attempt to define the learners' problems with any precision, and cannot therefore suggest steps for improving performance. They are of little practical value for the teacher whose students wish to communicate with a relatively unmarked (for foreign accent) form of English.

This paper attempts to define the problems of the 3S morpheme with greater precision, to determine what steps might be appropriately applied to improve the success rate of attachment of the morpheme. This is achieved by examination of the actual errors produced by Japanese EFL learners to provide insight into the development patterns and problems associated with the use of the 3S morpheme. From this knowledge the teacher is in a better position to intervene effectively (or to choose not to intervene) in the acquisition process. The method of research is not new. It was suggested by Corder (1967) as a means of discovering learning patterns. This paper,

however, goes beyond other morpheme studies in considering the influence of phonological and lexical factors in addition to the grammatical.

Subjects, Data and Method

The method used is a form of content analysis. Use was made of a data base of 6811 sentences produced in 10 individual longitudinal studies of the spontaneous informal speech of Japanese students aged sixteen to thirty enrolled in an intensive English programme in Australia. There was a wide range of ability in spoken English across the 10 subjects, and they were taught in two groups (labelled advanced and standard) according to their level of proficiency in English. There were five subjects from each group.

From this data base all sentences which required the use of the 3S attached to main verbs which do not also function as auxiliaries (i.e. *is, has,* and *does*) were abstracted as in Dulay and Burt (1973, etc.), a total of 220 obligatory situations in 216 sentences. All situations were then rated for error in the 3S morpheme. The errors noted were all omissions of the 3S marker, as found in the sentence:

Y2: He pronounce- # (English) very different from me and Australian people.

Situations where it is difficult to determine whether there is an error or not (e.g. if an /s/ or /z/ follows without a pause) are not counted in the total. Error rates were then determined for each study and for each individual in each recording session.

Results

There were errors in 98 of the 220 obligatory situations, an average of 45%. This rate of use is considered to be low when compared with more than 1,200 uses of *is* and a similar figure

for the use of the unmarked present tense form. Individually, however, the subjects revealed a wide range of error rates, from 16% to 78%. The highest error rates occurred unexpectedly amongst the more advanced students, and the error rates did not decrease during the course of the study. These latter two findings were in contrast to previous studies of the development of questions and relatives in the same data base (Saunders, 1983, 1986b) which showed that the more advanced subjects performed better and there was an improvement during the course of the study. As a result more detailed grammatical, lexical and phonological analysis was undertaken.

Grammatical Environment

The error rates were first investigated according to sentence complexity, defined in terms of the number of clauses contained within the sentence, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Error Rates in Simple and Complex Sentences

Sentence Complexity	Number of Sentences	Error Rate
1 clause	102	37%
2 clauses	89	55%
3 or more clauses	25	60%

From this table it can be seen that complex sentences (two or more clauses) have higher rates of error than simple sentences (one clause). Thus the error is more likely to appear in longer, more complex sentences, suggesting that the learner does not apply the same level of commitment to producing correct forms when involved in organising longer sentences. This is the trade-off effect. It is not possible from this data to determine whether there is a ratio of length to error rate beyond the simple-complex distinction because of the relatively low

incidence of longer sentences which results in the difference in error rate not being significant.

If sentence complexity involves more than the number of clauses, and is dependent on the types of clauses, then the error rate should reflect the hierarchy of "difficulty" in respect of the various types of clauses. Further analysis of the sentences by types of clauses used showed that there was no significant difference in error rate according to the linear order of the clauses (that is whether the subordinate clause preceded or followed the principal clause), nor whether the obligatory situation occurred in the principal or the subordinate clause. What was significant, however, was the clause type itself. The group of sentences containing co-ordinate clauses, adverbial clauses of reason or reported speech produced an error rate of 50%, while the group comprising temporal, conditional and relative clauses produced an error rate of 79% in the 3S morpheme. It is therefore concluded that there are at least two classes of complexity by clause type which result in different levels of trade-off error.

This finding may explain why the more advanced students produced higher levels of error — they produced longer and more complex sentence types. This also may explain why there did not appear to be any noticeable improvement during the course of the study — the expected improvement in error rate (from learning and practicing) is offset by the increase in trade-off error (from the production of more complex sentences).

Phonological Environment

The phonological environment relating to this morpheme may be considered in three sections — the phonological shape of the morpheme itself, the preceding environment and the following environment. The morpheme does provide particular problems for Japanese learners as its attachment often pro-

duces a syllable final consonant cluster which does not occur in their language.

This morpheme has three allomorphs (phonetically different shapes) — [s], [z] or [əz] — depending on the preceding phoneme. The use and error rate for each form is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Error Rates in the 3S Allomorphs

Allomorph	Obligatory Situations	Errors	
	No.	No.	%
[s]	104	40	38
[z]	103	49	48
[əz]	13	9	69
Total	220	98	45

This table shows the voiceless [s] the most stable of the three, with the [əz] the least stable. Further it shows that while [s] and [z] have nearly equal distribution, [əz] is used far less frequently. While it would be predicted that [əz] would occur less frequently as it is attached to words ending in a smaller number of phonemes than the other two, the high error rate indicates greater difficulty with this form, possibly to the extent of avoidance (the conscious or subconscious side-stepping of a particular form or structure).

The effect of the preceding phoneme may be judged from Table 3. This table includes only those phonemes with 10 or more obligatory situations. Two factors stand out in this table. First, the error rate for /ts/ is nearly twice the average, and second, the error rate for /ks/ is only half the average. From this it could be inferred that the /ts/ cluster is much more difficult for Japanese speakers than the /ks/ cluster. It is also interesting to note that the singleton consonant /z/

attached to words ending with a vowel produces error at the average rate. It seems that it is no more difficult to produce a singleton /z/ than a cluster for this morpheme.

Table 3

Use and Error of 3S by Preceding Phoneme

Phoneme	Obligatory Situations	Errors	
	No.	No.	%
/m/	15	8	53
/v/	14	6	43
/t/	32	24	75
/d/	14	6	43
/n/	16	8	50
/k/	70	15	22
vowel	42	20	45
other consonants	17	11	65
Total	220	98	45

The environment following the cluster was also analysed, but because the morpheme is conditioned by the preceding and not the following environment, the range of possible combinations is far greater and the distribution in each category correspondingly smaller; fewer valid generalisations are therefore possible. A larger data base is required to ensure a sufficient number of obligatory situations. Further, an acoustic study (Saunders 1986a) shows that word final clusters are often followed by devoiced vowels and glottal stops which may affect the phonological interpretation in this situation. There were, however, 14 situations where a clause- or sentence-final pause followed the 3S morpheme and 12 (88%) of these are in error. This may be related to the falling intensity in this position affecting the pronunciation of the fricative.

To sum up, the phonological environment plays a significant

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role in the error rate in this morpheme, and the following generalisations can be made:

1. The [əz] is more difficult than the [s] or [z] allomorphs.

2. The [ts] cluster is more difficult than other clusters.

3. The singleton consonant [z] after vowels is no easier than clusters.

4. Clause- and sentence-finally the morpheme is more likely to be omitted than medially.

Lexical Environment

The obligatory situations for the 3S morpheme occurred with some sixty different verbs, but eight account for 41% of the total use. These are listed in Table 4 together with the number of uses, error rate and number of subjects displaying them.

Table 4

Use, Error and Distribution of Verbs with 3S Attached

Verb	Use	Errors		Subjects Displaying
	No.	No.	%	No.
take	17	5	29	6
go	13	3	23	4
make	11	4	36	6
mean	11	4	36	4
come	10	7	70	6
depend	10	2	20	5
like	10	1	10	7
want	10	7	70	5
Total	92	33	36	

Of these verbs *go, like* and *depend* have a much lower error rate than would be predicted from the analysis of the final

phoneme (table 3), while *come* has a somewhat higher error rate. It is interesting that *come* also revealed a higher error rate than *go* in this verb attachment and in the past tense as well. Although all verbs were quite widely distributed, as were the errors, the error in *take* was confined to two subjects in the standard group, in the sentence type:

It take- x minutes from A to B.

One subject produced the morpheme correctly twice after classroom dialogue practice using the pattern, but some months later produced the error twice. This suggests that rote memorising a morpheme in a dialogue does not result in the acquisition of a morpheme if the subject has not reached the appropriate level to use it.

The study of the lexical use shows that there are some interesting problems in this area, but again a larger data base might reveal the extent to which error rate is determined by words or classes of words.

Discussion

Understanding the sources of 3S error is essential for the teacher who proposes intervention ·to reduce the incidence of omission. This study has shown that there is more than a single source of difficulty which can affect the error rate, and as a result it is argued that any attempt at remediation would require understanding of at least the major factors. The factors analysed here fell within the three areas of grammar, phonology and lexicon.

There is a relationship between complexity of sentence and error rate. From this it can be concluded that the error is both more likely to occur and less open to correction in complex sentences, especially those involving relative, temporal or conditional clauses. This raises the question as to whether correction should be given in all situations, or only in

those where the correct form could be expected more often.

The errors relating to the phonetic environment suggest that much of the difficulty with the 3S morpheme relates to interference at the level of phonology. For many learners additional practice in the [əz] allomorph is indicated to compensate for its lower frequency of use. In addition practice in word final /z/ and consonant clusters would seem warranted: studies of the past tense by Wolfram (1985), of consonant clusters in general by Ioup (1984), Sato (1984) and Greenberg (1983), and of word final /z/ by Dickerson (1975) suggest that for many EFL students, including Japanese, these phonological problems are serious. Dickerson, interestingly, showed that the level of formality was a factor in Japanese realising a word final /z/ correctly. Some further practice with the /ts/ cluster is also indicated for Japanese students, especially in producing a longer /s/ in this environment, as an acoustic study (Saunders, 1986a) shows the length of the /s/ in the /ts/ cluster is very short. Finally, it is necessary to practice maintaining the fricative in the clause- or sentence-final position.

The use and omission of the morpheme in particular lexical environments highlights the fact that learning to use a morpheme correctly in a sentence pattern is not a guarantee that it will be generalised to other sentences, or even maintained in the same pattern. Here, the teacher's expectations of his students are important factors affecting the variable use of the morpheme. It is clear from this research that studies of L2 morpheme acquisition must consider more than just the simple counts of presence or absence — if an adequate understanding of the processes is to be achieved.

Conclusion

This study found that the stability of the third person singular present tense morpheme in the spoken English of

Japanese was affected by the length and complexity of the sentence, by the phonetic shape of the morpheme and the phonetic environment, and by the lexical item it is attached to. These findings were specifically:

1. The morpheme is more likely to be omitted in sentences of more than one clause than in a sentence of one clause.

2. The morpheme is more likely to be omitted in relative, temporal and conditional clauses than in simple co-ordination, causal or reported speech clauses.

3. The [əz] form of the morpheme is more likely to be omitted than the other forms.

4. The morpheme is more likely to be omitted in the cluster /ts/ and less likely in the cluster /ks/.

5. The morpheme is more likely to be omitted in clause- or sentence-final position.

6. The morpheme is more likely to be omitted with some words like *come* than with others like *go* or *depend*.

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