

Examining systematic grammatical errors of a Japanese ESL learner: A case study

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Grammar: Data Collection and Analysis

Procedure:

In an attempt to discover any apparent grammatical error systematicity, this paper analyzes two data sets produced by a single subject. The subject's L1 is Japanese and they are currently studying English as an ESL student. Each data set consists of a set of picture cards, about which the subject was asked to provide a verbal and written description. In the first picture set, the subject was given five minutes to preview the picture set before being asked to describe it verbally and then write it out. In the second data set, the subject was allowed no time to prepare. Instead, the subject was asked to describe each card, one at a time, not being allowed to see the proceeding card until completely explaining the current card being presented. Through this form of data collection, the subject's English performance ability in both prepared and unprepared situations can be compared and analyzed. This comparison will allow for possible identification of any systematic misunderstandings of English through which the subject can understand and improve their current linguistic abilities.

In the following paper, three items are identified that contain systematic errors produced by the speaker. After explaining each item, possibilities are explored as to why these errors occurred, i.e. language interference, learning methods. It must be stated that the assumptions as to why the discussed errors are being produced are exactly that, assumptions, educated guesses that may provide insight into the subject's mind. Harvey Sacks (1984) expands upon this by suggesting that if the word "why" is asked when analyzing conversation, it ushers in all sorts of psychological baggage. We are not allowed to get in to the mind of the subject, but only ask "how are they getting the action done?"

Prepositions:

Prepositions state the spatial relationship, (as in *in* or *out*), the logical relationship (as in *of* or *for*), and the temporal relationship (as in *on*, *in*, or *at*) between the noun phrase following it and the preceding noun phrase, adjective, or verb. Although some prepositions can be used interchangeably depending the context, it is the relationship to the noun phrase, not the particular "meaning" of the preposition that should be attended to. Yule (1998, p.160) confirms this concept stating that even though there is a tendency to attach meaning to prepositions, their grammatical purpose is tied to the "conceptual meaning" of the attached noun/noun phrases. In both the spoken and written data collected, the subject incorrectly utilizes the preposition in several different contexts.

In line 11 of the unprepared written data (see appendix 2), the subject wrote, "Now he is

getting in the airplane. “ While the preposition “in” here doesn’t produce a misunderstanding of the situation being expressed and may be descriptively correct, the use in this context is prescriptively and conceptually incorrect. Yule (1998, p. 161) defines the movement to a surface in relation to the location prompts use of the preposition “on” and he continues to explain that the preposition “in” would imply the action of entering an area. Granted that an airplane could be considered an area, it would be more suitable to consider the action of boarding one as an act occurring in a two dimensional surface, or more specifically an interior space rather than that of a general area.

Again in the unprepared written data, we can see the subject use another preposition incorrectly. In line 14, the subject writes “Then it takes off. He is going to his business trip.” Here the use of “to” shows another misunderstanding when using prepositions. The use of “to” can be used to express movement in a direction or toward some destination. It is true that the airplane is figuratively and literally moving toward a location, however one cannot move toward a business trip due to the fact that is not a physical location. The correct preposition “on” would be appropriate because in this situation it would emphasize a theoretical connection to the verb and more appropriately describe the proposed action.

In line 15 of the unprepared spoken data, the subject can be heard saying “he took the bus to the airplane and hh.(.) take off the bus, “. The preposition off in “take off” is employed correctly but the associated verb is not. Although grammatically correct, to take off generally refers to an action of releasing or removing something. The correct verbal phrase in this situation that should have been employed, “get off”, generally is associated with the act of leaving. While the preposition itself is correct, the spatial relationship to the object being described and the occurring action is not.

Perhaps by reviewing preposition use and their dynamic spatial relationships between certain prepositions and their associated noun phrases, assuming it has been previously introduced, can these mistakes be corrected. Another factor that may be attributed to the given examples could be due to L1 inference. Japanese, the subject’s native language, contains seven total particles, very few when compared to the total number in English. Due to the limited number available in the subject’s mother tongue, proper use and application of English prepositions and particles may be difficult to fully comprehend for the subject.

Verbs through Tense and Aspect:

In order to talk about verbs, the topics of tense and aspect must be dually addressed. In the English language, there exist only two tenses marked by the English verb without incorporating any auxiliaries, that of past and present. With this, in order to properly characterize a verb, aspect, which identifies the kind of situation being described, must be considered as well. By studying both these points, students can have a better understanding of how they are incorporated into the English language. The subject can be seen, in the both the written and spoken data, expressing structures that may show an incomplete understanding of this grammatical item.

In line 1 of the unprepared spoken data the line “: mm:: a guy?, uh we::aring (.) a blue suit and tie (.) ha:ving a big h tru:nk? a::nd,” shows the subject trying to use the stative verb “have” through a situation expressing dynamic meaning. Except in situations where the speaker is trying indicate that the current status is not permanent, stative verbs like “have” are not normally expressed with a progressive grammatical aspect. Instead of using the progressive form, 3rd person “has” would be correct in this context.

In line 9 of the prepared written data and also in line 2 of the prepared spoken data (see appendix 1) we can see the subject expressed a misunderstanding in regards to aspectual forms and may not fully realize that they consist of two parts. In the prepared written data the subject says “He finished to write an application,” We can see the subject use a simple present tense instead of using the verbs progressive form, “writing”. Similarly, in the prepared spoken data, the subject says “found a application a:nd (.) take one and looking at the application.” Here, the subject employs the progressive form of “look” without inclusion of the be verb “is” in the sentence. Yule (1998) states that “when both form of aspect are included, the perfect always comes before the progressive.”

Speakers that commonly encounter these errors should learn/review that when employing tense structures in English, the aspect of the situation, i.e. perspective, must be taking into account. In the first example, review of stative and dynamic verbs seems to be necessary. In the second and third examples, instruction concerning the basic structure of English verb forms would be recommended. Included in his explanation of tense and aspect, Yule (1998) also states that beginning speakers of English commonly do not understand that these aspectual forms consist of two parts. Perhaps this is the reason why the subject constructed sentences such as these.

Articles:

According to Swan and Smith (2001 p. 304), “as no element in the Japanese sentence regularly shows plurality, and since the distinction between count and mass is not recognized, number and count-ability pose major problems.” Beyond any other systematic error that can be seen in the collected data, it is clear that article and number-countability use poses the greatest problem for the subject in this analysis.

In line 15 of unprepared spoken data (see appendix 2), the subject says “he took the bus to the airplane”. The first use of the definite article “the” in this sentence is being used to classify a common noun that should be new information to the listener. By presenting, this new information as anaphoric, the subject shows a lack of total understanding in regards to expressing articles in context. In line 2 of the prepared written data, similar mistakes can be seen. The speaker says “He found the application for a job,” In the previous line in this data, the subject has already introduced the topic “job” and therefore should have employed the definite article “the” instead of the indefinite article. Although the speaker does seem to understand article use to some extent, by linking the appropriate article with object expressed with a distinct or individual form, erroneous article use can be found

throughout the data.

In the final lines, 13 and 14 of the prepared spoken data, the speaker again expresses herself grammatically incorrect in regard to her article use. The speaker states “(.) yeah I think he need a job. (.) and he know how to write a application without dictionary, he doesn’t have any dictionary, (.) good, good.” Focusing only on the mistakes in regards to the use of articles, we can see the subject employ the indefinite article “a” despite the fact that that following word begins with a vowel sound. Again, a few words later, the subject removes entirely the required indefinite article. This latter mistake may show a misunderstanding of individuation. Although the first example in this paragraph may fall under the prescriptive/descriptive argument, the latter example is a valid error. Swan and Smith (2001) suggest using exercises known as “modified cloze”, that being a section of text that is missing the articles, as a way to help advanced students with their article use.

Conclusion

Through the data collection process and the following analysis of the stated errors, I have learned that my subject, does indeed compose many of the common errors produced by Japanese English speakers (Swan and Smith, 2001). I did realize prior to this analysis, especially with the consonant R and L sounds, but perhaps due to the subject’s familiarity of the English language, I’ve become oblivious to the many routine grammar mistakes. This analysis has allowed to view anew these erroneous structures and provided me with a conscious mind by which I may better assist with the difficulties with the English language.

Even with the relative recent phenomenon that is team-teaching (Tajino & Tajino, 2000) and the wide introduction of native speakers in the Japanese English classroom. It is still very apparent that the common errors produced by such learners are not being focused upon in a manner that can help curtail the number of cases of grammatical errors. Based on my own teaching experience in Japan I feel that although many of the classes that students receive in their primary and extended education in Japan most are based on translation of the basic grammar points that are commonly encountered in English, the points that provide students with exceptional difficulty are often treated as any other item introduced in class. These areas of common difficulty should be better focused on and be explained beyond the traditional methods and metaphors that students often encounter. By providing a historical and descriptive explanation of “why” along with the “when”, students can have a meaningful learning experience that will better equip them in their pursuit of the English language, be it intrinsic or otherwise. As a final note, although language interference may hinder learning we should be careful to not assume that all errors are in fact due to the speaker’s L1. The concept of Cross-Linguistic Influence (CLI) (Kellerman, 1995; Kellerman & Sharwood-Smith, 1986), suggests that although we should avoid a priori pigeon-holing of learners, members in the field of TESOL should recognize the significance of interference across languages and intralingual errors.

Although mastery of the English sound system may not be feasible or even rational for many

speakers, the ability to understand and be understood is the purpose of communication. Grammatical correctness is essential to be understood, be it through a prescriptive or descriptive means; all speakers must continuously pursue to express themselves in either manner in order to be understood.

Appendix 1

Prepared verbal data (1st set)

Subject: :uh Mike Johnson is looking for a job, He went a:: company? or somewhere, library, and found a application a:nd (.) take one and looking at the application. (.) H:e is thinking(2.0) and he decide to apply for this (.) hh job so he start to write his name, his last name, Johnson? (1.0) and but he stopped (.) and he is thinki::ng that he wa:nt to a, he wants to apply this job or not? for a minutes. and he decide he apply? for this job so he complete the application? (.) a:nd add a signature a:nd write a data, (.) of today date of today and he bring the application to (.) personal, maybe this is the secretary? of this company it looks like library, (.) and give it to, give the application to the person. (1.0) hopefully he could get a job,

Interviewer: okay? okay, anything else?

Subject: anything else, (.) mean?

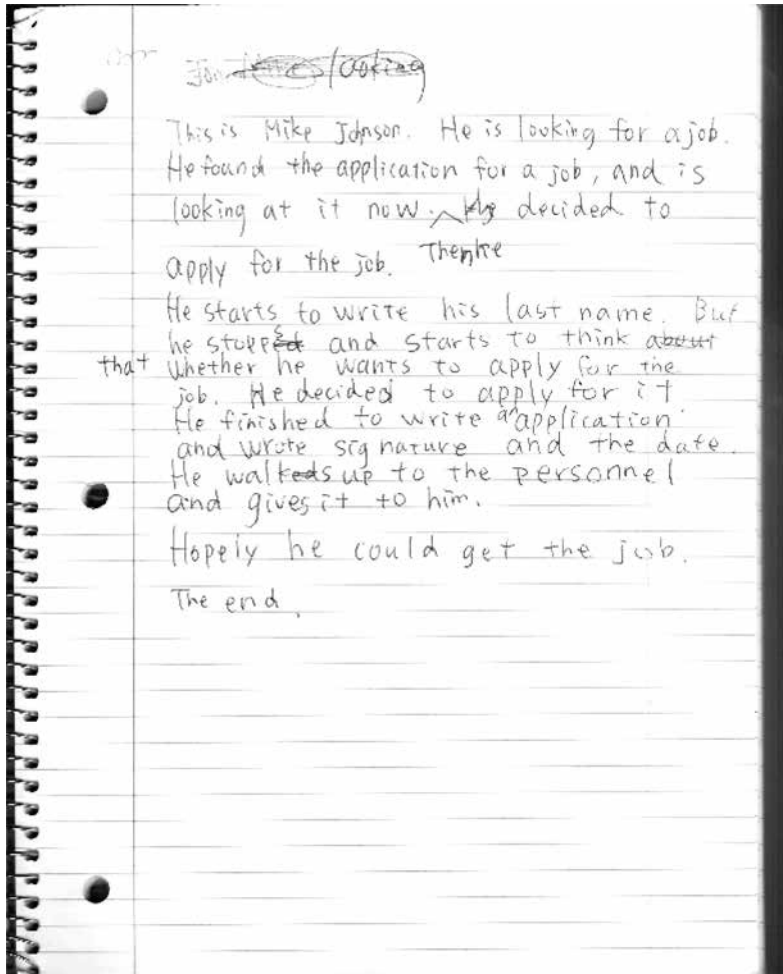
Interviewer: I'm just asking (.)

Subject: (.) yeah I think he need a job. (.) and he know how to write a application without dictionary, he doesn't have any dictionary, (.) good, good.

Interviewer: okay (3.0)

Appendix 1

Prepared written data (1st set)



Appendix 2

Unprepared verbal data (2nd set)

Subject: mm:: a guy?, uh we::aring (.) a blue suit and tie (.) ha:ving a big h tru:nk? a::nd document, (.) maybe a, a carrybag, a::nd what say this, not truck, it's Japanese trunk, it's Japanese, (3.0) suitcase, (.) a::nd seems (.) it seems (2.0) that uh:: he gonna (.) take the airplane, (1.5) yeah, I can see the sign, (.) yes

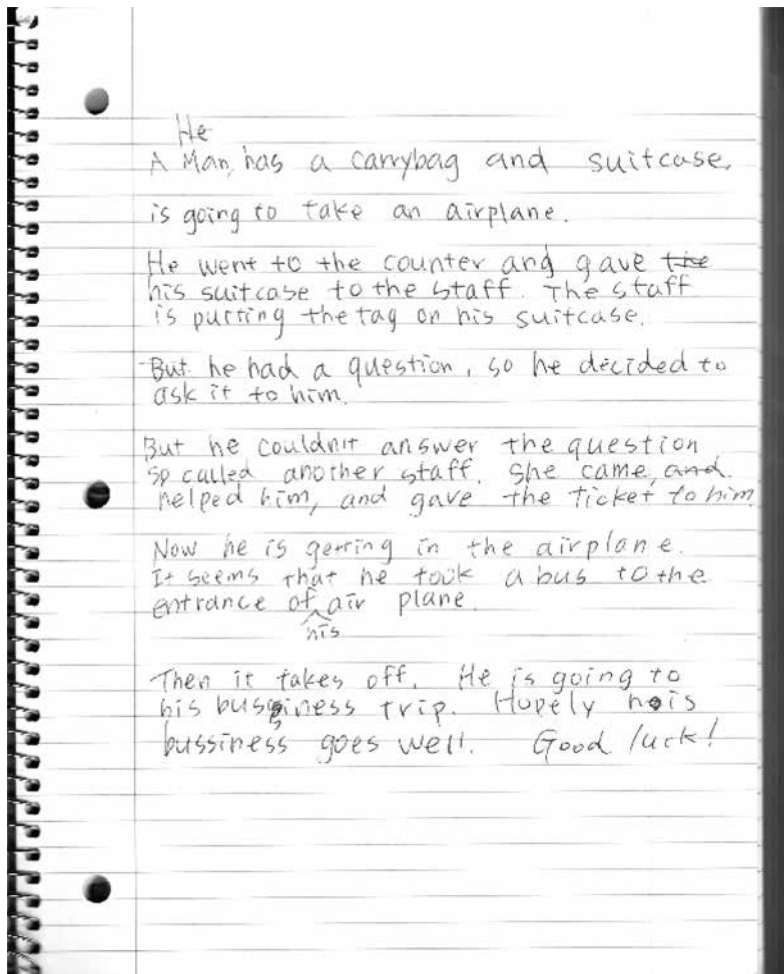
Interviewer: oh,yeah, ok. ok? (2.0)

Subject: oh, he gonna (.) take the plan::e, and the plane company is swa, I don't know this company, hh so he: i:s now: checking in?, he give his (.) suitcase to the staff and staff putting the tag on his suitcase. (2.5) he's waiting, standing, uh, in front of the counter yes, but he'll

have the, he has a some question and he's asking the question to the staff, and the staff is looking at the computer and hh I think he::'s, the staff is answering the question. the::n (.) I think the staff (.) cannot answer, that staff cannot answer the, (.) his question, so: he: call somebody and a lady came to: the counter: or he move, no maybe the lady came to the counter a::nd now he is waiting (.) to get his ticket, o:h now he's boarding to the airplane, (.) u::h but its not connected to:: the building directly probably he took the bus to the airplane and hh (.) take off the bus and he is using stairs and going up to the airplane, (2.0) an::d yeah, (2.5) THEN it's takeo::ff the plane takeoff, uh land, not land uh, like takeoff uh, he::, I cannot see him but I'm pretty sure he's in the plane and he is hh go travel, I think go (.) business (.) trip, hope he could do very well for his business. goodbye.

Appendix 2

Unprepared written data (2nd set)



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