An Effective Way of Teaching English Syntax

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Summary

There is mother tongue interference when a Japanese person who has passed the age of puberty learns English. In order to combat this interference, we have to make a contrastive analysis between English and Japanese and see where the differences are.

This paper will focus on syntax and attempt to point out the major differences between English syntax and Japanese syntax. We can predict the difficulties the Japanese learner will encounter by comparing the syntax of the two languages.

Language mirrors the way people view the world. English syntax reveals the way English-speaking people see the world, whereas Japanese syntax is an expression of the way Japanese people think. Therefore, the Japanese learner has to learn not only English syntax but also the way English-speaking people look at the world in order to have a real grasp of English syntax.

The fundamental syntactic structure of English is Subject Verb Object. On the other hand, the basic syntax of Japanese is Topic Comment. The Japanese learner will start out learning English from the perspective of Japanese syntax. The resulting errors are called Japanese English, English influenced by Japanese. The learner of English has to learn to shift the perspective and get into English-speaking people's way of thinking and speaking.

1. First language Acquisition vs. Second Language Acquisition

The use of language distinguishes man from other animals. Man, by virtue of being human, is endowed with the ability to acquire any language if he gets exposed to it. This ability to acquire a language is species-specific. In addition, the child acquires a language very quickly by mere exposure to a limited amount of language data. From this, Chomsky (1965) concludes that the child is born with a universal grammar. The child uses this innately endowed grammar to determine the grammar of the particular
language to which he is exposed by being born in a particular community. More specifically, Chomsky postulates the Language Acquisition Device (hereafter LAD) which the child uses in the process of defining the grammar of a language. The LAD is the faculty for language that the child possesses innately. The LAD makes the child choose the appropriate grammar out of all possible grammars. In other words, the LAD provides a method for arriving at the grammar of a language. This model of language by the child is shown graphically as follows:

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linguistic data → LAD → grammar
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Lenneberg (1967) who basically supports Chomsky's view on language acquisition looks at language acquisition from a biological point of view. He says that language is a biological phenomenon and develops according to a built-in biological schedule. More precisely, language is a maturational process, and as the brain matures, the child acquires the language spoken around him. And by the age of four, the child has acquired firm control over the essentials of his native language which becomes the basis for communication for the rest of his life.

After studying linguistically impoverished children and aphasia, Lenneberg concludes that language learning takes place during the resonance period (age 2 to 13) and that language development based on a built-in biological schedule stops after the age of thirteen. If the child is exposed to a foreign language during the critical period, he can acquire it with ease. In Chomskian terms, the LAD is working actively during this period and therefore all that the child needs is exposure to a small corps of linguistic data in an environment. However, after the age of thirteen, foreign language learning becomes increasingly difficult and automatic acquisition by mere exposure becomes impossible. Before puberty, the child learns a foreign language without any trace of accent, whereas the adult learner past puberty has some accent in his speech. The adult learner has interference or carry-over from his native language. To learn a foreign language becomes an intellectual effort and a foreign language must be taught consciously. Rather than the LAD, the native language of the adult learner becomes the basis on which a foreign language is built. This model of foreign language acquisition may be graphically represented as follows:

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linguistic data of foreign language → native language → grammar of foreign language
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Although all normal children acquire any language equally well, adults who learn a foreign language differ in their degrees of success in foreign language learning due to negative transfer from the mother tongue. It becomes necessary to find an effective
method to teach or learn a foreign language. This paper will attempt to shed light on an effective way to teach English syntax based on contrastive analysis. The assumption is that the Japanese learner of English transfers Japanese perspective and syntax into the English way of thinking and syntax. Thus he makes systematic errors due to interference from the native language. Contrastive studies are, therefore, of utmost importance to effectively combat errors.

2. Contrastive Studies

The adult learner of a foreign language has his native language firmly under control. And this mother tongue transfers constantly when he learns a new language. He looks at the target language from the perspective of his mother tongue. This is vastly different from the child who starts off with just the LAD.

The learner has difficulties where there are differences between his mother tongue and the target language. He finds it easier where there are similarities between the two languages. Japanese and English are historically unrelated languages and there are a great many differences. As a result, the Japanese learner of English has difficulties in learning English. Likewise, the English-speaking learner of Japanese will find it difficult to gain mastery over the Japanese language. On the other hand, German and English are historically closely related. They are sister languages that branched out from the same base, the proto-Germanic language. The German learner of English will find it a lot easier to learn English because of the many similarities. In fact, I met some Germans who spoke English fluently. I asked them if English was difficult for them to learn. The answer was always the same; “English was easy to learn.”

The concept of transfer is crucial to understanding the phenomenon of foreign language learning. Transfer is a psychological term. It is often used in psychology to refer to the transfer of training. It means that the learning of task A will affect the learning of task B. In many cases, there is positive transfer from the first task to the second task. However, there is negative transfer as well, especially in foreign language learning. Bigge (1964) discusses positive transfer and negative transfer as follows:

Although, when we think of transfer, we usually consider how one learning experience strengthens another, we should remember that there also is a negative transfer process within which one learning experience interferes with — weakens — another. However, generally speaking, what we learn in one situation tends to facilitate or help our learning in others. But the opposite effect, interference, can occur. For example, a person’s study of foreign language or philosophy can make him a slower reader of English literature, or his becoming committed to certain dogmas or absolutes can interfere with his future creative, reflective thought.
Negative transfer is a common phenomenon in foreign language learning and this is described as interference. This interference from the mother tongue seems to be a major source of difficulty in foreign language learning. The learner of the language falls back on his first language, the language which is available to him. I have been teaching English for the past twenty five years, and the influence of the Japanese language in the process of learning English seems very evident to me.

The errors that the learner makes are natural errors. By that I mean that the errors are the result of carry-over from the mother tongue. The errors reflect the native language. They are sometimes called transfer errors or interference errors because they are caused by the knowledge of the learner's first language. Errors cannot be avoided. Making errors is not the fault of the learner. He makes errors systematically. Thus it becomes necessary for the teacher to know why students make the errors they do. Then the teacher will be able to explain to their students where they went wrong and why. This knowledge is made possible by comparative studies between the source language and the target language.

3. Japanese Syntax vs. English Syntax

Each culture looks at the world in a certain way. This view of the world is revealed in the syntax of the language. Thinking and syntax are closely intertwined. In fact, syntax is the background phenomenon people use unawares to express what goes on in their minds. The way Japanese people view the world is manifested in Japanese syntax and the way English-speaking people view their world is mapped onto English syntax.

The Japanese take a holistic view of the world. We are nature-oriented in our view of the world. Man is in nature and not apart from it. Our mentality is in the field or situation. In concrete day-to-day living, a situation takes the place of nature and his situation is the frame of reference in the mind of a Japanese person. This cultural view of life is mirrored in the structure of the Japanese language. It is manifested in the Topic-Comment construction of Japanese syntax. The situation taken as a whole becomes Topic in the grammar and Comment describes Topic.

We put particle — wa to indicate the situation. It is created by the addition of wa. Originally it was a location but it can be a point in time, an object or a human. — wa, which indicate Topic, identifies what item is under discussion and — da, which indicates Comment, describes it. The following are some examples.

1. Ehime wa mikan da.
2. Hawai wa sumiyoi.
4. Otoosan wa tanki da.
5. Kore wa tegami desu.
Ehime wa, Hawai wa, Kyoo wa, Otoosan wa, and Kore wa in the above are Topic, which are known both to the speaker and the addressee. Mikan da, sumiyoi, nichiyooobi da, tanki da, and tegami desu constitute Comment and indicate a new piece of information to the addressee. The relationship between the way Japanese people view the world and the grammatical construction of Topic Comment are closely connected and may be graphically represented as follows:

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world-view                Japanese syntax
\[\text{describe the situation}\]                \[\text{Comment (--- da)}\]
\[\text{situation}\]                        \[\text{Topic (--- wa)}\]
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Language is a product of man. The Japanese language has been made by the Japanese for their use. The Japanese syntax of Topic Comment construction is an outgrowth of the world-view of Japanese people over the centuries. It is important to realize that there is a deep interplay between Japanese syntax and the way Japanese people think.

On the other hand, English-speaking people perceive the world differently from Japanese. They take an anthropocentric view of the world. Humans are actors who act on nature and cause nature to change. This outlook on life and the world is revealed in the English syntax of Subject Verb Object (hereafter S V O). Subject represents human agent, Verb represents human action, and Object represents the goal which a human aims at to bring about the change. The relationship between the way English-speaking people view the world and the way basic English syntax is structured may be graphically represented as follows:

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world-view                English syntax
\[\text{human agent}\]                \[\text{Subject}\]
\[\text{human}\]                        \[\text{Verb}\]
\[\text{nature}\]                      \[\text{Object}\]
\[\text{action goal}\]   \[\text{predicate}\]
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The English language is human-oriented in its approach toward life and the world. Man is separate from nature. Nature is there to be dominated, explored, or exploited by man. The English language reveals a unique cultural view of their world. Here are some examples.

1. John dropped a ball.
2. He broke the vase.
3. She is pushing a cart.
4. A girl is picking flowers.
5. My father drives a car.

'John', 'he', 'she', 'a girl', and 'my father' in the above represent the human agent. 'Dropped a ball', 'broke the vase', 'is pushing a cart', 'is picking flowers', and 'drives a car' represent what happens in nature. Within what happens in nature, 'dropped', 'broke', 'is pushing', 'is picking flowers' and 'drives' represent action which acts on the goal. 'A ball', 'the vase', 'a cart', 'flowers', and 'a car' represent the goal that the human agent acts toward and thus brings about change.

This human-action-goal pattern is the way the English-speaking people view the world. It is one way of structuring reality, which is structured through English syntax in terms of S V O.

John Robert Ross, a well-known American syntactician said in one of his JACET lectures at Hachioji in the summer of 1982 that the most basic kind of sentence in English is Subject Verb Object. The subject is volitional human, the verb is a transitive verb which represents activity, and the object is something that an active subject is doing an activity to. He explained that this proto-typical S V O sentence is the most beautiful sentence and quoted the following definition of Bloomfield's: "A sentence is an actor working on a goal."

Syntax is a set of rules. In fact it is a set of cultural rules. The way a particular culture looks at the world is expressed in syntactic construction. It is stored in the subconscious and the native speaker of the language uses it unawares to express ideas. It is a grid through which to view the world. The native speaker of English grows up in an individualistic culture where people are outgoing and assertive toward the world. English syntax represents this cultural view of the world and the inner thinking process of the native speaker of English moves in such a way as a human is working on the world and bringing about change. This communicative process is expressed in terms of syntactic S V O. This S V O order is a unique way of looking at the world.

4. A Shift in Perspective

Japanese is a language which is fundamentally different from English. Japanese organizes syntax in terms of Topic Comment, whereas English structures word order in terms of S V O. Behind language there is a way of thinking. The fact that Japanese and English are vastly different indicates that the way the world is viewed is different and distinct between the two languages.

Japanese people perceive the world holistically and then talk about this holistic world. This field mentality is firmly rooted in the mind of the Japanese. Syntactically, it is revealed as Topic Comment. When a Japanese person learns English, he will transfer this proto-typical pattern of Topic Comment into the process of learning English. This transfer constitutes the major obstacle when he studies English. The Japanese learner
will put Topic where Subject ought to be placed. He will put Comment Where Verb Object ought to be placed. In terms of world outlook, the Japanese learner will place ‘the field’ where ‘the human agent’ should be, and will place ‘description’ where ‘action and goal’ ought to be. This transfer error is so common among learners of English that the teacher would be well-advised to know this fundamental difference between Japanese syntax and English syntax and also underlyingly different ways of looking at the world between the two peoples. When the Japanese way of thinking is directly translated into English, it becomes a kind of English labelled ‘Japanese English’, that is, English influenced by Japanese.

I will illustrate with some English sentences where Topic Comment construction has been used where S V O pattern ought to have been the order. The examples are all taken from English sentences composed by my students at Matsuyama Shinonome Junior College. When the English sentences are translated back into Japanese, they become natural Japanese sentences. However, the English sentences are strange because they are constructed from the perspective of the mother tongue. I will write both the students’ English and their translated counterparts so that we may see why the English is awkward whereas the Japanese is natural.

1. Unnatural English: Collegel life is happy.
   Translation back into Japanese: 大学生活は楽しい。
2. Unnatural English: My work was very free.
   Translation back into Japanese: 私の仕事は大変暇でした。
3. Unnatural English: College is free.
   Translation back into Japanese: 大学は自由です。
4. Unnatural English: Blanks are not many in college.
   Translation back into Japanese: 短大ではプランクがありません。
5. Unnatural English: Third period is blank.
   Translation back into Japanese: 3限目がプランクです。

It seems certain to me that the students had Japanese in mind when they composed the above English sentences. The mother tongue operates without their awareness. Thus the students unconsciously put Japanese into English from the point of view of their native language. That explains why the students made errors in the above sentences. The teacher of English should consciously know the way Japanese syntax operates and the way reality is viewed by Japanese people. At the same time, he ought to know the way English syntax operates and the way English-speaking people perceive the world. By contrastive analysis he is able to understand where sentences are awkward and why. Only then can he predict students’ errors in English and explain to them where sentences are strange and why. The natural English for the above unnatural English is as fol-
lows:
6. I am enjoying my college life.
7. I had a lot of free time at work.
8. I have a lot of freedom in college.
9. I don't have a lot of free time at college.
10. I have third period free.

It is of great importance to take note of the fact that Topic-first is switched to Subject-first, and that Comment is changed to 'Verb Object'. The Japanese learner of English has to learn to shift gears from Topic Comment to S V O in order to express ideas in natural English. He must awaken to the fact that Japanese syntax is very different from English syntax. And it is the teacher's job to make the learner become aware of the differences. To do that is the most effective way of teaching English syntax.

When the teacher of English points out the basic differences to the students, that is, the differences between Topic Comment and S V O, he is leading them to an understanding of the differences between the two syntaxes. At the same time, he should explain the differences in world outlook between the two peoples and bring them to an awareness of the different ways of looking at the world. Japanese students of English are learning two things at the same time; English syntax and the English way of viewing the world. It is my firm belief that the very purpose of foreign language learning lies in widening the horizons of the mental world. This effective way of studying English syntax through contrastive studies will contribute to this purpose as well.

Bibliography


剑持武彦 「間」の日本文化 東京：講談社 1978, p. 32.
