Error Analysis of Passive Sentences Written by Japanese Learners of English: With Reference to Native Language Transfer

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate the question of how Japanese affects the production of passive sentences in the task of translation from Japanese into English given to Japanese learners of English. The Japanese sentences used in this study, twenty in total, are classified into three categories: (I) syntactically non-passive sentences whose corresponding English sentences are expressed in the passive voice; (II) sentences which are expressed in a voice construction other than the passive; and (III) indirect passives and causatives. The subjects in the study, 232 senior high school students and 79 university students, were given the task of translating the twenty Japanese sentences into English. The results of the study showed that the subjects' production process was influenced by the type of Japanese sentence given, suggesting that the subjects did not comprehend very well the agent–patient relationship that a verb indicates. Especially, for the indirect passives and the causatives, similar kinds of confusion were observed as to the direction of the action which a verb signifies and the direction of the influence between an embedded event and a passive or causative subject.

1. Introduction

The English passive voice is usually included in the target sentence structures to be learned in the second year of junior high school in Japan. Matsui (1979), however, reported that out of 935 errors obtained from English composition by Japanese EFL learners, the errors related to the passive and the causative amounted to 10% of the total number.

Numerous studies have been done to show that there are various types of error, most of which can safely be said to have resulted from transfer from Japanese (e.g. Matsui 1979; Kotera 1989; Watabe et al. 1991; Suzuki et al. 1992). It would be justifiable to assume from these studies that
these errors are, in part, caused by the fact that the Japanese passive morpheme -(r)are is also used in other types of construction such as potential, honorific, and spontaneous expressions. Moreover, the Japanese indirect passive, which English has no equivalent of, is said to affect the occurrence of transfer from Japanese. In addition to these, many English sentences can be translated naturally into Japanese without using the passive morpheme -(r)are and changing the passive meanings. Thus, all these functional differences of the passives of Japanese and English could become a learning difficulty for Japanese EFL learners, and bring about language transfer.

Although a number of attempts have so far been made to report the types of error caused by transfer in free composition, few studies have been done on the number of errors of each type observed in Japanese–English translation by a certain group of learners. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine how the types of Japanese sentence would affect the production of the passive in the task of translation from Japanese into English by Japanese EFL learners.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects
The subjects were 232 prefectural senior high school students (157 first-year and 75 third-year students), and 79 university students (41 freshmen majoring in educational science and 38 sophomores majoring in engineering at Hiroshima University).

2.2. Materials
The materials in the translation task consisted of twenty Japanese sentences (see Appendix). Basically, the sentences were constructed in such a way that the English vocabulary size required in the task would be at junior high school level (about 1000 words). The words and expressions which the subjects might find difficult were presented in parentheses.

2.3. Procedure
The subjects were not informed of the purpose of the task. They were only told that the task was intended to investigate the general tendency of errors made in translation by Japanese learners of English. They were also told that the results of the task were not counted as part of their academic records, but they were encouraged to answer as many questions as possible. Although there was no time limit to the task, almost all of the subjects finished it within twenty minutes.

3. Results and Discussion

The Japanese sentences in the task are classified into three categories: (I) syntactically non-passive sentences whose corresponding English sentences are expressed in the passive voice; (II)
sentences which are expressed in a voice construction other than the passive; and (III) indirect passives and causatives. In the following discussion, the major findings on each category are reported with special emphasis on Category III.

3.1. Category I

Below are the sentences which come under Category I. It is important to note that, in order to express the meaning of each sentence, the corresponding English sentences are constructed naturally in the passive voice, while the Japanese sentences except (Q9) are formed naturally in other various ways without the passive morpheme -(r)are:

(Question 1) Sono hon wa kantanna eigo de kai-te aru. (Intransitivizing Resultative)
the book TOP easy English in write-RESULT
“The book is written in easy English.”

(Q2) Watasi wa sono paayii ni sasoi uke-ta. (Periphrastic Passive)
I the party to invitation receive-PAST
“I was invited to the party.”

(Q3) Kono kabin wa Tanaka-sensei kara sazukari-masi-ta. (Intransitive Verb)
this vase Tanaka teacher from be given-POLITE-PAST
“Mr. Tanaka gave me this vase; I was given this vase by Mr. Tanaka;
This vase was given (to) me by Mr. Tanaka.”

(Q7) Sono akatyan wa nizikangoni mitukat-ta. (Intr. V.)
the baby two hours later be found-PAST
“The baby was found two hours later.”

(Q14) Eki no tikaku ni takusanno ie ga tatu-yotei-da. (Intr. V.)
station near many houses NOM be built-PLAN
“Many houses will be built near the station.”

(Q11) Kanozyo no tegami wa Bob ga kai-ta. (Topicalization)
her letter Bob NOM write-PAST
“Bob wrote her letter; Her letter was written by Bob.”

(Q12) Watasi wa ano senotakai hito ni eigo o osiet-e morat-ta. (Favor)
I that tall man by English teach-RECEIVE-THE-
FAVOR-OF-PAST
“That tall man taught me English; I was taught English by that tall man; I had that tall man teach me English.”

(Q9) Bob wa tomodati kara suk-are-te iru. (Translation of by - kara)
Bob friend by like-PASSIVE
“Bob is liked by his friends.”

The major findings on Category I are that about 5-30% of the subjects could not perceive the passive meanings probably because of the absence of the passive morpheme -(r)are, and
wrote (Q7) “The baby found two hours later” (37.9 %), (Q14) “Many houses will build near the station” (29.9 %), (Q2) “I invited to the party” (13.2 %), (Q1) “The book wrote in easy English” (12.5 %), or (Q11) “Her letter wrote by Bob” (4.8 %). These types of error could lead us to maintain that the subjects did not comprehend very well the agent-patient relationship which a verb signifies or the distinction between intransitive and transitive verbs.

3.2. Category II

Below are the sentences which belong to Category II. What is characteristic of these sentences is that the passive morpheme –(r)are is used in potential, spontaneous, and honorific constructions:

(Q4) Watasi wa sonnani hayaku ringo o taber-are-nai. (Potential: transitive)
I so quickly apple eat-POTEN-NEG
“I can’t eat an apple so quickly.”

(Q19) Watasi wa asita wa ik-are-nai. (Potential: intransitive)
I tomorrow go-POTEN-NEG
“I can’t (won’t be able to) go tomorrow.”

(Q16) Nihon de wa kono syu no doobtu wa mir-are-nai. (Potential/Passive)
Japan in this kind of animal see-POTEN/PASSIVE-NEG
“We cannot see this kind of animal in Japan; This kind of animal cannot be seen in Japan.”

(Q5) Maitosi natu ni kookoozidai no koto ga omoidas-are-ru. (Spontaneous)
every year summer in my high school days remember-SPON-PRESENT
“I remember my high school days every summer; I am reminded of my high school days every summer; Summer reminds me of my high school days every year; My high school days come (spontaneously) to my mind every summer.”

(Q18) Yosida-sensei wa kokuban ni go-zibun no namae o kak-are-masi-ta.
Yoshida teacher blackboard on HON-his name write-HON-POLITE-PAST
“Mr. Yoshida wrote his (own) name on the blackboard.” (Honorific)

The major findings on Category II are that about 20 % of the subjects attempted to use the passive both in (Q5) and in (Q18) to describe the spontaneous and the honorific meanings, and wrote, for example, “I was remembered...” or “Mr. Yoshida was written his name....” For (Q16), in which –(r)are designates both the potential and the passive meanings, about 20 % of the subjects only expressed the potential meaning and wrote “This kind of animal cannot see in Japan.” The same conclusion as was reached in 3.1. could be drawn from these results: the subjects did not understand very well the agent-patient relationship which a verb signifies or the distinction between intransitive and transitive verbs.
3.3. Category III

It is widely known that there are two types of passive in Japanese: the direct passive and the indirect passive. The direct passives, like the English passives, are derived from the corresponding active sentences with a transitive verb, as in (1) and (2):

(1) Active: 
Sensei wa John o sikat-ta.
“The teacher scolded John.”

(2) Direct Passive: 
John wa sensei ni sikar-are-ta.
by scold-PASSIVE-PAST
“John was scolded by the teacher.”

The relationships between the participants in (1) and (2) can be schematically represented as in Figures (1) and (2), respectively (adapted from Teramura 1982: 247):

In the indirect passives, on the other hand, both intransitive and transitive verbs can appear in passive constructions. For example (Kuno 1973: 22-24),

(3) Active: 
Ame ga hut-ta.
rain NOM fall-PAST
“Rain fell.”

(4) Indirect Passive: 
John ga ame ni hur-are-ta.
(intransitive) John by fall-PASSIVE-PAST
“(Lit.) John was fallen by rain.”
“John was adversely affected by rain falling.”

(5) Active: 
Mary ga piano o hi–ita.
Mary play-PAST
“Mary played the piano.”

(6) Indirect Passive: 
John ga Mary ni piano o hik-are-ta.
(transitive) John by play-PASSIVE-PAST
“(Lit.) John was played the piano by Mary.”
“John was adversely affected by Mary’s playing the piano.”
What is syntactically peculiar about (4) and (6) is that these indirect passive sentences have one extra noun phrase (W in Figures 3 and 4) compared to the corresponding active sentences.

What is semantically peculiar about these passives is that the passive subject (W) is adversely affected by the whole event that the corresponding active sentence represents. In a similar manner, (4) and (6) can each be schematized as follows (adapted from Teramura 1982: 247):

![Figure 3. Indirect Passive (intr.)](image)

![Figure 4. Indirect Passive (tr.)](image)

It is important to note that English is said to have no syntactic equivalent of the Japanese indirect passive.

The third category of the task materials consists of seven Japanese sentences. I will present the results of the translation task of the sentences one by one in the following discussion, paying attention to whether the function or the surface structure of the Japanese indirect passive was transferred in translation.

(Q20) Kinoo ame ni hur-are-ta. (Indirect Passive (IP): intransitive)
   yesterday rain by fall-PASSIVE-PAST
   “It rained (on me) yesterday; I was caught in the rain yesterday.”

Only 15% of the subjects wrote the target sentences. 26% of the subjects wrote ill-formed sentences such as “I was rained yesterday,” or “It was rained yesterday.” This could show that the type of transfer in question occurred.

(Q10) Watasi wa ninenmaeni titi ni sin-are-ta. (IP: intr.)
   I two years ago father by die-PASSIVE-PAST
   “My father died (on me) two years ago; I lost my father two years ago.”

A quarter of the subjects answered correctly. About 30% of the subjects made the errors which were presumably caused by the transfer from the Japanese indirect passive as in, for example, “I was died by my father two years ago.”

(Q8) Watasi wa zibun no tokei o kowas-are-ta. (IP: tr.)
   I my watch by break-PASSIVE-PAST
   “My watch was broken; I had my watch broken; Someone broke my watch.”

More than 40% of the subjects wrote one of the well-formed sentences above, 26.7% placing “my watch” in the subject position, 13.2% “I”, and 0.3% “someone”, respectively. Another 40% of the subjects, however, literally translated the Japanese sentence and wrote “I was broken my watch.”

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(Q17) Watasi wa haha ni tegami o yom-are-ta. (IP; tr.)
I mother by letter read-PASSIVE-PAST
"My letter was read by my mother; I had my letter read by my mother; My mother read my letter."
31.3% of the subjects wrote one of the sentences above correctly, 20.6% placing “letter” in the subject position, 2.3% “I”, and 8.4% “my mother”, respectively. As many as 41.2% of the subjects transferred the surface structure of the Japanese sentence and wrote “I was read my letter by my mother.”
Let us leave the indirect passives and turn to the causative sentences now.
(Q13) Watasi wa sono senso de musuko o sin-ase-ta. (Causative: intr.)
I the war in son die-CAUSE-PAST
"My son was killed in the war; I lost my son in the war."
Although (Q13) has the causative morpheme -(s)ase on the surface, (Q13) does not mean that “I” literally caused “my son”’s death. What (Q13) means is that, for example, “I” could not prevent “my son” from joining the army and going to war, and that “I”, now, feel some kind of responsibility for “my son”’s death. Because of this semantic complexity, only 10.9% of the subjects wrote the correct sentences, either placing “my son” in the subject position (5.1%) or “I” (5.8%). 15.8% of the subjects confused the causative meaning with a passive one, and wrote “I was died by my son in the war.” Other varieties of this confusion such as “I died my son...” (5.8%) and “My son was died...” (4.8%) were also observed.
(Q6) Sono hahaoya wa zibun no musuko ni gyuunyu o nom-ase-ta. (Causative: tr.)
the mother her son milk drink-CAUSE-PAST
"The mother gave her son some milk; The mother let (made) her son drink milk."
Approximately 25% of the subjects wrote the correct sentences, using “give” (5.1%) or the causative verbs “let (make)” (19.6%). Note that 15.1% of the subjects, again, confused the causative meaning with a passive one, and wrote, for example, “The mother was drunk milk by her son.” Other varieties of this confusion such as “Her son was drunk milk...” (11.9%) were also found.
(Q15) Watasi wa kare ni uta o utaw-ase-ta. (Passivized Causative: tr.)
I him by song sing-CAUSE/PASSIVE-PAST
"I was made to sing a song by him; He made me sing a song."
Question (15) is a passivized causative and more complex in both meaning and structure. Therefore, only 7.1% of the subjects produced the correct sentences, while as many as 44.4% of the subjects could not differentiate the causative meaning from the passive one, and wrote “I was sung a song by him.”
It is necessary, at this point, to explain the semantic similarity between the indirect passive and the causative in connection with the errors mentioned above. Figures 5 and 6 below (adapted from Teramura 1982: 289) schematize the semantic relationships of the participants in the indirect passive and the causative, respectively:
Figure 5 means that W is adversely affected (B) by the event of X’s doing (something to Y) (A). Figure 6, on the other hand, means that W, as an instigator, causes (C) the event of X’s doing (something to Y) (A) to happen. The only difference between the two, then, is the direction of the influence (i.e., B and C) between W and the event.

Most of the subjects in the study tended to confuse the direction of the influence (B or C) and the direction of the action (A) within the event, and thus to produce those types of ill-formed sentence which we have seen above. In the case of the indirect passives, it can be assumed that the following ill-formed sentences resulted from the confusion of the directions of A and B in Figure 5:

(Q20) *It was rained yesterday.
(Q10) *I was died by my father two years ago.
(Q8) *I was broken my watch.
(Q17) *I was read my letter by my mother.

In the case of the causative sentences, it can be assumed that the following ill-formed sentences resulted from the confusion of the directions of A and C in Figure 6:

(Q13) *I was died by my son in the war.
(Q6) *The mother was drunk milk by her son.
(Q15) *I was sung a song by him.

The results of the study also indicated that the confusion of the directions did not occur with the same frequency in the seven sentences above. The confusion of the directions tended to be observed frequently (more than 40% of the subjects) in (Q8), (Q15) and (Q17), and less frequently (about 25–30% of the subjects) in (Q6), (Q10), (Q13) and (Q20). It could be argued that this discrepancy in number was caused by the meaning or the type (intransitive or transitive) of a verb, the number of participants expressed explicitly in a given sentence, and so on. It can be stated that the errors supposedly caused by the confusion of the directions tended to be observed more frequently if the given sentence was a passive with a transitive verb ((Q8) and (Q17)), or a passivized causative (Q15).
4. Conclusion

In this paper we have seen that many of the subjects in the study did not perceive correctly the agent-patient relationship which a verb indicates or the distinction between intransitive and transitive verbs. In addition, for the indirect passives and the causatives, the subjects tended to confuse the direction of the action that a verb signifies and the direction of the influence between an embedded event and a passive or causative subject. We may, therefore, reasonably conclude as pedagogical implications that lexical knowledge of verbs will become essential and prerequisite to the learning of the English passive voice. When teaching the passive voice, we should ensure that the learners realize that the Japanese passive morpheme -(r)are is also used in potential, spontaneous, and honorific constructions. Added to this, the use of the Japanese passive morpheme -(r)are is not the only way of expressing passive meanings in Japanese, and thus we should also show other varieties of expressions with passive meanings in Japanese when translating the English passives into Japanese. Furthermore, when teaching causatives, which are usually introduced after the passive, we should bear in mind that Japanese EFL learners tend to confuse passive meanings and causative ones.

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Note

1) For further discussion of errors observed in each category, see Yamakawa (forthcoming), and for further details of the differences between Japanese and English in the function of the passive voice, see Yamakawa (1994).

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Appendix

英作文

* 次の日本文を ( ) 内のヒントを参考にしながら英語にしなさい。

1. その本は簡単な (easy) 英語で書いてある。
2. 私はそのパーティーにきそいを受けた。
3. この花びらは田中先生から授 (さず) かりました。
4. 私はそんなに速く (so quickly) りんごを食べられない。
5. 毎年夏に高校時代のこと (my high school days) が思い出される。
6. その母親は自分の息子に牛乳を飲ませた。
7. その赤ちゃんは2時間後に (two hours later) 見つかった。
8. 私は自分の時計をこわされた。
9. ポブは友達から好かれている。
10. 私は2年前に父に死なれた。
11. 彼女の手紙はポブが書いた。
12. 私はあの背の高い人に英語を教えてもらった。
13. 私はその戦争で息子を死なせた。
14. 駅の近くにたくさんの家が建つ予定だ。
15. 私は彼に歌を歌わされた。
16. 日本ではこの種の動物 (this kind of animal) は見られない。
17. 私は手紙を母に読まれた。
18. 吉田先生は黒板 (blackboard) にご自分の名前を書かれていました。
19. 私は明日は行かれない。
20. 昨日雨に降られた。