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Interference caused by transfer of characteristics of topic-prominent languages

Chikako AOKI

INTRODUCTION

Topic-prominence was originally proposed by Li and Thompson (1976). They suggested that language typology should be divided not in terms of the traditional SVO/SOV etc. word order distinction but rather on the basis of the grammatical relation of subject-predicate and topic-comment, saying that “The subject has a minimal discourse function in contrast with the topic...the topic, but not necessarily the subject, is discourse-dependent, serves as the center of attention in the sentence, and must be definite” (p.466). They interpret that while a subject is determined and grounded by a verb, a topic is determined by the center of attention and not grounded by a verb. Li and Thompson define the former as “a subject-prominent language” and the latter as “a topic-prominent language”. According to their classification, English falls in the subject-prominent language, and Japanese can be regarded as a highly topic-prominent language compared to English, even though it shares characteristics of both.

Recently some researchers have discussed topic-prominence in interlanguage development, especially in its earlier stages. Schachter and Rutherford (1979), for example, introduced the notion of topic-prominence into second-language acquisition research. They argue that some of the properties of topic-prominence, especially the discourse organization, often become obstacles for Japanese EFL learners. This paper first examines some differences between Japanese and English based on discourse function. Then it discusses how these differences influence Japanese EFL learners’ interlanguage.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Much research has concerned the influence of the native language in second language acquisition for many years. Contrastive analysts once promoted a theory of explicit transfer of the L1 structure (e.g., forcing SVO order onto a SOV language); however, this theory

is no longer widely accepted. Instead, more implicit influence of the L1 processing strategy has been discussed, for example, L1 discourse functions, lexical features, or syntactic processes (Schachter & Rutherford, 1979).

- 1a. ?Most of food which is served in such restaurant have cooked already.
- 1b. ?Irrational emotions are bad but rational emotions must use for judging.

(Schachter & Rutherford, 1979, p.7)

Such sentences are commonly seen in the English compositions of Japanese students. Schachter and Rutherford suggest that these sentences are examples of typological transfer from first-language functions to second-language. They claim that instances of these error types are unique to learners of topic-prominent languages like Japanese which are quite different from subject-prominent languages like English. Their study indicates that there are some important aspects of topic-prominence in Japanese, which may elicit interlanguage interference in learners' acquisition of English. These aspects are "preposing of topic", "omission of subjects", and "double subject".

Preposing of topic:

The topic is always coded in topic-prominent languages. In Japanese, the topic normally occurs sentence initially and is always marked with the particle wa (Schachter & Rutherford, 1979), as shown in example (2).

- 2. Chocolate cookie wa Mike ga taberu.
(TOPIC) (tm) (SUBJECT) (sm) (VERB, eat)
(Mike eats the chocolate cookie.)
(tm=topic marker, sm=subject marker)

In sentence (2), the topic is sentence initial followed by the topic marker wa and the subject comes next. Li and Thompson (1976) hypothesize that discourse strategies cause this preposing of the topic, saying "Since speech involves serialization of the information to be communicated, it makes sense that the topic, which represents the discourse theme, should be introduced first" (p.465), and the subject should receive less priority. In English, on the other hand, Sawasaki (1996) explains that the topic is sometimes introduced in the sentence final position because the subject receives the priority, as in sentence (3).

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3. Mike brought cake and orange juice to the party yesterday. He said his mother baked “the cake”.

(Sawasaki, 1996, p.44)

He discusses that “the cake” is the topic of this sentence because the speaker has brought it into the context and has chosen to talk about it rather than the orange juice. He also claims that if sentence (3) is translated into Japanese, “the cake” must be placed in the sentence initial position followed by the topic marker wa, otherwise it sounds awkward. Jorden (1987, cited by Sawasaki, 1996) explains that these implications are often expressed with a change of intonation in English.

Omission of subject

Topic-prominent languages like Japanese tend to use word order for the expression of discourse function, and sometimes subject and often object are not required by the language discourse conventions (Schachter & Rutherford, 1979). Fuller and Gundel (1987, cited by Sawasaki, 1996) argues that topic prominent languages don't require a noun phrase if the missing noun phrase has the same referent as the topic of the sentence. Yip & Matthews (1995) explain that the omission of subject is constrained by syntactic as well as pragmatic factors. Sentence (4) illustrates this.

4. Watashi wa onaka ga itai kara, @ byoin e ikimasu.

(I) (tm) (stomach) (sm) (hurt) (because), (I) (the doctor) (to) (go).

(I will go to the doctor because I have a stomachache.)

As can be seen in sentence (4), the subject is not repeated in the second clause as it is in English. In Japanese, once a noun phrase is introduced as the topic, there is no need to reintroduce it unless there is a change in the discourse topic.

Double subject

Topic-prominent languages make extensive use of what has been called “double subject constructions”. The first nominative is used as a topic and the second as a subject. They behave like two separate subjects (Li & Thompson, 1976). Sentence 5 illustrates this.

5. Sakana wa tai ga oishii.
 (Topic, fishi) (tm) (Subject, red snapper) (sm) (delicious)
 (As for fish, red snapper is delicious.)

(Li & Thompson, 1976, pp.466-469)

In this sentence, the topic and the subject are related and occur sequentially, but can be distinguished easily. The topic has no selectional relationship with the verb.

Schachter and Rutherford (1979) claim that these characteristics “preposing of topic”, “omission of subjects”, and “double subject”, which are unique to topic-prominent languages could influence Japanese speakers when they learn English. They say when such influences are manifested as identifiable errors one usually calls them negative transfer of interference errors.

PURPOSE

This is a preliminary study to investigate how much the above mentioned properties are carried over when Japanese learners speak English. First, the relationship between the learners’ proficiency level and error types in terms of topic-prominence will be examined. Then Japanese EFL learner’s interlanguage will be discussed.

SUBJECTS

Three Japanese ESL students at a Northern American University participated in this study, S1, S2, and S3. They all had studied English in Japan for six years, three years of junior high school and three years of high school. Table 1 shows the demographic profiles of the subjects.

PROCEDURE

Informal conversation with the researcher was done in order to get some naturalistic data (see appendix 1). Second, an elicited translation exercise was carried. According to

Table 1 Profiles of three Japanese ESL students

Subject	Gender	Years of stay in US.	TOEFL score**
S1	F	3 months	380
S2	F	2 years	400
S4	F	1 year	480

** scores from Test of English as a Foreign Language

Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991), an elicited translation procedure requires both the decoding of the stimulus sentence and the encoding of the translation, so that the subjects' performance approximates natural speech production. In the elicited translation exercise, the researcher prepared ten questions in Japanese (see appendix 2). Each question began with a couple of sentences to create a context and provide a topic for the last sentence, which they were to translate into English. There were three types of sentences, those with animate/human subjects, animate/non-human subjects, and inanimate subjects. The three types of sentences were ordered randomly. Each subject listened to the recorded exercise and asked to translate the last sentence, which contains a topic, into English. Two IC recorders were used during the exercise, one to play the exercise sentences and the other to record the subjects' answers. Appendix 3 shows their answers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Informal conversation

In the naturalistic data, some sentences, which were directly translated word-for-word from Japanese, were seen. They are seen in the sentences (6) a-d.

- 6a. S: 2 Afternoon was a little bit study homework.
- 6b. S: 3 This weekend was my friend came here.
- 6c. S: 3 Tax is she spend 15%.
- 6d. S: 3 Here is everything is very cheap.

These four sentences produced by Japanese ESL students seem to have many common characteristics. The copula "be" is used as a topic marker to signal the boundary between the topic and the comments as shown in 6a-d.

- | | | |
|------------------|------------|------------------------------|
| 6a. Afternoon | <u>was</u> | a little bit study homework. |
| 6b. This weekend | <u>was</u> | my friend came here. |
| 6c. Tax | <u>is</u> | she spend 15%. |
| 6d. Here | <u>is</u> | everything is very cheap. |
| (Topic) | (tm) | (Comment) |

Naturalistic data as shown in 6a-d above taken from Japanese subjects show the same tendency as that seen in Sentence 7a, which is an example utterance of a nine-year-old

Japanese-speaking subject, Kazuko. She had two months English exposure at an English-speaking school in Japan. Sasaki (1990) says that Kazuko made a drastic leap in both form and function during a 10-month observation period. Her English showed the development of complex subordinate constructions like sentence 7b from paratactic coordinate constructions like sentence 7a.

7a. Shoes is tiger give.

(Topic) (**tm**) (Comment)

7b. And then, I saw that it's dying.

(Sasaki, 1990, p.340)

Sasaki explains that Kazuko's earlier productions exemplified in 7a can be explained as word-for-word translations from Japanese, which has a topic-prominent orientation. She further explains that the English word "is" is functioning as the topic marker "wa" in Japanese. She hypothesizes that one of the major reasons for the topic-prominence in Kazuko's earlier interlanguage was the influence of Japanese.

Elicited translation exercise

In the elicited translation exercise, different errors were produced depending on whether the sentence contained animate/human, animate/non-human or inanimate subject. Figure 1 shows the error percentage for each subject.

When the subject is inanimate, the error percentage was high compared to animate/human and animate/non-human. In this exercise, the researcher focused on the form of the target language so local mistakes such as third person singular or plurals were ignored.

Animate/human subject

The students translated the following underlined sentences from Japanese to English.

8a. There is a kitchen in this apartment on the first floor. Nine students use this

Figure 1 Error percentage by students in the sentence contained animate/human, animate/non-human and inanimate subject

	animate/human	animate/non-human	inanimate
Student 1	100%	100%	100%
Student 2	50%	0%	100%
Student 3	0%	0%	60%

kitchen.

8b. Alice made chocolate cookies and lemon cookies. Ken ate the lemon cookies. Mike ate the chocolate cookies.

The topics in the underlined sentences are “this kitchen” and “the chocolate cookies” respectively, and they are placed at the sentence final position in English. However, the following sentences were examples of errors made by the S1 and the S2.

S1: 9a. ?Kitchen is spend nine student.

9b. ?Chocolate cake ate Mike.

S2: 10a. ?Kitchen share nine students.

10b. ?Chocolate cookies is Mike eat.

As can be seen in 9a-b and 10a-b, the students utilized Japanese word order as discussed earlier. They simply use “the kitchen” and “the chocolate cookies” as subjects. This is probably because topics such as “this kitchen” and “the chocolate cookies” are sentence initial in Japanese, followed by the topic marker “wa”. These students seemed to be confused about which is topic and which is subject. These examples have the same characteristics as naturalistic data; the topic is placed in the sentence initial position followed by the copula “is” as the topic marker “wa”, as if they are speaking Japanese.

Animate/non-human subject

The students translated the following underlined sentences from Japanese to English.

11a. I left some fish, which I bought this morning, on the table, but now it's gone. Tom's cat ate it.

11b. My carrots and tomatoes were eaten by someone. Maybe a rabbit ate the carrots.

When the subjects were animate/non-human, the S1 utilized Japanese word order. This time the copula “ate” is used as a topic marker to signal the boundary between the topic and the comments, as seen in 12a-b. The S3 used correct declarative sentences, which native speakers of English are most likely to produce in cases like these, as seen in 14a-b. However, the S2 used passive sentences, which may be inappropriate in this context, as seen in 13a-b.

- S1: 12a. ?It ate Tom cat.
12b. ?Maybe it ate rabbit.
S2: 13a. ?Tom's cat was eaten by the fish.
13b. I'm sure the carrots was eaten by rabbit.
S3: 14a. The Tom's cats eat it.
14b. Probably the rabbit ate carrots.

The S2 tended to use passive sentences incorrectly in the informal conversation (see appendix 1), as well as in the elicited translation exercise. Sasaki (1990) found that Japanese EFL learners tend to overuse the dummy subject "there" and "there is" structure, once they learn them in the first year of EFL instruction at school and are familiar with them. Sawasaki (1996) speculates that this is the result of over-generalization of the functions of dummy subjects at an interlanguage stage and not the result of proper acquisition of L2. The over usage of the S2's passive sentences could be the result of the interlanguage production or the result of language fossilization, considering that she had a lengthy stay in the U.S..

Inanimate subjects

The students were asked to translate the following underlined sentences from Japanese to English.

15. There was an accident and two people got hurt.
An ambulance took the injured to the hospital.
16. There are many things to be calculated.
The computer will do it.
17. I have so many books. What should I do?
A book store will buy the new ones.

When the subject was inanimate, the error percentage was high. All the sentences except 20c utilize Japanese word order, preposing the topic.

- S1: 18a. ?Hurt take hospital
18b. No answer.
18c. ?New book buy bookstore.

S2: 19a. ?Injure took ambulance to hospital.

19b. ?It count computer.

19c. ?New book might buy a book store.

S3: 20a. ?The injured takes into the hospital by ambulance.

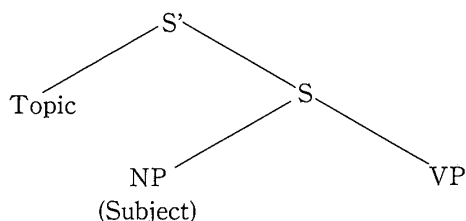
20b. ?It can do by computer.

20c. ?The bookstore can new one.

The topics in the underlined sentences in 18a-c, 19a-c and 20a-c are “the injured”, “it”, and “the new ones” respectively. As can be seen, the students utilize Japanese word order for most of the sentences discussed before. In sentences 18a, 19a, and 20a, the three students put the topic “the injured”, which is animate/human in the sentence initial position, and use them as the subjects of the sentences.

English allows a wider range of roles for subjects, particularly in allowing an inanimate noun to serve as the subject of an active sentence. Japanese, however, is more restrictive in the type of noun which may serve as the subject; almost always humans or higher animals serve as subjects (Harrington 1987). This seems to explain why the subjects avoided using “an ambulance” as the subject, since it is rare that inanimate nouns become the subject in Japanese.

Yip and Matthews (1995) bridge the gap between typological insights and interlanguage competence in terms of generative grammar. They argue that if no other element is topicalized in the main clause, the subject may be topicalized in a vacuous sense invisible on the surface, as indicated below.



21. Irrational emotions are bad but [rational emotions] (ϕ must use for judging).

TOPIC

COMMENT

(Yip & Matthews, 1995, p.20-21)

According to this analysis, the clause-initial NP in sentence 21 is interpreted as a topic, whose actual subject is not required by the native language conventions. Jorden (1987, cited

by Sawasaki, 1996) explains that Japanese has no grammatical requirement to express the subject as long as it is apparent from the context.

18a. [Hurt] (ϕ take hospital).

18c. [New book] (ϕ buy book store).

20a. [The injured] (ϕ took into the hospital by ambulance).

In all of the above data taken from the students, the topic is shown in brackets, and the comments in parentheses. Moreover, the subjects of these sentences can be interpreted as “they”, which is not required when they are interpreted in Japanese.

This phenomenon could be explained as the carryover of topic-prominent surface syntax from Japanese into English.

CONCLUSION

Topic-prominent languages like Japanese have characteristics which are different from subject-prominent languages like English such as preposing of topic, omission of subject and double subject. Much research has shown that these characteristics cause negative transfer into the target language. The elicited translation exercise provides evidence of negative transfer from Japanese. This finding may support a model of interlanguage production characterized by topic-prominence. Japanese English learners seem to carry over negative transfer from Japanese and go through a unique interlanguage stage characterized by preposing of topics or omission of subjects in a clause, due to topic prominent characteristics of Japanese.

In this study, the researcher used ten exercises of three types, those with animate/human subject, animate/non-human subject and inanimate subjects, and the students encountered them independently. These sentences might have sounded artificial, not like natural discourse. If this research had dealt with a more coherent discourse exercise (i.e., beyond the sentence level), the results may differ. Written exercises might show different data than speaking. More research with a larger sample size needs to be done in order to have a clear picture of topic-prominence in interlanguage. Additional research will also become the direction for future classroom-based research in terms of the particular pedagogical practices.

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Appendix 1

Naturalistic data

S: 1

(Do you like Portland?)

Yes...rain a lot. Rains rains everyday. don't like... but, pretty... pretty... beautiful. green I like. good smells

(Can you tell me about your family?)

Father... mother... brother, me. Father work small company. Brothers ... work company. Company father has. Mother no work.

(What's your hobby?)

Baseball...I baseball everyday...Japan.

S: 2

Oh, yesterday I have no special day. I am a Buddhist and Buddhist. I have Buddhist community center at Ankeny Street and 18th avenue. Oh, usually I went to a community center and I chanting with my religious member and I don't have a special plan every weekend. Yesterday, yesterday I went to my friend's apartment and she chanting together and I was taken a bus at 8:30 and I went to North Portland. Maybe 30 minutes was taken by a bus 30 minutes and I went to her apartment and three people together we chanting about one and half hours and back ride she took to me my apartment. I arrived my apartment at one o'clock. Afternoon was a little bit study homework and that's all. Oh, she is my friend and she wants teach English to me and together she will meet to my apartment maybe she helps me my homework and maybe I will cook for her we eat dinner together.

S: 3

...last week I studied hard. This weekend was my friend came here and we go to some place. I...We went to Loyd center. We went to Colombia gorge with my husband. It was very good, but it was very cold. The fall was good. It was the second time. First time I went with my American friend. Except there we went to Pioneer square with my husband bought I didn't buy anything, but my friend bought Coach bag. Nike shoes. They are very expensive. It was very cheaper than Toronto she lived. She has to pay tax. Tax is she spend 15%. Here is everything is very cheap. My study is very hard. Because when I was very easy because my teacher didn't give me homework work, but now I have a lot of homework and assignment. It's very hard. My teachers are Laura, Julie, Margaret, oh,

John. They are very good. Naokata is take one class, speaking. He is very busy. He works a lot. I'm going to study art. But I don't know what course I'm going to take. I have to ask my advisor. Maybe easy courses. I'm worried studying with Americans.

Appendix 2

- (1) このアパートの一階には台所があります。その台所は9人の学生が使っています。

There is a kitchen in this apartment on the first floor. Nine students share this kitchen.

- (2) 昨日交通事故があり、二人けがをしました。そのけが人は救急車が病院へすぐつれて行きました。

There was an accident yesterday and two people got hurt. An ambulance took the injured to the hospital.

- (3) スーザンはサラダとケーキをパーティーに持って来ました。

このケーキはお母さんが焼いたのよとスーザンは言いました。

Susan brought salad and cake to the party. She said that her mother baked the cake.

- (4) 今朝買ってきた魚をテーブルに置いておいたんですが、なくなってしまいました。それは、トム猫が食べてしまいました。

I left some fish, which I bought this morning, on the table, but now it's gone. Tom's cat ate it.

- (5) このパーティーに来ている人はみんな知っているけど、あの赤いドレスの女の人は知らないわ。メアリーね。彼女はスーザンが招待したのよ。

I know all the people in this party except that woman with a red dress. She is Mary. Susan invited her.

- (6) 計算しなくてはいけない物がたくさんあります。

それはコンピューターがやってくれますよ。

There are so many things to be calculated. The computer will do it.

- (7) せっかく育てた人参とトマトが食いあらされました。人参は、きっと、うさぎが食べたのですよ。

My carrots and tomatoes were eaten by someone. Maybe a rabbit ate the carrots.

- (8) たくさん本があるのですが、どうしましょうか。新しいのは、本屋さんが買ってくれますよ。

I have so many books. What should I do? A book store will buy the new ones.

- (9) アリスはチョコレートクッキーとレモンクッキーを焼きました。レモンクッキーはケンが食べました。チョコレートクッキーはマイクが食べました。

Alice made chocolate cookies and lemon cookies. Ken ate the lemon cookies. Mike ate the chocolate cookies.

- (10) 私には年をとった離婚している両親がいます。父は老人ホームで生活しています。母は私が面倒をみています。

I have old divorced parents. Father lives in a nursing home. I take care of mother.

Appendix 3

Elicited translation data

- (1) S1. Kitchen is spend nine student.
S2. The kitchen is use. Share nine students.
S3. Nine students use this kitchen.
- (2) S1. Hurt take hospital.
S2. Injured took ambulance to hospital.
S3. The injured takes into the hospital by ambulance.
- (3) S1. The cake bake mother.
S2. This cake was made her mother, she said.
S3. Susan said she made the cake.
- (4) S1. It ate Tom cat.
S2. The fish was eaten by Tom's cat.
S3. The Tom's cats eat it.
- (5) S1. She invite Susan.
S2. Susan invited her.
S3. Susan invited her.
- (6) S1. No answer.
S2. It can count computer.
S3. It can do by computer.
- (7) S1. Maybe it ate rabbit.
S2. I'm sure the carrots was eaten by rabbit.
S3. Probably rabbit ate carrot.
- (8) S1. New book buy bookstore.
S2. New book might buy a book store.
S3. The bookstore can buy new one.
- (9) S1. Chocolate cake ate Mike.
S2. Chocolate cookie is Mike eat.
S3. Mike eats chocolate cookies.
- (10) S1. My mother take me.

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S2. My mother is taken care by me.

S3. I take care of my mother.