Pronominal Interpretations in L2 Japanese

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1. Introduction
This paper discusses experimental results of a truth-value judgment task on L2 learners’ interpretations of Japanese overt and null pronouns. Japanese is a [+null] language and as such overt pronouns cannot have a bound variable reading when the antecedent is a quantified NP. Kanno (1997) reports that 78.5% of JFL learners accepted the bound variable (BV) interpretations of null pronouns as opposed to 13% of overt pronouns, despite a low acceptance of coreferential (CR) readings of overt pronouns (42%). She argues that this finding is evidence for learners’ access to the Overt Pronoun Constraint (Montalbetti, 1984). Masumoto (2008), however, found that 54 English speaking JFL learners correctly accepted the CR sentences 82.5% of the time, but only correctly rejected the BV sentences 51.9% of the time. These results cast some doubt on Kanno’s claim. The present study provides additional data to these conflicting views.

2. Methodology
Fifty-seven English speaking JFL learners (18 subjects in 2nd year Japanese (200 instructional hours), 16 in 3rd year (350 hrs), 14 in 4th year (550 hrs) and 9 in 5th year (beyond 600 hrs)), and 20 Japanese native speakers (the control group) participated in our experimental study at a large American university. All were given a questionnaire that included 37 short narratives in English with the Japanese sentences. They were instructed to read them and decide if the sentence that followed each narrative matched the situation they had just read (a la Crain and McKee’s (1985) truth-value judgment task). The 24 test sentences consisted of: four BV sentences with an overt pronoun (1a), six BV sentences with a null pronoun (1b), two coreferential member sentences with an overt pronoun (1c), four coreferential member sentences with a null pronoun (1d), six coreferential non-member sentences with an overt pronoun (1e), and two coreferential non-member sentences with a null pronoun (1f). Each test sentence contained the quantifier dono X mo ‘every’ in subject position (cf. WH-words and minna ‘all’ were used in Kanno and Masumoto, respectively) and overt/null pronouns at the possessive position of the object noun. Examples are listed with the partial results below.

(1a) Dono itoko-mo kare-no imooto-o yonda. (BV context, 47% correct) [BVO]
(1b) Dono hisyo-mo meeru-o kaita. (BV context, 83% correct) [BVE]
(1c) Dono ruumumeeto-mo kare-no asagohan-o tabe-ta. (CR member context; kare = one of dono ruumumeeto-mo discussed in the narrative, 77% correct) [CMO]
(1d) Dono kookoosei-mo bideo-o mita. (CR member context; null pronoun = one of dono kookoosei-mo discussed in the narrative, 88% correct) [CME]
(1e) Dono onna-no-hito-mo kanozyo-no hanashi-o kiita. (CR non-member context; kanozyo = a person in the narrative, but not a member of dono onna-no-hito-mo, 78% correct) [CNO]
(1f) Dono onna-no-ko-mo arubamu-o wasure-ta. (CR non-member context; null pronoun = a person in the narrative, but not a member of dono onna-no-ko-mo, 87% correct) [CNE]
3. Results and Discussion

Our results were similar to Masumoto’s in that the learners correctly rejected overt pronoun sentences with BV readings an average of only 51% of the time, while the native speaker control group’s average was 76%. Only the 5th year students performed similarly to the natives by correctly rejecting BVs with overt pronouns 83% of the time. The learners correctly accepted CRs with overt pronouns an average of 85% of the time, and correctly accepted BVs with null pronouns (BVE) 79% of the time. Contrary to Masumoto’s study, a gradual increase by proficiency level was not observed in the correct rejection rate of overt pronoun sentences with BV readings (L2=44%, L3=34%, L4=43%, L5=83%). The results show that knowledge of the OPC takes time to acquire.

The correct responses (rejections) for the BV sentences with overt pronouns (BVO) in our study were quite low at 51% compared with 87% in Kanno’s study. Since the present study utilized a truth-value judgment task that required either a True or False response, yes-bias effects could have influenced JFL learners’ responses. Therefore, the non-parametric index of sensitivity (A’) was assigned to the data in order to control for such biases (Linebarger, Schwartz, and Saffran (1983)). For the case of the BV readings of the overt and null pronouns the results show that Levels 2-4 each were significantly different from Level 5. No differences were found between Level 5 and the control group. Thus it appears that Levels 2-4 did not differ in grammatical sensitivity on the BV readings. Again this casts some doubt on the access to the OPC from the initial stage of their L2 grammar. In the case of the null pronouns, Levels 2 and 3 did show sensitivity but they were significantly different from Level 5. This suggests that the overt pronouns in the BV readings and not the null pronouns were problematic for JFL learners particularly in Levels 2-4. Our findings suggest that the learners at an early stage: a) may have thought overt pronouns could have BV readings like in English (L1 transfer), and/or b) were sensitive to discourse effects, i.e., the OPC was overridden by discourse effects. Comparing the results in (1d-f) to those of the native control group (CMO: 93%; CME: 100%; CNO: 87%; CNE: 93%), our results show (as per Masumoto) that JFL learners seem to acquire knowledge of coreferential readings from an early stage of learning, possibly suggesting L1 transfer.

References


List of Technical Terms

Overt Pronoun Constraint (OPC): According to Montalbetti (1984) “overt pronouns cannot link to formal variables iff the alternation overt/empty obtains” (p.94).

Bound Variable: An anaphoric expression that is coindexed and c-commanded by a quantifier.

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