

ON THE INTERFACE OF GRAMMAR ERRORS AND PRAGMATIC FAILURES IN L2 JAPANESE WRITINGS

上級日本語学習者の作文における文法的誤りと語用論的失敗の接点をめぐって

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is not just some extra piece of work that a speaker must perform beyond making a meaningful sentence. Syntax, semantics and pragmatics are all interrelated to make a single utterance understood. Often times, languages have constructions that strongly encode particular pragmatic interpretations through conventionalization (Goldberg, 1995: 2006). Observe the following famous example;

(1)

Diner: Waiter, what's this fly doing in my soup?
Waiter: Madam, I believe that's the backstroke.

(Fillmore & Kay, 1999. p.4)

English speakers would have no trouble reading the accusing tone from the waiter "what's this fly doing in my soup?" Indeed, Fillmore & Kay (1999) claim that there are "incongruous" senses in the diner's question, rather than a genuine question. They contend;

What's X doing Y? construction may have had its origin in conversational implicature – though situations in which an individual A is clearly up to no good and B asks what A is doing- the semantics of incongruity is *now conventionalized associated with* [emphasis added] the special morpho-syntax of WXDY constructs (ibid.: 6)

They argue that this particular meaning of "incongruous" is now a part of the meaning of this WXDY construction through the conventionalization of form-meaning pairings. Taking up Construction Grammar approaches (Fillmore, Kay & O'Conner, 1988, Goldberg, 1995:2006, *inter alia*), this study examines advanced-level L2 Japanese learners' grammatical errors attributed to the mismatch in conventionalized form-meaning pairings in the target language. Since grammar encodes pragmatic meanings, it is hypothesized that an L2 learner's wrong grammatical choices could result in misjudgments of the L2 learner's intended meanings and even their moral attitudes.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

2.1 Pragmatic failures

Thomas (1981) used the term pragmatic failures, rather than pragmatic errors since "the nature of pragmatic ambivalence is such that it is not possible to say that the

pragmatic force of an utterance is ‘wrong’. All we can say is that it failed to achieve the speaker’s goal” (ibid.: 94). She distinguishes two types of pragmatic failures, namely pragmalinguistic failures and sociopragmatic failures:

Pragmalinguistic failure, which occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2 (ibid.: 99)

According to Thomas, while pragmalinguistic failures originate in the wrong choice of linguistic forms, sociopragmatic failures originate in the student’s system of values and beliefs, therefore requiring more careful treatment when negotiating the student’s intended meanings. More crucially, sociopragmatic failure could even call the student’s personality into question while pragmalinguistic failure does not invite such inferences.

While acknowledging the two types of pragmatic failures is helpful for language teachers to assess the student’s error types and the treatments of the errors accordingly, I would like to call for particular attention to the cases where the wrong choice of linguistic forms (pragmalinguistic failures) can cause further failures in sociopragmatics.

2.2 Register

The term “registers” and “genres” are used differently depending on the researcher’s interests. This study takes the definition of register by Biber & Conrad (2009): “a language variety associated with both *a particular situation of use with pervasive linguistic features* [stress added] that serve important situation of use” (ibid.: 31). Recall that I discussed the conventionalized form-meaning pairing in “what’s X doing Y” construction in section 1 and notice that “a particular situation of use” corresponds to the *meaning/function* and “linguistic features” to the *form*. My claim is that a particular situation of use and the corresponding linguistic features are conventionalized just like a form-meaning pairing in construction grammar. Therefore, when the mismatch occurs in this form and meaning pairing, the L1 speakers would find something funny about it.

2.3 Error analysis

2.3.1 *overtly idiosyncratic* vs. *covertly idiosyncratic*

Corder (1974) calls the language of a second language learner an *idiosyncratic dialect* along with other language idiosyncratic dialects such as poems and child language. Through his arguments, he distinguishes those that are *overtly idiosyncratic* sentences and *covertly idiosyncratic* sentences. Overtly idiosyncratic sentences are superficially ill-formed in terms of the rules of the target language while covertly idiosyncratic sentences are superficially well-formed yet they are still idiosyncratic. Most importantly, he discusses that “well-formed sentences in terms of one social dialect (the target dialect in the case of the learner) are just as important as those which are overtly idiosyncratic” (ibid. 165). Following Corder (1974), the present study also divides the overtly idiosyncratic sentences and covertly idiosyncratic sentences and discusses their natures. Moreover, the present study further looks at the covertly idiosyncratic features of L2’s errors in more depth.

2.3.2 On the definition of error

In section 1, I have talked about the conventionalized form-meaning pairings that are encoded in our grammar constructions. In section 2.1, I have talked about the pragmatic failures (particularly pragmalinguistic failures), which occur due to the mismatch of pragmatic forces between the L2 speaker's intention and the target language. In section 2.2, I have talked about the form-meaning pairing with regards to linguistic registers. The present study follows the definition of errors as presented in Ferris (2011): "morphological, syntactic, and lexical forms that deviate from the rule of the target language, *violating the expectations* [emphasis added] of literate adult native speakers" (ibid.: p.3). I believe *expectation* is the key concept to understand why L1 speakers would feel the mismatch between form and meaning: the pairing of form and meaning is so conventionalized that they expect a particular meaning when they encounter a particular linguistic construction even including the contextual meanings. Therefore, when their expectations are violated, they notice the mismatch between the form and the meaning. Importantly, the notion of "expectation" can also explain the violation at syntactic surface level, the sentences termed "overtly idiosyncratic" by Corder.

3. THE STUDY

3.1 Methodology

Three advanced level L2 Japanese learners and three L1 Japanese students were paired up, forming three groups. L2 students were asked to write an essay on a given topic and had a writing conference with the paired L1 students. After each session, the L2 students were asked to rewrite their essays based on the conference. L1 students met for tutor meetings three times after each writing conference to discuss their interactions with L2 students. All the writing conferences between L2-L1 and the L1 tutor meetings were video-recorded. On top of the video-recorded sessions, I conducted questionnaires to ask both L2 and L1 students about their expectations and satisfactions regarding the writing conferences.

3.2 Participants

Table 1: L2 participants

ID	group	First language	Second language	Major/year
17MF	1	English	-	Accounting/3 rd undergrad
17SG	2	Mandarin	English	Applied mathematics/4 th undergrad
17AD	3	English	Mandarin	Linguistics/3 rd undergrad

Table 2: L1 participants

ID	group	First language	Second language	Major/year
17MT	1	Japanese	English	Linguistics/3 rd undergraduate
17YO	2	Japanese	English	Education/3 rd PhD
17EH	3	Japanese	English	Linguistics/2 nd MA

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Coding

The coding divided errors into 14 types. As I discuss in the later sections, these 14 error types are not all mutually exclusive. The error type assessment proceeds from one point to another with the *yes/no* decision-making at each point (see table 3). The decision-making questions are arranged in such a way that it is clear what kind of criteria we as tutors could have in our mind when correcting the errors and how we could prioritize discussing these errors.

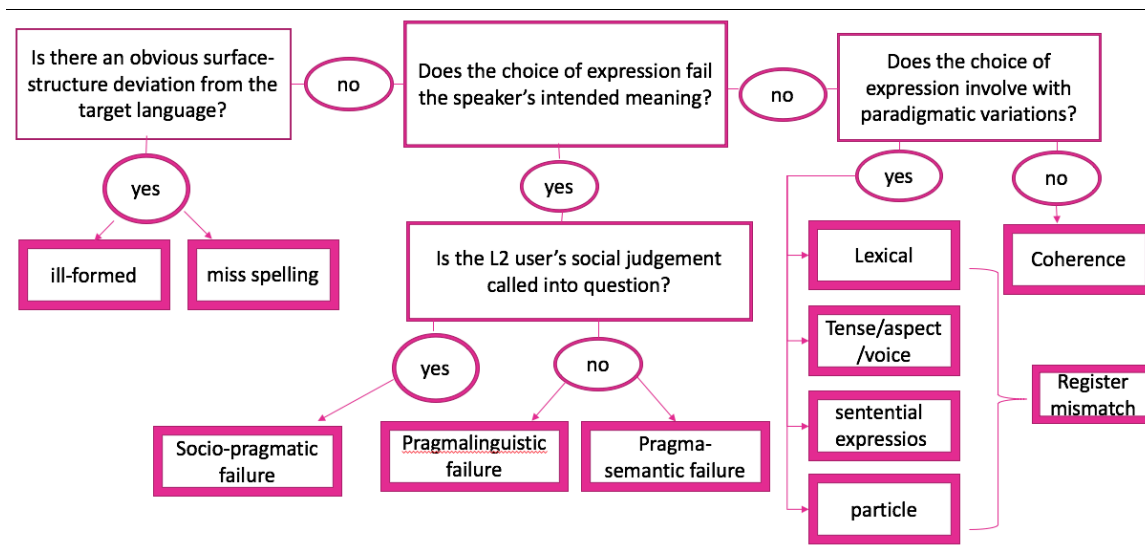
The first and most apparent criterion is whether a tutor can identify an obvious surface structure deviation from the target language. If so, the error is recognized either as “ill-formed” or “misspelling”. These kind of errors appear not to require much time in writing conference and the all three tutors did not explain why a particular form is wrong to the L2 students. During the L1 tutor meetings, one of the tutors explained that she thinks her L2 student would have no “ill-formed” or “misspelling” types of errors if only this student reexamined what he had written. Indeed, all the students agreed on the errors as soon as the tutors pointed out surface structure deviations.

The next and most important criterion is whether the student’s choice of expression conveys the speaker’s intended meanings or not. If so, the error is recognized either as “socio-pragmatic failure”, “pragmalinguistic failure” or “pragma-semantic failure”. “socio-pragmatic failure” should be distinguished first as it could cause a serious social issue such as misjudging the L2 speaker’s moral values. I will discuss the distinction between “pragmalinguistic failure” and “pragma-semantic failure”, which was not present in Thomas (1981)’s study.

If a particular expression does not fail to convey the speaker’s intended meaning, the final question to ask is whether the expression is involved with linguistic paradigmatic variations or not. If so, then four types of paradigmatic variations errors can be considered: “lexical”, “tense/aspect/voice”, “sentential expressions” or “particle”. Most importantly, as I discuss in the later section, errors in such paradigmatic variations can sometimes cause a mismatch in register choice. If a particular error is not involved with paradigmatic variations at this stage, the error is recognized as “coherence”. Coherence errors were found to be mistakes in expressing the sentence transitions or overt transitions.

I disregarded the changes made by L1 speakers which I did not find to fit in any of the descriptions above. That is, if I could not observe the violation of the L1 speaker’s expectation for a particular linguistic choice, I did not identify the expression as an error. Such changes made by L1 speakers were often observed to occur at beyond clausal levels. These corrections were coded as “others”.

Table 3: Error analysis flow chart



4.2 The data

The table 4 summarizes the tokens of L2 student errors that occurred in their writing drafts for the three time writing conferences.

Table 4: The summary of error tokens

L2 ID	ill-formed	Miss-spelling	Pragmase-mantic	Pragmalinguistic	Socio-pragmatic	lex	T/V/A	particle	Sentential expression	coherence	others	total
17MF	4	15	10	28	5	10	4	13	1	20	0	110
17SG	20	4	2	13	4	9	2	28	12	7	0	101
17AD	3	8	7	17	5	24	12	27	15	16	40	194

5. DISCUSSION

This section takes up the examples for each error type and discusses the issues where relevant. In each examples, (a) indicates the sentences produced by L2 student and (b) indicates the suggested sentences by L1 students.

5.1 Surface deviations

Errors of the following two kinds should not be spent much time on in the writing conference.

5.1.1 Ill-formed

(2) Mandarin speaker, 17SG02-0

- a. 大学生は留学した方がいいとしなくてもいい場合があります。
- b. 大学生は留学した方がいいとしなくてもいい場合があります。

The student 17SG was the most advanced level of Japanese learner among the three participants. However, she repeatedly made errors in such noun modifying constructions

where we will not expect the genitive case marker *-no*. This tendency made the number of her errors in “ill-formed” the highest among the students.

5.1.2 Misspelling

Errors of this kind should be corrected by the learners themselves before handing in their drafts.

(3) Mandarin speaker, 17MF01-10

- a. その国の週間や人たちのことをもっと分かるようになります。
- b. その国の習慣や人たちのことをもっと分かるようになります。

5.2 Coherence

This L1 English speaker was repeatedly corrected to remove the overt first person singular subject throughout his writing. This overt subject affects the flow of the discourse;

(4) English speaker, 17AD02-06

私は言語を勉強することが大好きです。色々な言語を勉強するのが面白いと思います。日本語以外、中国語と韓国語を勉強する経験があります。それ以外、フランス語とかスペイン語とかセルビア語とかを勉強しました。でも、私の意見としては、日本語が一番好きな言語です。(私は)子供の頃から日本の文化を習いましたから、ちょっと欲目かもしれませんが、仕方がないです。

5.3 Paradigmatic deviations

5.3.1 Lexical

(5) English speaker, 17MF01-12

- a. 子供の時から、私はいつもバッファローに住んでいました。
- b. 子供の時から、私はずっとバッファローに住んでいました。

5.3.2 Tense, aspect, voice

(6) English speaker, 17MF02-11

- a. 日本語を話せるようになりたいので、私が選んだのはホームステイだけのプログラムでした
- b. 日本語を話せるようになりたかったので、私が選んだのはホームステイだけのプログラムでした

5.3.3 Sentential expression

The next example shows the most frequently observed error in sentential expression choice; students tend to use the polite verbal ending *-masu* and the colloquial subordination marker *-kara* together, creating a speech style tone;

(7) English speaker, 17AD02-95

- a. 日本語を勉強しましたから、留学と旅行ことができました。
- b. 日本語を勉強したことで、留学と旅行をすることができました。

5.3.4 Particle

The L2 students' non-use of particles often suggested the casual speech register when it should be academic writing register;

(8) Chinese speaker, 17SG02-32

- a. 交換留学しに行きました
- b. 交換留学をしました

The non-use of particles was previously considered as ellipsis. However, Shimojo (2006) argued that they have discourse unique properties thus best considered as a separate pragmatic choice. It is noteworthy that the students have to be careful with not only a choice of lexical form but also the use (or non-use) of particles when considering the linguistic registers.

5.4 Pragmatic failures

5.4.1 Pragma-semantic errors

When discussing pragmatic failures, Thomas only took up two types of failures-pragmalinguistic failures and socio-pragmatic failures. After close examination, however, this study found cases where a perfectly grammatical sentence conveyed a different proposition from the proposition that the student intended to express. I argue cases like this should be also discussed under the pragmatic failures as such sentences fail the student's intended meaning and lead to a communication breakdown just like pragmalinguistic failures and socio-pragmatic failures.

(9) English speaker, 17MF02-08

- a. 一年間か一学期間か留学できませんでした
“(literal meaning) I could not study abroad for one year or one semester.”
“(intended meaning) I had to choose one year studying abroad or one semester study abroad.”
- b. 一年間か一学期間の留学はできませんでした

5.4.2 Pragmalinguistic error

The sentence (10a) exemplifies the mismatch in constructional meaning and the writer's intended meaning. Although, unlike pragma-semantic failures, the intended

propositional meaning remains the same, the pragmatic force is understood differently than the student's intention.

(10) English speaker, 17AD02-51

- a. そのゲームがあつて信じられなかった。
- b. そのゲームが存在するのを知って信じられなかった。

The example (10a) shows the inadequate use P-*te* Q construction. Hasegawa (2015) argues that in order for “P-*te* Q” to imply a temporal sequence, some conceivable connection beyond a mere temporal alignment between the two situations must exist. In this case, there is no conceivable connection between the existence of game and that the 17AD cannot believe such existence. That is, the relationship between these two clauses is merely temporal. The sentence (10b), however, gives us an impression that there is a conceivable relationship between the two events. Thus (10b) sounds awkward.

The next example (11) demonstrates the mismatch in evidential forms and the L2 student's intended meaning;

(11) English speaker, 17AD02-48

- a. 確かに、アメリカにポケモンレッドとブルーとイエローを発売しましたが、友達から聞いたグリーン版もありそうでした。
“(literal meaning) They might have Pokemon green in the US.”
- b. 確かに、アメリカではポケモンレッド、ブルーとイエローが発売されていましたが、友達から聞いた話ではグリーン版もあるようでした。
“(intended meaning) Apparently they have Pokemon green in the US.”

Hasegawa (2015) explains when *so da* is attached to an adjective or stative verb, it indicates that some state of affairs is likely to exist while when *so da* follows a tensed predicate, it indicates that the content is hearsay. In example (11a), because *so da* is attached to a stative verb *aru* ‘to be’, we read the sentence as possibility. However, the student's intended meaning was hearsay, not possibility as in (11b). It is hard to argue whether this type of failure should be classified as a pragma-semantic failure or pragmalinguistic failure since the choice of evidential depends on the propositional meanings of a certain event as well as the speaker's pragmatic attitude towards the event.

5.4.3 Socio-pragmatic errors

The next example discusses the socio-pragmatic error due to the wrong choice of construction.

(12) Mandarin speaker, 17SG03-24

- a. もし、大学の時で留学するが出来なかつたら、大学院でも、会社に入っても、たくさんな留学の仕掛けがあります。

“(literal meaning) **If** you won’t be able to study abroad while in college you still get chances to study abroad at graduate schools or at the company you work for”

- b. もし、大学の時に留学することが出来なくても、大学院や会社に入ってから、たくさんの留学のきっかけがあります。

Notice the English translation will be the same for (12a) and (12b). However, Japanese differentiates the conditional meaning with *-tara* as in (12a) and the concessive meaning *-temo* as in (12b). Fujii (1989) pointed out that *-temo* construction is often used when “the speaker has some empathy with the hearer’s expectations about the antecedent-consequent contingency, but express information that is contrary to those expectation” (ibid.: 301). This might suggest when the speaker uses the conditional *-tara* construction instead of the concessive *-temo*, the speaker sounds indifferent, not empathizing with the hearer. Especially because the antecedent context is a negative possibility “not being able to study abroad”, the (12a) sounds a little bit impolite as if the speaker confirms this negative possibility to the hearer.

5.5 On the grammar correction

Truscott (1996) argues that grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned because a) the correction process is ineffective given the nature of language learning and b) it is harmful to the student’s motivations. While there are many points I would like to argue against Truscott, I would like to single out one point in particular;

There is some reason to think that syntactic, morphological, and lexical knowledge are acquired in different manners (Schwartz, 1993). If this is the case, then probably no single form of correction can be effective for all three. Teachers who wish to correct their students’ errors may have to come up with two or three effective methods rather than just one. On the other hand, these considerations might suggest that lexical and morphological knowledge are amenable to correction, even if syntax is not. It makes no sense to think of syntax as a collection of discrete items that students can learn one by one (Truscott, 1996, p.343).

We have observed complex configurations of errors, where lexical, morphological and syntax errors cannot be straightforwardly demonstrated to the students. True, error corrections could discourage the students, but error corrections, as far as my participants are concerned, took the form of meaning negotiations between L2 and L1 students, not a one-way correction. There were discussions as to why a perfectly grammatical sentence sounds awkward or why a particular expression sounds colloquial. Both tutors and students should learn such dynamic figures of grammar: because pragmatics, syntax and semantics are all interrelated, an error in lexical, morphological and syntax could result in unintended meaning in semantics, pragmatics and even unwanted social judgments.

6. CONCLUSION

Students rarely produced surface form deviations such as ill-formed sentences or misspellings, except the most advanced learner 17SG because she repeatedly produces the genitive marker *-no* in noun modifying-constructions where it is not necessary. She uses the genitive marker on such a regular basis that she almost follows a rule. Other than the surface form deviations, L2 and L1 students spent a lot of time in discussing the errors in pragmatic failures, where the student's original intended meaning is different from the L1 student's interpretation. The students' errors in paradigmatic linguistic variations such as use (or non-use) of particles were often found to cause the mismatch in registers. It appears to me that the writing tutorial experiences as L2 speakers of English affected the way the L1 Japanese students advised L2 Japanese students. That is, what L1 Japanese students expect from the writing tutorials as their being L2 of English spoke a lot about how they picked up errors and how they addressed such errors. For example, one L1 tutor marked a lot of errors in "other" category, which is about the preference of L1 tutors, not involved with the deviation in expectation. In the questionnaire, this L1 tutor revealed that she would not mind doing these writing sessions again just by email exchanges whereas the other L1 tutors strongly disagreed because they need to discuss why a certain expression sounds awkward to them with L2 students face to face. This L1 tutor, who would not mind email corrections, seems to be concerned a lot about how far her writings are from the "native-like" norms when she writes English essays. Future research should investigate the bi-directional aspects of language attitudes- the student's being an L1 tutor and the student's being an L2 learner.

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