Japanese Learners' SLA in Responses to English Negative Interrogative Sentences

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This paper attempts to explore one of the Japanese ESL learners' seemingly unachievable skills in English speech discourse: how to respond to a negative interrogative sentence. The impetus for this study derived from my life-long retrospection on my own L2 development and the struggles to overcome this particular difficulty. It is based on my direct observation of an abundance of interlanguage data from Japanese learners of English as second/foreign language in both classroom and naturalistic SLA settings. Attempts are made to explore the differences in linguistic structures between Japanese and English as well as the way an interlocutor responds to a negative interrogative sentence in respective languages. In addition, to unveil the L2 errors and other predictable interlanguage data, Japanese and English L1 speakers' cognitive domain are discussed with some pedagogical implications for the future.

Among the difficult aspects in learning English as a second language or ESL (the term includes EFL in this paper), even an advanced Japanese learner of English often fails to respond properly to an English "negative interrogative sentence (hereinafter referred to as NIS)" or "negative question." This is especially true in spontaneous oral communication or unplanned speech (Suzuki and Watanabe, 1981; Okutsu, 1990; Webb, 1987). This difficulty pertains not only to Japanese ESL learners but also to other Asian L1 speaking learners of English such as Koreans, Chinese, Malaysian and Vietnamese.

An NIS could be defined as a sentence or a phrase that contains one of the following lexical items ── not, never, no, nothing, nobody, no one, nowhere, none, neither, etc. Furthermore, each of these words alone could also constitute an NIS. An example frequently observed between a native and a nonnative speaker of English or between a nonnative speaker and another nonnative speaker is as follows:

1) An English native speaker: Aren't you going?
2) A Japanese ESL learner: Yes.

An English native speaker with little knowledge of Japanese ESL learners' interlanguage pragmatics would take the Japanese response as affirmative to the interrogative sentence, assuming that the Japanese learner is going somewhere. In contrast, the one with frequent contacts with Japanese ESL learners may feel it reassuring or even feel compelled to reconfirm the affirmative by adding, "Are you going or not?" in an attempt to induce a subsequent statement from the speaker such as, "Oh,

no. I'm not going. I'm busy." The wise speaker might prefer to avoid using a negative question rather than having trouble to readjust his/her utterances to the Japanese ESL speaker.

Such a native speaker's approach to Japanese speakers of English can be labeled an "avoidance" strategy (Faerch and Kasper, 1983; Tarone, 1977), one of the communicative strategies that were proposed and supported by a score of theorists of applied linguistics.

To illustrate another example with more context provided, look at the following situation:

> One a hot summer day in Otaru, Yoshiko Hayashi, a Japanese university student, met her American English professor, Dr. Bill Kirkwold, on campus. The professor reminded her to turn in her late assignment immediately. Yoshiko reacted rather reluctantly, which made the professor a little upset. The professor said in a rather low and rough voice, "Aren't you serious about your assignment?" Yoshiko was frozen by the tough blow, but, in a panic, she managed to answer, "No, I'll write it tonight!"

Those familiar with Japanese ESL speakers' interlanguage communication would need less than a few seconds to recall several similar or even more frustrating experiences.

Similarly, American students learning Japanese often encounter problems such as in the case below:

3) A Japanese native speaker: *Kyoo wa getsuyoobi ja nai desu ka.*
(Isn't today Monday?)
4) An American JSL learner: *Iie, getsuyoobi ja nai desu.*
(No, it isn't Monday.)

Looking at the literal English translation given for the American JSL learner's Japanese speech, the L1 English speakers would see no conflict in the semantic domain of the two languages. Those with minimal knowledge of L1 Japanese speakers' pragmatic norms such as in a dialogue like this would be rather puzzled to learn the proper answer in this case is: *Hai* (or *Ee*), *getsuyoobi ja nai desu.* (literal translation is "Yes, it isn't Monday.") The parenthesized translation, which seems both grammatically and semantically unacceptable to most English native speakers, exemplifies the differences between English and Japanese native speakers.

L1 Interference on NISs

We see from the list that in most European languages the way native speakers grammatically respond is usually not affected by how their interlocutors address them. Exceptions can be seen in the French *si*, the German *doch* and the Russian *vsho taki*, which are used to contradict a negative statement.

TABLE
Comparisons of affirmative and negative morphemes in major Asian and
European languages in responses to affirmative and negative IS

	Responses to Affirmative IS		Responses to Negative IS	
Asian Languages	**Affirmative**	**Negative**	**Affirmative**	**Negative**
Japanese	hai	iie	iie	hai
Korean	nee/ye	anyo/animnida	anyo/animnida	nee/ye
Chinese	shi	bushi	bushi	shi
Mongolian	za	ugui	ugui	za
Indonesian	ya	tidak/bukan	tidak/bukan	ya
Turkish	evet	hayir	hayir	evet
European Languages	**Affirmative**	**Negative**	**Affirmative**	**Negative**
English	yes	no	yes	no
German	ja	nein	doch	nein
French	oui	non	si	non
Italian	si	non	si	non
Spanish	si	no	si	no
Russian	da	net	vsho taki	net

Errors are generally divided into two categories: interference errors (errors due to transferring rules from the L1) and developmental errors (errors from the speaker's processing the L2 in its own term). Burt and Dulay (1973, 1974), pioneers in the field of SLA morpheme studies, identified four types of errors according to their psychological origins: 1. interference-like errors; 2. L1 developmental errors; 3. ambigious errors; 4. unique errors. The identification of error types for responses to English NISs seems to be L1-based since European language native speakers usually do not have this sort of problem.

The possible causes of the Japanese ESL learners' errors involving NISs can be explained in two terms. The first is an apparently convincing explanation for the contrast of the two languages. It claims that a semantic agreement to the interlocutor's question or statement in Japanese oral communication works as a basis for almost any interactions in Japanese pragmatics. A Japanese L1 speaker, in other words, is expected to react according to the way the interlocutor expresses himself/herself. Whether it is affirmative or negative determines how the listener is expected to respond to a question. An English speaker, on the contrary, reacts to an NIS in accordance to grammatical agreement on the surface structure. The reason I put surface structure here is that there is certainly a difference in sentences such as the ones following:

5) A: Do you like it? (in a sarcastic tone of voice)
    B: Yes, it's fun.
6) A: Don't you like it? (in a rather surprised tone of voice)

B: Yes, but I'm not feeling so great today.

The speaker in sentence 5 expresses his/her disbelief about his/her interlocutor's idiosyncratic manner or favor, which is taken in a rather negative context by the speaker in a statement by the interlocutor such as, "I collect wings of flies every night." The sentence would be categorized as rhetorical rather than interrogative.

Kuno (1988) states that most NISs in English are those which presuppose affirmative answers, citing five examples below (p. 274):

a. Didn't you go to school yesterday? (You must have.)
b. Isn't it the case that you gave it up? (It must be the case.)
c. Doesn't he look like a hippie? (He looks like a hippie.)
d. Aren't you sick? (You must be sick.)

In sentence 6, the speaker presupposes an affirmative answer from the interlocutor, sounding even accusatory of the interlocutor's undecisive attitudes or evasive manner.

The second possible interpretation is made more in terms of the semantic and functional differences between the Japanese words *hai/iie* and the English words yes/no. It would be difficult to semantically identify the Japanese *hai/iie* with the English yes/no. Each lexical item works in their own linguistic norm. Thus, crosslinguistic semantical definitions for *hai* = yes and *iie* = no have limitations. The Japanese *hai* is, among many functional and semantic representations, a marker to express agreement with the interlocutor's question. Some linguists define *hai* and *iie* and provide English equivalents. Martin (1962) states that *hai* is used to mean "what you said is correct" and *iie* "what you've said is incorrect." M. Nakano (1980) translates *hai* as "Yes, it is the case." and *iie* as "No, it is not the case." I. Nakano (1987) explains that *hai* is "you are right," whereas *iie* implies "You are not right." I would define *hai* as "true" for the wider range of Japanese ESL learners' future pragmaic communication, and *iie* as "false."

Assuming my position, you might well expect the following responses from the Japanese ESL learners:

7) A: Do you like it? (in a sarcastic tone of voice)
   B: True, it's fun.
8) A: Don't you like it? (in a rather surprized tone of voice)
   B: False, I'm just feeling so great today.

The responses presented in this dialogue would hardly occur in natural discourse and may even sound funny to native ears, but it could be more widely accepted in time. This is inevitable as English becomes more internationalized with the nonnative variants observed in the discourse of international communication.

Morpheme studies

In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a surge of empirical studies, most of which were cross-sectional analyses on both L1 and L2 morpheme acquisition (Brown, 1973; Dulay and Burt, 1974; Hakuta, 1974, 1976; Burt, Dulay and Hernandez-Chaves, 1975; Larsen-Freeman, 1976; Makino, 1980; Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Pica, 1983; Krashen, 1985). These morpheme studies, however, limited their focus on the morpheme or sentence-level unit. They failed to extend their research to the pragmatic level; few attempts have been made to examine ESL learners' acquisition of the proper response to an NIS.

A major reason for the research focus is explained in the following statement expressed by one of the leading SLA researchers (Ellis, 1997):

> Language is such a complex phenomenon that researchers have
> generally preferred to focus on some specific aspect than on the whole of
> it. (p.11)

The findings from the aforementioned studies no doubt contributed greatly to syllabus designs of second and foreign language teaching, especially in the order of the grammatical structures of English to be presented in the classroom. The teaching order of grammatical structures or particular morphemes is often determined by the mere linguistic complexity. This is often called "external syllabus," designed by linguists interested in contrastive analysis. Since these have been recognized among ESL instructors and textbook writers, the order has been viewed not only in terms of structural complexity but also through the psychological factors involved. In other words, it is evident that the actual learning sequence in both L1 and L2 acquisition is not identical to the teaching sequence.

Despite such a paradigm shift in the view of the morpheme acquisition order, few attempts have been made to modify the traditional English grammar textbooks presenting structures based on the linguistic complexity. These texts typically present simpler structures earlier than more complex ones. For instance, regular verbs are still commonly presented prior to irregular verbs in almost all Japanese junior high school English textbooks screened by the Ministry of Education. One of the popularly used textbooks, "One World English Course 2" (1992: 9-12), has a lesson entitled "A Sumo Wrestler from Hawaii," in which *arrive* as in "On the first day he arrived at Narita." precedes *come* as in "Takanishiki came to Japan last year."

However, the genuine acquisition order of the two features appear in reverse order according to the findings Krashen's proposed for the "natural order" for L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1977). The actual order of acquisition in naturalistic SLA settings that was identified and classified through a series of performance analyses is also called "internal syllabus." This is in contrast to the aforementioned external syllabus (classroom teaching order).

What determines the internal syllabus? Steinberg (1993) suggests that the order of morpheme acquisition by both L1 and L2 speakers is determined by two factors: *communicative needs* and *salience*. I would like to add *frequency* as an essential component that affects the order. *Frequency*, which concerns how often the learners are exposed to a certain morpheme or structure, is the most important factor of the three. It seems that NISs appear more often than tag questions in English oral discourse although we see no empirical study to prove it. *Communicative needs* refers to how meaningful a certain morpheme or structure is regarded to make the meaning expressed by that morpheme distinct. *Salience* is the extent that a certain morpheme or structure is audibly conspicuous in a naturalistic SLA settings. By applying these three criteria to an NIS, we can conclude that an NIS occurs frequently, conspicuously and meaningfully in natural English discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this study has shown the following:

1) The cause for Japanese ESL learners' difficulty in acquiring this particular aspect of English pragmatics is purely interlinguistic and shared by other Asian language speakers. Besides, that negative transfer seems rather difficult to overcome even for advanced ESL learners.

2) An NIS has high frequency and audible salience. It is also communicatively meaningful in natural English discourse.

3) An improper response to an NIS could cause a serious communication interruptions, frustrating both ESL learners and their interlocutors.

Implications for Applied Linguistics and ESL

Communication predicaments involving NISs have been underestimated. Insufficient descriptions or exercises have been introduced in ESL textbooks in general. This is evident in even junior high and senior high school textbooks approved by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Under the current English curriculum at junior high and senior high school levels in Japan, an NIS is not overtly taught and only partially addressed in a form of tag questions.

One of the possible pedagogical approaches to teaching proper reactions to NISs is to offer practice dialogues that contain NISs in high school Oral Communication A or B textbooks. Those dialogues should appear in a spiral syllabus rather than in a linear syllabus. In other words, learners should be continually exposed to NISs over an extended period of time rather than at a single time. English teachers who introduce NIS dialogues should be knowledgeable about the crosslinguistic and psychological features behind the error analysis explained in this paper.

In addition, teachers should not be overly obsessed with students' potential pragmatic errors. Excessive interruptions or corrections on the student's oral production may inhibit and discourage their free expression.

Implications for Interpersonal Communication in English

To maintain better interpersonal communication in English, both native and nonnative speakers of English should observe the following:

First, any speakers of English are encouraged to minimize the output of NISs when interacting with nonnative speakers of English. This is particularly the case with Japanese and other Asian language L1 speakers that share a similar grammatical system and cognitive process in reaction to NISs. The "avoidance" should be recognized as a strategy to facilitate a smooth flow of oral communication.

Second, if you eventually accept the fact that English dominates the international scene as the most favored instrument for international communication, native speakers of English or near-native or advanced learners of ESL, who can coordinate their oral production much more easily, should be aware of the common linguistic problem found in English interlanguage data and partially adjust themselves to less proficient speakers or false beginners of the de facto world language. Such a partial "foreigner talk" (Ferguson, 1971), which involve both language form and language function, should be permissive in favor of less flawed international oral communication in English.

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