

Perspective-taking in Adult Japanese-language Learners' Oral Narratives: A Cross-linguistic Comparison*

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Abstract

This study, which compares native Japanese speakers and L2 learners of Japanese, discusses the question of what makes narrative sound natural in the light of macro- and micro- narrative structure. The study found that native speakers of Japanese, regardless of topic, tended to use the passive voice together with multiple aspect forms at narrative high points. The use of the passive voice indicated that the speaker's viewpoint tended to be fixed on the main characters. In contrast, L2 learners, regardless of topic, tended to use the active voice, which indicates that their viewpoint was placed on the subject of the scene. Further, L2 learners rarely used aspect forms; even if they did, they chose one form without attempting to combine them. The study discusses whether these differences are attributable to the L2 learner's L1 transfer or to the lack of understanding of the concepts to be acquired in the L2.

Key words

foreign/second language (L2) narrative discourse, oral narratives, Labovian methodology, macrostructural analysis, microstructural levels, first language (L1) transfer, perspective-taking, coherence, cohesion, voice, aspect, modality

* I am grateful for the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (A) No. 24251010 (2012–2015), and 16H01934 (2016–2019), supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). I am also indebted to Kumiko Sakoda, our project leader at the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL) — for further information, see <https://lsaj-data.ninjal.ac.jp/>. Last but not least, I would like to thank Sooyun Park of Kobe University for her invaluable assistance in the data coding and analysis.

1. Introduction

It has long been recognized that narrative discourse ability is essential for improving communication skills. However, it is difficult for foreign/second language (L2) learners to achieve sufficient communicative proficiency in the target language. To begin with, they are likely to face the problem that their L2 ability as a communication tool is too limited to accomplish its purpose. L2 narration can be daunting, but their problem arises in part because not all cultures allow people to construct narratives in the same way.

The main focus of this paper is the comparison of L2 speakers of Japanese and native speakers of Japanese. The paper addresses issues related to narrative, cognition, and culture within the framework of L2 narrative discourse by proposing a series of questions: (1) Does the L2 learner's narrative sound unnatural compared to that of native speakers? (2) If so, what is causing the problem? Is it attributable to the L2 learner's first language (L1) transfer or to the lack of understanding of the concepts that need to be acquired in the L2? Using an L2 corpus developed by the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics, this study discusses the question of what makes narrative natural in the light of macro- and micro- narrative structure.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Labovian methodology: Macrostructural analysis for narrative coherence

Labov's (1972) major contribution was his identification of a universal set of ordered structural categories, such as orientation (information about "who, when, where, and what?"), complicating action ("Then what happened?"), evaluation ("So what, how is this interesting?"), resolution ("What finally happened?"), and coda ("That's it"). Labov's structural analysis is sometimes referred to as high point analysis because he described "narratives as being structured around 'high points,' or 'suspension points'" (Peterson and McCabe 1983: 3). Labovian macrostructural analysis thus examines the higher-order hierarchical sequencing of orientation→complicating action→evaluation→resolution→coda (see Figure 1).

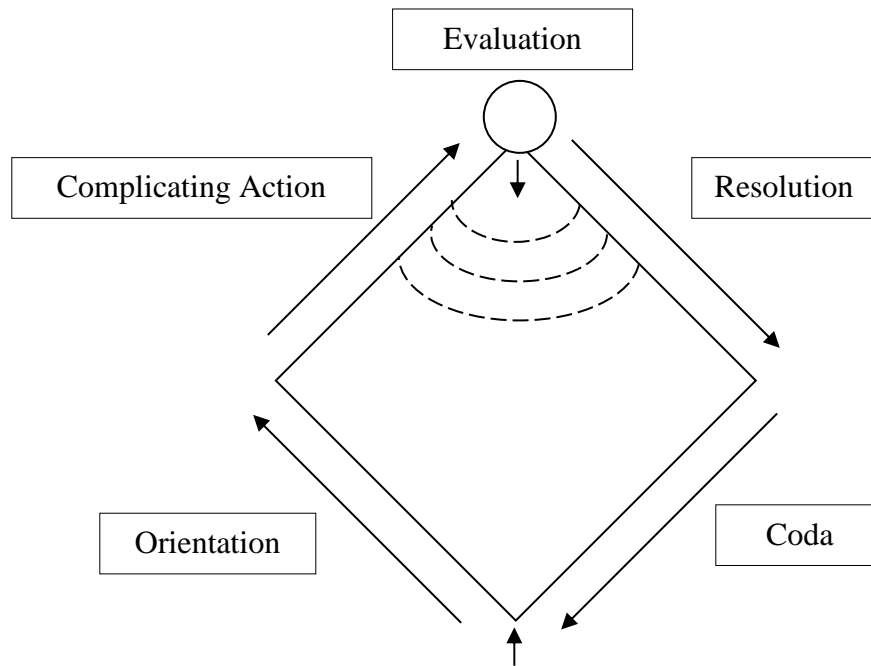


Figure 1: The normal form of narrative [adapted from Labov (1972: 369)].

2.2 Microstructural levels of narratives: Voice and aspect for narrative cohesion

While the term “coherence” refers to whether or not a text makes sense at a global level, “cohesion” describes the linguistic relationships among clauses in a narrative, such as how its surface linguistic elements are linked together at a local level. A relevant feature at microstructural levels of narratives for narrative cohesion is a speaker’s choice of active or passive voice, which is related to perspective-taking, or the speaker’s point of view. The speaker represents his or her attitude toward event characters in different ways, as if changing camera angles. Kuno (1987) called this speaker’s identification with the event participant “empathy.” For instance, regardless of language, a referent in the subject position tends to attract higher empathy than one in any other position in a sentence. In storytelling, however, English and Chinese narrators may hold the voice constant (the active voice throughout) by changing the subject. Japanese narrative, on the other hand, may hold the subject constant by switching from the active voice to the passive voice or vice versa. Some researchers (Kimura 2014, Peng 2016, Yamanashi 2009) even claim that English and Chinese are objective languages whereas Japanese is a subjective language. In this way, perspective-taking, which may emerge in various forms, reflects the narrator’s empathy and, to complicate matters, may be dependent on language.

2.3 Microstructural levels of narratives: Aspect and modality for narrative cohesion

Another major feature of language used to enhance narrative cohesion is aspect, a grammatical category that expresses how an action, event, or state denoted by a verb extends over time. An example in Japanese is the perfective aspect, the *te*-form of a verb + *shimaw-u*, which expresses in a statement that a certain event/action is totally complete (i.e., “end up”/“finish doing”). However, *te-shimaw-u* is known to have a wide range of usages, expressing aspect, modality, and intermediate meanings. In explanation of its various usages, there are arguments that focus on aspect (completion) and those that focus on modality (strong emotion) (e.g., Group Jammassy 2015, Jeong and Uehara 2005, Uchiyama 2012). In the light of Labov’s (1972) categories, aspect is generally associated with orientation, while modality is associated with the evaluative element.

Because *te-shimaw-u* implies the irreversibility of an action, it is sometimes used to refer to the lack of premeditation, or to suggest that the action/phenomenon was beyond the control of the speaker/narrator, or even that it was a mistake or a misfortune. “My pet dog died on me” with *te-shimaw-u*, for example, expresses a sense of regret. While *te-shimaw-u* tends to emphasize the perfective aspect, it also expresses modality, that is, how an individual’s “voices from the heart” is represented in language. Unfortunately, this emotional nuance is not sufficiently emphasized in current Japanese language instruction.

Another Japanese aspect form is *iru* used as an auxiliary verb. A verb + *te-iru* expresses three related but distinct meanings: (1) ongoing actions (i.e., continuous/progressive aspect), (2) repetitive actions (i.e., habitual aspect), and (3) resultant states (i.e., perfective aspect), which indicate that an event occurred prior to the time of reference but has continuing relevance to it. The third function of *te-iru*, however, receives inadequate treatment in the existing Japanese textbooks. In short, while both “*te-shimaw-u*” and “*te-iru*” are introduced relatively early as basic grammatical categories in current Japanese language instruction, their important emotional implications and other nuances — “a sense of regret” and “resultant state” (and further their composite *te-shimat-te-iru*) — may not receive sufficient emphasis.

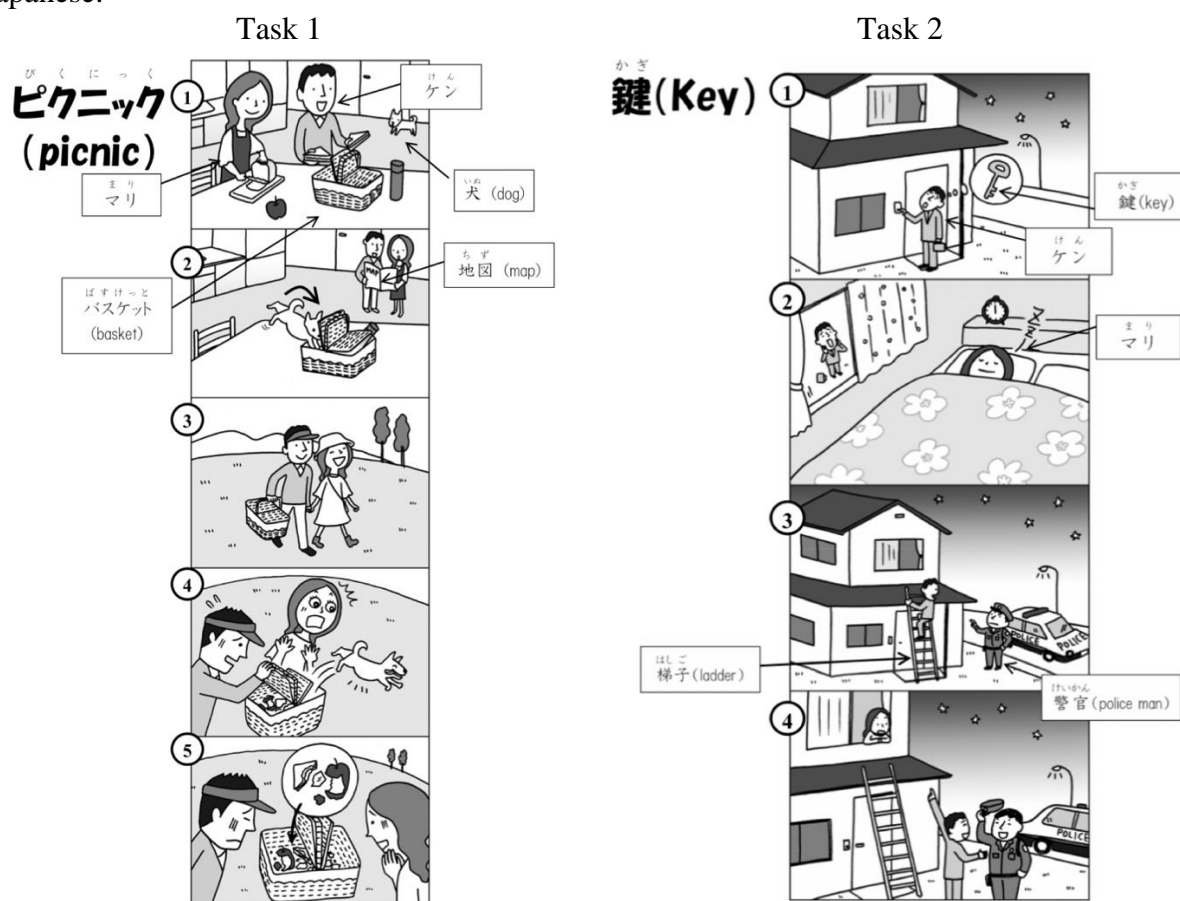
3. Methods

The data for the current study come from a large corpus called the International Corpus of Japanese

as a Second Language (I-JAS). I-JAS is a cross-sectional learner corpus that contains data from 1,000 Japanese-language learners of twelve different L1s. Data from 50 native speakers of Japanese are compared with the learner data in the study. The learners also underwent Japanese language proficiency assessment using the Japanese Computerized Adaptive Test (J-CAT), which is comprised of four skills with a maximum of 100 points for each: listening, vocabulary, grammar, and reading. In addition, the learners took the Simple Proficiency Oriented Test (SPOT), which consists of 90 questions (1 point each). Note also that the data used for the current analysis is the March 2020 version. In this study, the following two issues are investigated: (1) What grammatical forms do L2 learners of Japanese use at the emotional apex (high point) of the narrative? Are the grammatical forms different depending on the learner's native language? Are they different from native speakers of Japanese? (2) Do the grammatical forms at the high points of the narrative differ for a given task?

4. Results

The present study examines two spoken story-describing tasks. Task 1 (“The Picnic”) consists of 5 frames (see Figure 2a) whereas Task 2 (“The Key”) consists of 4 frames (see Figure 2b). The learner data used in this study were gathered from 200 Chinese speakers (100 from Mainland China and 100 from Taiwan), 100 English speakers, 100 Korean speakers, and 50 native speakers of Japanese.



Figures 2a and 2b: Two story-describing tasks

The emotional high point of Task 1 is “When the protagonists, Ken and Mari, who went on a

picnic, opened the picnic basket to eat lunch, their pet dog suddenly jumped out, and they were stunned to find that the dog had already bitten into their sandwiches and apples.” High points were identified. Task 1 (“The Picnic”) tended to take the ending-at-the-high-point pattern, where the narrative ends at the emotional peak without resolution. On the other hand, Task 2 (“The Key”) tended to take the classic pattern in which the story builds up to a high point and then resolves it. That is, the emotional high point of Task 2 occurs at the point “When Ken, who did not have his house key with him, tried to enter his house by climbing up to Mari’s second-floor room with a ladder, a police officer came and warned him.”

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the native speakers of Japanese, regardless of topic, used the passive voice at the narrative high points. The use of the passive voice indicates that the speaker’s viewpoint tended to be fixed on the main characters (e.g., “Ken and Mari were surprised by their dog” instead of “Their dog surprised Ken and Mari” in Task 1, “Ken was warned by the police officer” instead of “The police officer warned Ken” in Task 2). Chinese and English speakers, regardless of topic, tended to use the active voice, which indicates that they tended to place their viewpoint on the subject of the scene (the dog in Task 1 and the police officer in Task 2). Despite the fact that, unlike Chinese or English, both Korean and Japanese belong to the same Altaic language family, the great majority of Korean speakers also chose the active voice.

Table 1. J-CAT and SPOT scores, and the voice that appeared at the high points

Native language	J-CAT <i>M (SD)</i>	SPOT <i>M (SD)</i>	Task 1		Task 2		
			("The Picnic")		("The Key")		
			Passive Voice	Active Voice	Passive Voice	Active Voice	
Chinese (<i>n</i> = 200)	China (<i>n</i> = 100)	229.47 (41.49)	73.82 (6.82)	54	46	41	59
	Taiwan (<i>n</i> = 100)	255.72 (37.76)	75.55 (6.85)	45	55	40	60
English (<i>n</i> = 100)	165.74 (49.42)	58.97 (11.48)	16	84	13	87	
Korean (<i>n</i> = 100)	257.88 (55.71)	78.59 (8.89)	11	89	35	65	
Japanese (<i>n</i> = 50)			40	10	35	15	

In the case of English speakers, their low J-CAT and SPOT scores may suggest that the choice of voice is related to L2 proficiency. In fact, compared to those who obtained low-range SPOT scores (0-55 points), those who obtained mid-range SPOT scores (56-80 points) were more likely to use the passive voice at the high points in Task 2, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 5.83, p < .02$. Similar

tendencies apply to Chinese and Korean speakers. Yet these tendencies were not observed in Task 1. Therefore, the hypothesis that “the more proficient the L2 learner becomes, the more likely he or she is to use the passive voice at narrative high points” may hold, but it depends on the given task.

More important, however, English speakers who used the passive voice in either task tended to use it in both, $r(98) = .32, p < .01$, and a similar tendency was observed among Chinese speakers, $r(198) = .30, p < .01$. From these results, therefore, we may infer that once L2 speakers understand how to take the appropriate point of view, they consistently use the passive voice at narrative high points.

Furthermore, out of 40 passives native Japanese speakers used at the high points in Task 1, 16 cases co-occurred with *te-shimaw-u*, 8 cases co-occurred with *te-iru*, and 12 cases co-occurred with the composite of these two aspects, *te-shimat-te-iru*. In Task 2, 23 out of 35 passives at the high points co-occurred with *te-shimaw-u*.

On the other hand, L2 learners’ narratives seemed very different from those of native speakers. The results of each group are summarized below:

- a) For Chinese speakers, in Task 1, out of the 99 passives at the high point, 29 cases co-occurred with *te-shimaw-u*, but none co-occurred with *te-iru*. In Task 2, of the 81 cases that used the passive voice at the high point, 5 cases co-occurred with *te-shimaw-u*.
- b) For English speakers, the use of the passive voice at high points was extremely low, to begin with. In Task 1, of the 16 passives, 6 cases co-occurred with *te-shimaw-u*, only one co-occurred with *te-iru*. In Task 2, of the 13 passives, only one co-occurrence was observed with *te-shimaw-u*.
- c) The same was true for Korean speakers, with an extremely low frequency of passives at the high points. In Task 1, of the 11 passives, 4 co-occurred with *te-shimaw-u*, 3 co-occurred with *te-iru*, and 1 co-occurred with *te-shimat-te-iru*. In Task 2, of the 35 passives, 6 co-occurred with *te-shimaw-u*.

In the oral narratives, therefore, native speakers of Japanese frequently used the passive voice at the emotional high points of the story with *te-shimaw-u*, *te-iru*, or the composite form *te-shimat-te-iru*. In contrast, L2 learners of Japanese rarely used these forms, and even when they did, they chose one of them and did not attempt to combine them.

5. Conclusion

Since Labov and Waletzky (1967) conducted their narrative research, numerous studies have been performed with focus on differing sociocultural variables in narratives (e.g., Minami 2002, Minami 2011, Minami 2020, Minami 2021, Minami and McCabe 1991, Minami and McCabe 1995, Peterson and McCabe 1983). Addressing the key issue of what makes a story sound natural, this study has focused on the narrator’s choice of point of view. The concept of L1 transfer has received much attention, but if we bear in mind that “transfer” means the carrying over of learned behavior from one situation (i.e., the L1) to another (i.e., an L2), we will see that there are several items that deserve early introduction and emphasis in the Japanese language classroom. These include the passive voice and some easily overlooked grammatical items such as *te-shimaw-u* (which, in many cases, implies a sense of regret), and *te-iru* (which sometimes expresses a resultant state rather than an ongoing action). L2 learners’ conceptual understanding of these items should also be developed through practice with many verbs.

Concept-based instruction (Ohta 2017), which promotes the construction of new concepts required in the target language, may help L2 learners develop their ability to tell natural-sounding stories. We should not overlook the effect of instruction on language learners' conceptual/cognitive awareness of grammatical variables. Future research should establish and document what types of conceptualizing activity will be effective for transforming L1-based conceptualizations into systematic conceptualizations that are appropriate in a speaker's L2.

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