

# A Contrast of L1 Pronominal Usage: Japanese and Mandarin in Oral Narratives\*

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the use of subject (pro)nouns in Japanese and Mandarin Chinese through an experiment conducted on native speakers of the two languages. In storytelling, a significant contrast was observed between native Japanese and Chinese speakers' choices among third-person overt pronouns, referential nouns, and null pronouns. Results implied a fair amount of null pronouns were used in both languages, however, the Chinese use of overt pronouns differed from the Japanese use. After the first introduction of the referent, overt pronouns were used in Japanese narratives 5% of the time while 48% of the time by the Chinese participants (cf. 92% for L1 English narratives in Nakayama et al. 2015). In general, the difference in their frequency of usage between Chinese *ta* 'he/she/it' and Japanese *kanojo/kare* 'she/he', may be due to their respective historical development and the availability of their alternate meanings (i.e., 'girl/boyfriend' for *kanojo/kare*).

## Key words

pronominal usage, referential nouns, narrative analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Referential expressions create links across utterances, and thus are important to study in order to understand how different languages employ pronouns in discourse (Sun & Kennison 2015). Both Japanese and Mandarin Chinese utilize null pronouns (*pro*) quite often. By contrast, Mandarin allows the use of overt pronouns (*ta*) while referring to a third-person antecedent (Yang et al. 1999), whereas the Japanese use of overt pronouns (*kare/kanojo*) is less frequently observed (Clancy 1980). In light of a potential divergence between Japanese and Chinese in their respective use of third-person singular pronouns in spoken language, this study intends to find out the frequency of the utterances of their subject-position pronominal uses—overt pronouns, null pronouns, and referential nominal phrases—drawing from how native Japanese and Chinese speakers differentiate their expressions of a known subject in telling stories.

Based on Tsuchiya et al. (2015), this study compared oral narratives of *The Little Match Girl* by native speakers of the two languages. As a result, a fair amount of referential nouns were observed in Japanese. However, unlike Japanese, Chinese speakers used more overt pronouns and fewer referential nouns after the first introduction of Little Match Girl. The variance in their frequency of usage between Chinese *ta* ‘she’ and Japanese *kanojo* ‘she’, may have been influenced by their respective historical development and the existence of their alternate meanings (i.e., ‘girl/boyfriend’ for *kanojo/kare*).

The organization of this paper is as follows: Previous studies regarding pronominal uses in the two languages are discussed in the next section. Results of the narrative experiment are presented in Section 3, followed by the discussion and concluding remarks in Section 4.

## 2. Previous studies

Japanese is highly elliptical in both speech and written language compared to English, and the use of null pronouns also has to do with the length of the utterance (Shibatani 1990; Hinds 1983). In his study, Hinds investigated a) a stylized retelling of a Japanese folktale; b) a semi-structured interview involving two females; and c) a relaxed conversation between two males. He argued that the more the same topic extended continuously over numerous clauses, the more likely a null pronoun would be chosen for the topic in Japanese.

With respect to the overt pronouns *kare/kanojo* ‘he/she’, it was reported that native Japanese speakers did not frequently use them to keep track of referents in oral narratives, instead they used more referential nominal forms and null pronouns in their oral storytelling (Clancy 1980; Tsuchiya et al. 2015; Nakayama et al. 2015, 2016).

In addition, speakers’ accommodation to listeners’ need would influence how they narrate a story. Clancy (1980) claimed that the more distance from the referent, the more likely for a native

Japanese to select a full referential nominal phrase (RN), so as to keep listeners on the same page. Consider (1) (Clancy 1980: (66)):

- (1) *sono tochuu de, ano—onna no ko ga tootta no ne?*  
On the way, uh—a girl NOM passed, you know?  
*sono onna no ko o mite.*  
that girl, ACC looked at  
'On the way, a girl passed by, and (he) looked at that girl.'

Clancy (1980) identified such usage as a strategy to illuminate ambiguity and to differentiate peripheral status of various characters in the Japanese spoken language.

According to Matthew (2000), a Chinese pronoun always refers to a known referent; thus an RN must always precede a pronoun in discourse. There are three possible ways to refer back to the antecedent nominal phrase: one is by repeating the RN, or a variation of it; two, by using an overt pronoun; and three, by using a null pronoun. On the other hand, Matthew (2000) argued that the use of Chinese overt pronouns (*ta*, 他 'he'/她 'she') and null pronouns seemed to be random and determined by personal preferences of the speaker/author. He also reported that third-person pronouns were used as frequently as null pronouns in oral narration; however, the pronominal usage between oral and written languages in Mandarin was quite different. In the written narratives, null pronouns were the most productive, followed by referential nouns, with overt pronouns being the least productive.

In classical Chinese, *ta* meant "other", and people started to use *ta* as gender free third-person singular pronoun during the Tang Dynasty (i.e., 618-907 A.D.). Until the 1920s, the third-person feminine singular pronoun was separated from the masculine singular pronoun in terms of the written language (Clan 1985). In Huang's (2009) book about the history of the development of female pronoun *ta* (她), he described that the invention of *ta* "not only signified the unprecedented roles that women of the time assumed or imagined, but were indicators of the complex processes of social, political, and cultural change in modern China" (Huang 2009:122). Referential expressions in Mandarin Chinese seem to be associated with their extensive use of *ta*, as well as oriented toward different types of discourse, among other factors.

Taking the storytelling approach, Tsuchiya et al. (2015) conducted an experiment on native English speakers' use of (pro)nouns for the third person singular feminine referent in L2 Japanese narratives. In their study, it appeared that the acquisition of pronominal usage had to do with proficiency levels and formal instructions for L2 Japanese learners. Advanced English speakers of Japanese as a second language generally performed better and might have the potential to getting

close to the target level's use of the referential expressions. My current study strives to build upon the native Japanese speakers' choices of subject-position pronouns in their oral narratives reported in Tsuchiya et al.

### **3. The Present study**

#### **3.1 Participants**

There were 5 native Japanese-speaking and 10 Chinese-speaking adults participating in this experimental study. Separately, Tsuchiya et al.'s data of the L1 Japanese speakers' group (Group I) was included in the current study on the Japanese adults (Group II), this was done so that the cumulative data could be compared in parallel with their Chinese counterpart (i.e., narratives by ten native speakers for both languages were obtained).

To illustrate, Group I consisted of 5 college students with less than 2-month experience living in the U.S., whereas Group II contained 5 undergraduate/graduate students with at least 1 year study abroad experience in the U.S. They were all residing in the States at the time of the experiment. In terms of the L1 Chinese speaker group, 10 native speakers ranging from high school students to company employees were studied. All Chinese participants studied English as a second language, and were based in mainland China at the time of this experiment.

#### **3.2 Materials and procedure**

The study adopted Tsuchiya et al.'s methodology, and was designed to elicit pronouns from native speakers of the two languages. Participants were asked to narrate the story of *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Anderson. Chosen as the narration material, *The Little Match Girl*, at its core revolves around a single main character. Therefore, with very limited interference by other possible animate subjects, the same referent could consistently appear as the subject of a sentence. This would suggest a high chance for narrators to use third-person pronouns in their narratives.

During the experiment, illustrations of *The Little Match Girl* (Erickson 1987) were provided to each participant, who was instructed to go through all the pictures first (in order to familiarize themselves with the storyline), and to tell the story in their first languages as if they were to tell it to a 5-year-old Japanese/Chinese boy. Stories were narrated individually. The Japanese narratives were recorded by the examiner and the Chinese narratives by the participants themselves.

Recordings of the storytelling by both groups were then transcribed and analyzed. The respective numbers of the following categories were counted for each person's oral narration: a) the number of sentences/clauses, b) animate subjects including both subjects that referred to the Little Match Girl (LMG) and other characters, c) *kanojo/ta* 'she', null pronouns (*pro*), referential

nouns (RNs) in reference to LMG exclusively. Also, only (c) was taken into account while computing the percentages of narrators' pronominal usage.

### 3.3 Results

The following table summarizes the results of native Japanese speakers. The pronoun types referring Little Match Girl in subject positions were each labeled as “# of *kanojo*”, “# of *pro*”, and “# of RNs”, and consolidated under the category named “# of Ns with antecedents” in Table 1. The percentages (in the parentheses) were obtained by dividing the respective pronominal type (i.e., the numerator) over the “# of Ns with antecedents” (i.e., the denominator). Referential nouns used to re/introduce the heroine were not included in these categories with the antecedents, but counted along with other animate subjects in “total # of animate subjects” instead.

Table 1. Individual and collective Japanese pronouns referring to the LMG

	# of sentences	# of animate subjects	# of Ns with antecedents	# of <i>kanojo</i> (%)	# of <i>pro</i> (%)	# of RNs (%)
A	20	12	9	0 (0%)	4 (44%)	5 (56%)
B	45	22	16	3 (19%)	10 (62%)	3 (19%)
C	41	24	13	0 (0%)	5 (38%)	8 (62%)
D	25	13	8	0 (0%)	5 (62%)	3 (38%)
E	49	25	16	2 (12%)	11 (69%)	3 (19%)
Sub <sup>1</sup>	160	96	62	5 (8%)	35 (56%)	22 (36%)
T <sup>2</sup>	122	77	70	1 (1%)	25 (36%)	44 (63%)
Total	282	173	132	6 (5%)	60 (45%)	66 (50%)

<sup>1</sup>Sub computes Group II study result; <sup>2</sup>T cites the result on Group I (Tsuchiya et al., 2015)

In regard to the Japanese pronominal usage, Group I (cited from Tsuchiya et al., 2015) used RNs most frequently (63%), followed by *pro* (36%), and *kanojo* the last (1%). Group II, on the other hand, used *pro* (56%) for most times, RNs the next (36%), and *kanojo* least of the time as well (8%). There was some divergence between the two groups, and details will be elaborated in the discussion section below.

The examples below are excerpts from the Japanese narratives. Referential nouns were underlined; null pronouns (*pro*) were marked by brackets.

- (2) An example with Japanese referential nouns:

*Tsukarete shimatta node, macchiuri no shojo wa suwatte*

Exhausted because, Little Match Girl-TOP sit  
*yasumu koto ni shimashita.*  
 rest decided to do  
 ‘As (she) was exhausted, the little match girl decided to sit down and take a rest.’

(3) An example with Japanese null pronouns (*pro*):

*Totemo samukute, [pro] kogoete shimaisoo datta node, [pro] macchi o ippon*  
 Very cold about to freeze was because match ACC one  
*tsukete mirukoto ni shimashita.*  
 light try decided to do  
 ‘It was so cold and [she] was freezing, so [she] lit a match.’

Table 2 shows the result of the 10 Chinese narratives. Similar to Table 1, the pronoun types in reference to Little Match Girl were labeled as “# of *ta*”, “# of *pro*”, and “# of RNs”, respectively, and cumulated under “# of Ns with antecedents”. Percentages under each category were computed in the same way as the previous example for the Japanese study.

Table 2. Individual and collective Chinese pronouns referring to the LMG

	# of sentences	# of animate subjects	# of Ns with antecedents	# of <i>ta</i> (%)	# of <i>pro</i> (%)	# of RNs (%)
A	50	36	27	12 (44%)	11 (41%)	4 (15%)
B	61	40	31	21 (68%)	7 (23%)	3 (10%)
C	96	62	43	19 (44%)	15 (35%)	9 (21%)
D	50	30	23	14 (61%)	7 (30%)	2 (9%)
E	86	42	31	10 (32%)	13 (42%)	8 (26%)
F	35	24	20	10 (50%)	9 (45%)	1 (5%)
G	73	50	41	13 (32%)	20 (49%)	8 (19%)
H	99	51	31	13 (42%)	10 (32%)	8 (26%)
I	43	31	22	16 (73%)	4 (18%)	2 (9%)
J	98	54	34	18 (53%)	12 (35%)	4 (12%)
Total	691	420	303	146 (48%)	108 (36%)	49 (16%)

In Chinese oral narratives, there was a general pattern that *ta* was used most often, followed by *pro*, and RNs last, with the exception of 2 out of the 10 individuals (i.e., Subject E and G who used *pro* more than *ta*). All narratives started with a referential noun, (*mai huo chai de*) *xiao nü*

*hai* ‘the Little (Match) Girl’. As the narrators went on with the story, they used a) *ta*, or b) *pro*, if not c) *xiao nü hai* ‘little girl’ (as well as its equivalent nominal forms), referring to the single heroine. For reference, the following narration represents Mandarin samples with overt pronouns (underlined>) and null pronouns (in brackets).

- (4) An example with Mandarin Chinese *ta* ‘she’:

Tā yòu cā liàng le yì gēn huǒ chái. Liàng guāng zhào zài qiáng jiǎo,

She again lights a match. Light shines the wall,

tā hǎo xiàng kàn dào le shèng dàn dà cān.

She seems to see Christmas dinner.

‘She lights another match. Light falls on the wall, and she seems to see Christmas dinner (through the light).’

- (5) An example with Mandarin Chinese null pronouns (*pro*):

Yǒu yí gè xiǎo nü hái, [pro]chì zhe jiǎo, [pro] chuān zhe hěn dān bó de yī fu,

There is a little girl, in bare foot, wearing ragged clothes,

[pro] zǒu zài jiē shang.

wandering in the street.

‘There is this little girl—[she is] (walking) in bare foot, [she is] wearing ragged clothes and [she is] wandering in the street.’

#### 4 Discussion and conclusions

As pointed out above, there was some divergence between the two groups of native Japanese speakers. For instance, their use of *pro* and RNs seemed to be of opposite frequencies. Moreover, the participants from Group II used *kanojo* more often. The differences in the length of their living experiences in English speaking countries (and/or individual exposures to the English language) might have played a role to impact their L1, but it was unclear whether there would be other reasons to account for the differentiation. It was also inexplicable which one of the two Japanese groups resembled the pronominal usage of a larger population.

Combining the two L1 Japanese-speaking groups, RNs were used most often (50%), followed by *pro* (45%), and *kanojo* last (5%)—only 3 out of the 10 individuals used *kanojo* to refer to Little Match Girl in their oral narratives. The particular person who used *kanojo* the most, was originally from Tokyo, and had spent about 3 years studying in the U.S. This particular person had *shojo* (i.e., the little girl) in the beginning of the storytelling before switching to *kanojo* at a certain point, and thereafter said *kanojo* repeatedly as a reference to the antecedent. On the other hand, people who

used RNs more often, mentioned that they intended to be more audience centered, and thus kept reminding their interlocutors of the subject in an explicit way. Additionally, given Hinds's (1983) argument that more null pronouns are used in Japanese where the antecedent stays the same throughout numerous sentences, then it might be possible that the more familiar the narrators were with *the Little Match Girl*, the higher the chance that they used *pro* in a more frequent basis.

In terms of different types of the subject pronouns discovered in Chinese narratives, not only did we observe a significant contrast in native speakers' choices between third-person (as well as null) pronouns and referential nouns, the participants' collective use of overt and null pronouns added up to 84% (with 48% of *ta* and 36% of *pro*) among all subjects referring to the antecedent. This was different from the Japanese case—being equivalent to 50% (with 5% of overt pronoun *kanojo* and 45% of *pro*). Despite the fact that the frequency of Chinese *ta* varied from one individual to another (32~73%), on a cumulative basis, there was clearly a substantial use of *ta* (48%), over their use of referential nouns (16%).

The results indicated a difference between Japanese and Chinese speakers' use of overt pronouns and RNs in oral narratives: although both languages are pro-drop languages, their respective applications of overt pronouns and RNs appeared to be profoundly distinct. Based on their study, Yang et al. (1999) pointed out that Chinese speakers used null pronouns if the referent was easily identifiable, whereas they would use overt pronouns as opposed to null pronouns if the referent became ambiguous (with other referents in discourse, etc.). This is in accordance with my observations from the Chinese speakers' storytelling of the *Little Match Girl*: in spite of individual variation with the ratios, all narrators had the tendency to switch between null and overt pronouns, as opposed to using RNs.

The differences between Japanese and Mandarin in their respective use of nominal forms in the subject positions, to some extent, mirrored the referential expressions in Japanese and English. Clancy (1980) asserted that "in English nominal reference was unusual when referring to a character mentioned within the same sentence, when no mention of other characters had intervened since the last mention of the referent in question, and when the subject nominal had the same referent as the subject of the immediately preceding main clause. In Japanese, however, only nominal reference in the same clause or the clause immediately following the last mention of the referent had been observed as unusual" (Clancy 1980:170).

In conclusion, overt and null pronouns were used in Chinese narratives 84% of the time while English used overt pronouns 92% of the time, according to Nakayama et al. (2015), after the first introduction of the *Little Match Girl* (cf. Japanese 50%). Combining Tsuchiya et al. (2015) study result of Japanese narratives, this research observed that the native Japanese speakers' collective use of null pronouns and referential noun phrases was equivalent to 95%, whereas overt pronoun



*kanojo* for only 5% of the time. The frequency of pronominal uses in Chinese narratives (48% *ta*, 36% *pro* and 16% RNs) lay between that of English (92% *she* and 8% RNs) and Japanese (5% *kanojo*, 45% *pro*, and 50% RNs). Within such a spectrum, English employed an exclusive use of overt pronouns, because of a lack of pro-drop option.

Japanese third-person pronouns are originally derived from demonstrative pronoun *ka* ('that one over there'), and therefore, are dependent on conversational context, whereas Chinese *ta* has less limitation in terms of its usage as a referential third-person pronoun (Takubo & Kimura 1990). Nowadays, people have invented new ways of using the language, for instance, written as *pinyin* (Chinese alphabets), "*Ta*" is designed by users to exploit its gender ambiguity property to achieve a variety of interactional purposes. Institutional accounts utilize *ta* in advertisements/promotional texts to appeal to a larger consumer audience instead of specifying gender (Sluchinski 2016). The recent development of *ta* has not been considered to have replaced its third-person referential usage, but it seems evidential that *ta* has been used to mark romantic relationships as in *kare/kanojo*.

In their spoken languages, both Japanese and Chinese use null pronouns to a considerable degree, but the Chinese use of overt pronouns differs from Japanese. Japanese makes little use of *kanojo* 'she' and/or *kare* 'he', which may be the case because of their chronologically-late appearance and their alternate meanings (i.e., 'girl/boyfriend' for *kanojo/kare*). The distinctions in Mandarin Chinese may be due to the long history and no particular alternative meanings the third-person pronoun *ta* has by itself (Chan 1985). Overall, there could have been personal preferences in the participants' choices of pronouns, and impacts of interlanguages also appeared to be relevant. Other aspects such as distance of the referent, interference of various subjects, length of the narratives, and differences of discourse styles, etc. may have to do with the L1 pronominal usage as referential expressions as well. Nevertheless, this study was subject to a limited number of participants, and therefore the conjecture needs further verification through examining a larger number of target language speakers, as well as analyzing both their oral and written narratives.

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