

The Acquisition of English Non-anaphoric Bridging Definite by Japanese Learners: Focusing on Lexical Sensitivity Regarding Situational Uniqueness*

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Abstract

This study examined the acquisition of the English definite article *the* by Japanese learners of English. The learners' judgments made on non-anaphoric bridging, a specific usage of the that requires semantic-pragmatic interface, is mainly observed. Two tasks were used in the study: (1) an acceptability judgment task and (2) a word ordering task that was designed specifically for this study. The relationship between word ordering based on the noun phrases' association with the given situation and the judgments made in the acceptability judgment task was analyzed. The results suggest that the acquisition of such usage of *the* may be related to lexical sensitivity toward the given noun phrase in terms of the relationship with the presupposed situation.

Key words

Bridging Definite, Pragmatic Competence, Lexical Sensitivity, Situational Uniqueness

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1. Introduction

English articles are known for their difficulty of acquisition. For the learners whose L1s are article-less language, such as Korean, Japanese, or Chinese, acquiring English articles is a critical challenge, as previous studies (Ionin et al. 2004, Snape 2008, and others) point out that even highly proficient learners tend to fail to judge appropriate articles. For the reason behind such difficulty, some studies (Cho 2017, Feng 2019) have suggested that not only grammatical ability, but also pragmatic competence is crucial to complete the acquisition of the. In this paper, Japanese learners of English's judgements on non-anaphoric bridging definite, which requires the competence to achieve semantic-pragmatic interface, is examined. To do so, a new experimental method is proposed in addition to the traditional acceptability judgement task. On the basis of the results of the experiments, this paper shows that more proficient learners are better at utilizing pragmatic competence, and suggests that lexical sensitivity detecting the situational uniqueness is one of the elements of such competence.

The organization of this paper is as follows. In section 2, previous studies regarding the acquisition of definiteness considering pragmatic competence are introduced. The research questions are proposed considering the findings of previous studies. In section 3, the methodology of the experiment is shown. The result and its interpretation are discussed in sections 4 and 5.

2. Previous studies

The acquisition of definite articles by second language learners has been frequently examined from various perspectives. First, the traditional principle and parameters viewpoint (Ionin et al. 2004) suggests that learners may experience difficulty when setting the parameter for the definite article *the*. This theory is known as the Article Choice Parameter. While definiteness, which assumes a knowledge shared or presupposed by both speaker and hearer, is the apt parameter for choosing *the*, the research indicates that learners may wrongly choose specificity, which denotes the unique and noteworthy individual, as a criterion for using *the*. It has been suggested that such learners would fluctuate between definiteness and specificity for the usage of *the*.

More recent studies such as those conducted by Cho (2017) and Feng (2019) indicate that acknowledging the feature [+definite] and deleting the unrelated features can be the key for acquiring definite articles. This is known as the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere 2008, 2009). This hypothesis would suggest that Korean learners who have demonstratives consisting of [+anaphoric] and [+definite] features in their first language (L1) need to realize that [-anaphoric] can be the case for English definite articles. However, the previous research found that even for the learners who probably finished their process of feature reassembly, judging the proper and improper use of *the* can still be difficult. For this possible reason, previous authors have addressed the problem of pragmatic competence. They suggest that understanding the features of *the* is insufficient for completing the acquisition. What is considered crucial is the ability to connect world knowledge to the given situation. Such an ability is addressed as a semantic-pragmatic interface, or presupposition accommodation in Cho (2017) and Feng (2019). What demonstrates the need for this type of proficiency is a special usage of definite articles called bridging (also known as associative) definites (Clark 1977, Charolles 1999). These definites construct definiteness based on the speakers' situational knowledge, rather than on explicit anaphoricity. Cho (2017) classified bridging definites into anaphoric bridging, where bridging is established through the relationship between the anchor verb mentioned beforehand and the definite noun phrase (NP), and non-anaphoric bridging, where bridging is established by situational uniqueness.

(1) I've just been to a wedding. The bride wore blue. (Lyons 1999:7)

Sentence (1) is an example of non-anaphoric bridging. For the given situation “wedding,” “bride” is a unique entity since it is unnatural to have more than one bride in a single wedding. Therefore, “bride” becomes a definite NP even though it was not explicitly mentioned anaphorically beforehand. As non-anaphoric bridging requires world knowledge outside of the given sentences the most, it can be said that a speaker is accessing a considerable amount of pragmatic competence, or semantic-pragmatic interface, when producing and comprehending non-anaphoric bridging. Therefore, because this study intended to analyze and observe the usage of pragmatic competence, how learners react to non-anaphoric bridging was the main focus.

In this study, NPs that were situationally unique in a non-anaphoric bridging, such as “bride” in sentence (1), were addressed as a uniquely associated NP (U-NP). However, there are NPs that do not form a unique association with a given situation. These were addressed as non-uniquely associated NPs (nU-NPs). NPs such as “guest” or “flower” in sentence (1) are examples of nU-NPs. Although these NPs are associated with the situation, they are unlikely to be unique. Thus, nU-NPs cannot be definite NPs in non-anaphoric bridging, although English learners may be confused when determining whether they should be definite.

Given the characteristics of non-anaphoric bridging, sensitivity to a situationally unique NP may be the key to detecting and comprehending the definiteness of non-anaphoric bridging. However, no previous study has examined the acquisition of non-anaphoric bridging in the sense of lexical sensitivity. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the acquisition of the English non-anaphoric bridging definite based on its relationship with lexical sensitivity regarding situational uniqueness.

The research questions were as follows:

1. Can intermediate learners of English whose L1 is Japanese properly judge the acceptability of non-anaphoric bridging?
2. If so, does lexical sensitivity affect judgment of acceptable/unacceptable non-anaphoric bridging?

3. Methodology

In this study, the participants were required to perform two tasks. The first was the acceptability judgment task (AJT), and the second was a word ordering task that was designed specifically for this study. Both tasks were conducted online using Google Forms. Further details are provided below.

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were all university students whose L1 was Japanese. They were split into two groups based on their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores: the Common European Framework of Reference B1 (lower intermediate) group and the B2 (upper intermediate) group.

3.2 Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT)

The AJT consisted of 60 tokens that included 16 target tokens and 44 fillers. All tokens involved two sentences, and the target tokens contained non-anaphoric bridging. There were four types of

target tokens ($4 \times 4 = 16$), which are illustrated in examples (2a)–(2d).

(2) a. Indefinite article preceding an U-NP

It was Sally's first birthday party. She seemed very interested in a cake.

b. Indefinite article preceding a nU-NP

It was Sally's first birthday party. She seemed very interested in a firecracker.

c. Definite article preceding an U-NP

I was invited to John's wedding yesterday. The bride was wearing white.

d. Definite article preceding a nU-NP

I was invited to John's wedding yesterday. The guest was wearing white.

(2a) and (2d) are unacceptable or less felicitous sentences, while (2b) and (2c) are acceptable sentences. The participants were asked to rate the acceptability of the sentences on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being unacceptable and 4 being acceptable. The sequence of the tokens was randomly shuffled in advance, and all participants experienced the same order of presentation.

3.3 Word ordering task

In the word-ordering task, participants were asked to arrange three words in the order of association with the given situation. The number of tokens was 16, eight of which were directly related to the targets used in the aforementioned acceptability judgment task. An example is provided below. They were required to judge the strength of the association of the situation and the words, and evaluate each word as "best," "second-best," or "third-best." They could not assign the same rating to more than one word. For example, rating two or more words as "best" was prohibited. The three words consisted of a U-NP, nU-NP, and filler. Except for the filler, the words used in the ordering task were those that appeared in the AJT. In the analysis, whether the participant rated the U-NP higher than the nU-NP was the only variable considered. Therefore, the rating of the filler word did not affect the analysis. The demonstration and the examples of word lists are shown in Appendices.

The reason for designing and using this specific task was to evaluate the ability to detect the U-NP. One of the important characteristics of non-anaphoric bridging of the that makes it distinctive from other uses is that the definite NP is unique in a pragmatically situational way, in other words, how the NP is perceived through world knowledge. Therefore, by comparing the results of the word-ordering task and AJT, we aimed to observe the relationship between lexical sensitivity and acceptability judgment.

4. Methodology

4.1 Acceptability Judgment Task

The results of the AJT are presented below. In the analysis, Fisher's exact test was used to calculate significance. While B1 learners' rating toward non-anaphoric bridging did not differ significantly, B2 learners could distinguish acceptable and unacceptable sentences, although they seemed to overrate unacceptable tokens (mean value of ratings being 3.09) to a certain extent.

Table 1. Results of descriptive statistics and *t*-test of the AJT

	acceptable	unacceptable	<i>p</i> -value
B2 (n=16)	3.46 (0.89)	3.09 (0.98)	<u><0.01**</u>
B1 (n=19)	3.31(0.78)	3.20 (0.71)	0.14

As B1 learners failed to judge the acceptability of non-anaphoric bridging, this study could not adequately match their judgments of the acceptability judgment task with the word-ordering task. The general tendency of word ordering task by B1 learners were similar to that of B2 learners, but it was not possible to observe such a tendency in a relationship with the other task. Therefore, only B2 learners' ratings of the word-ordering task were included in the analysis.

4.2 Word Ordering Task

Again, the only variable considered was simply whether the participant would rate the U-NP higher than the nU-NP. In terms of this variable, most of the ratings did not differ significantly. There were two tokens in which more than two learners' choices varied from the others.

- (3) a. [situation] tennis practice, [U-NP] racket, [nU-NP] ball
 b. [situation] working in the kitchen, [U-NP] microwave, [nU-NP] fork

For (3a), there were 6 participants who rated the ball higher than the racket, and 10 who rated the racket higher than the ball. For (3b), there were 5 participants rated the fork higher than the microwave, and 11 who rated the microwave higher than the fork. The mean ratings of the corresponding tokens of acceptability are presented below.

Table 2. Results of the word ordering task (1)

	Acceptable AJT (4a)	Unacceptable AJT (4b)
<i>ball</i> > <i>racket</i> (n=6)	3.8	3.8
<i>racket</i> > <i>ball</i> (n=10)	2.9	2.4

- (4) a. Lily was practicing tennis with her friends. She grabbed a ball.
 b. Lily was practicing tennis with her friends. She grabbed a racket.

For (4a) and (4b), in a situation of practicing tennis, using a random ball rather than a specifically assigned one is more convincing. On the other hand, a racket is more likely to be designated to a person; therefore, using an indefinite article as (4b) is rather unacceptable compared to (4a), although the distinction between them is not perfectly strict.

The mean ratings of six participants who judged a ball to be more strongly associated with tennis did not differ between acceptable and unacceptable tokens in the AJT. On the other hand, participants who judged the racket over the ball performed better.

Table 3. Results of the word ordering task (2)

	Acceptable AJT (5a)	Unacceptable AJT (5b)
<i>fork</i> > <i>microwave</i> (n=5)	2.4	2.6
<i>microwave</i> > <i>fork</i> (n=11)	3.6	3.2

- (5) a. Sandra is working in her kitchen. She cleaned the microwave first. (Feng 2019)
 b. Sandra is working in her kitchen. She cleaned the fork first. (Feng 2019, slightly modified)

For (5a) and (5b), having a single, unique microwave for a kitchen is natural, but just one fork is not; therefore, (5a) is more acceptable than (5b). To observe the mean ratings, learners who rated “fork” higher than “microwave” in the word ordering task failed to place the acceptable token over the unacceptable token in the acceptability judgment task, while the others did not. It is also important to note that the two learners who differentiated acceptable and unacceptable sentences the most were the ones who rated the U-NP higher than the nU-NP each time.

5. Discussion

Pragmatic competence is crucial for comprehending and judging the non-anaphoric bridging definite. Although judgments based on world knowledge itself may not be greatly influenced by one’s linguistic ability, the result of the acceptability judgment task indicates that linguistically proficient learners (upper-intermediate learners) are better at judging non-anaphoric bridging sentences. It seems that the difference is whether the learner can combine their pragmatic ability with linguistic ability and integrate these two in their judgments. As previous studies (Cho 2017, Feng 2019) suggest, a semantic-pragmatic interface is crucial in the acquisition of certain aspects of usage of definite articles, and the capacity to carry such an interface out is likely to be proportionate with a learner’s general language proficiency.

This study attempted to further explore how such an interface is operated and designed a word ordering task to focus on the relationship between lexical sensitivity and the comprehension of non-anaphoric bridging. The result of the word ordering task and its relationship with the acceptability judgment task suggests that sensitivity toward a situationally unique NP may help a learner to detect definiteness in non-anaphoric bridging. This indicates that learners who are highly sensitive to U-NP judge sentences with non-anaphoric bridging better. However, learners who are not aware of a specific U-NP have difficulty judging sentences with non-anaphoric bridging. This suggests that what has been ambiguously addressed as pragmatic competence, or the semantic-pragmatic interface, in the acquisition of definiteness should be reviewed regarding lexical sensitivity concerning situational uniqueness. Although lexical sensitivity is a relatively narrow range of phenomena and is indisputably insufficient to fully explain the acquisition of definiteness in a broad sense, this study still presents the possibility of a notion for considering the acquisition of definite articles.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study had several limitations. First, the word ordering task was specifically designed according to the purpose of the study, but as it was not a conventional methodology, it may require further development. Also, upper-intermediate learners could rate non-anaphoric bridging quite well, but more data from higher-proficiency learners and native speakers should be investigated as

well. For lexical items, the way learners interpret the items based on their corresponding L1 items may be important. Future cross-linguistic studies would be able to provide more insight.

Despite the above limitations, this study offers new insights on the acquisition of English definite articles, especially in non-anaphoric bridging and beyond the sole focus on linguistic ability. I would like to further develop the methodology and expand the findings in future research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. A demonstration of the word-ordering task

[Instruction] *In this section, you will see a [situation] and a word list consists of 3 words. Please consider the association of the words and the situation, and rate the degree of the association in 'best', 'second-best', 'third-best'.*

[situation] wedding

word list: *guest, flower, bride*

	best	second-best	third-best
<i>guest</i>		√	
<i>flower</i>			√
<i>bride</i>	√		

Note: The check marks show an example of a participant's answer.

Appendix 2. Examples of word lists used in the word-ordering task

situation	U-NP	nU-NP	filler
riding an express train	<i>ticket</i>	<i>book</i>	<i>snack</i>
birthday party	<i>cake</i>	<i>firecracker</i>	<i>balloon</i>
proposal	<i>ring</i>	<i>flower</i>	<i>movie ticket</i>