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26 | L2 Acquisition of Argument/ VP Ellipsis

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I. Introduction

This paper discusses whether there exists a logical problem in the cognitive
mechanisms of second language (L2) acquisition (cf. Bley-Vroman, 1990;
2009; Song and Schwartz, 2009 etc.). The qualitative gap between learners'
language experience and grammar strongly suggests that acquisition is con-
strained by the properties of Universal Grammar (UG) in L2 acquisition, as
well as first language (L1) acquisition. To investigate whether this gap exists
in L2 acquisition, it is necessary to explore whether target grammar is able
to be derived from the general learning mechanism or from L2 input, and be
induced by directly applying L1 grammar.

 To address this issue, I discuss the ellipsis construction in Japanese and
English for the target grammar as shown in (1) and (2).[1]

> a. Bill washed the car carefully, but　　　　　　　(1)
> b. John didn't *e*.

[1.] Throughout this paper, I use the symbol '*e*' to indicate a null element.

a. Bill-wa   kuruma-o   teineini   aratta   ga   (2)
    Bill-TOP   car-ACC   carefully   washed   but
    'Bill washed the car carefully but,'

b. John-wa   *e*   arawa-nakat-ta.
    John-TOP   wash-not-PAST
    Lit. 'John didn't wash *e*.'

Although the preferred interpretation in (1b) is 'John did wash a car, but not in a careful manner', it is difficult to reach that interpretation in the Japanese null object construction in (2b). The natural interpretation is 'John didn't wash the car at all'.

   I demonstrate that adult English and Japanese L2 learners understand the ellipsis construction in the target language without specific instruction and suggest that there is a logical problem of language acquisition in L2.

   Section 2 describes and analyzes the two types of ellipsis construction to clarify the constraints that learners must know when acquiring the differences between Japanese and English. Section 3 concerns hypotheses and predications for L2 acquisition of the ellipsis construction. Section 4 summarizes and points out problems.

II. Ellipsis Construction in Japanese and English (Oku, 1998)

To distinguish between (1b) and (2b), Oku (1998) proposes that (2b) involves an argument ellipsis. An argument ellipsis is tied to scrambling, a movement operation responsible for the free word-order phenomenon. Japanese, but not English, is a free word-order language, which is crucial in the presence and absence of argument ellipsis in those languages. Following Bošković and Takahashi's (1998) theory of scrambling, Oku claims that languages such as Japanese allow AE because the θ-feature is weak; on the other hand, languages like English do not allow AE but allow VP-ellipsis because the θ-feature is strong.

   As shown in (3), Oku asserts that the position of the null object in Japanese is empty in the overt syntax, and that the object of an antecedent clause

kuruma-o 'car-ACC' is copied into the empty object position at LF component.

    a. Bill-wa [$_{VP}$ [kuruma-o] teineini   aratta   ] ga (3)
        Bill-TOP   *car-ACC*   *carefully* *washed*   *but*
        'Bill washed the car carefully but,'
                      ↓LF Copying
    b. John-wa   [$_{VP}$ [kuruma-o] arawa-nakat-ta   ]
        John-TOP   *car-ACC*   *wash-not-PAST*
        Lit. 'John didn't wash a car at all.'

In contrast, as seen in English in (4), the VP of the antecedent clause, 'washed the car carefully', is copied into the empty object position at the LF component. Since strong features cause a PF crash, they must be removed before Spell-Out.

    a. Bill [$_{VP}$ washed the car carefully], but   (4)
                  ↓LF Copying
    b. John didn't [$_{VP}$ wash a car carefully].

Thus, Oku proposes that the parameter in (5) governs the type of ellipsis. Variations in ellipsis construction among languages are attributed to the θ-feature strength.

    The Parameter of θ-feature Strength:θ-features are {strong, weak}. (5)

The differences between Japanese and English are summarized in (6).

Differences between Japanese and English   (6)

	θ-feature strength	Null object
Japanese	weak	Argument ellipsis
English	strong	VP-ellipsis

Based on Oku's (1998) parametric theory, Sugisaki (2009) predicts they should acquire knowledge of argument ellipsis as shown in (8) by that age. Using test sentences involving the null subject, he shows that Japanese-

speaking preschool children permit sloppy identity interpretation only for null-subject sentences, and Sugisaki (2009) concludes that AE is available to young Japanese-speaking children. His findings are consistent with the parametric proposal by Oku (1998).

Following these analyses, I consider L2 acquisition of the ellipsis construction in the next section.

III. Acquisition of Argument/VP ellipsis by L2 Learners

1. Introduction: Predictions

The difference between Japanese and English is not derived from the general learning mechanism through examining surface word-order, since each argument or verb is elided. Constraints on these contrasts are not taught in classroom and not derived solely from L2 input. In addition, this contrast is not induced by directly applying an individual's knowledge of L1. Thus, if a logical problem of language acquisition exists in L2 acquisition, L2 learners know of ellipsis in the target language.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Twenty-one (eight English-speaking learners of Japanese and 13 Japanese-speaking learners of English) undergraduate or graduate Japanese students L2 learners were tested. They had never explicitly been taught the English/Japanese ellipsis construction and scrambling. Native speakers were also involved as a control group.

2.2 Procedure

The picture judgment task was employed to originate data for sentences involving an ellipsis in Japanese and English. This is shown in (7). Each sentence type was represented by five tokens. Participants were asked to indicate whether a picture was correctly described by the accompanying sentence. In (9a), for example, two pictures were presented for each test

sentence: one depicted Taro quietly reading a book and Hanako not reading a book, while the other depicted Taro reading a book quietly and Hanako reading a book in an unquiet manner.

a. Taro-wa   hon-o   sizukani   yomda   ga   (7)[2]
   Taro-TOP   book-ACC   quietly   read.PAST   but
   'Taro read the book quietly, but'
   Suzuki-wa   *e*   yomanakatta
   Suzuki-TOP   read.not.PAST
   'Mr. Suzuki didn't read *e*.'

b. Taro read the book quietly, but Mr. Suzuki didn't.

3. Results

The results are summarized in (8) and (9). (8) shows the percentage of acceptance of test sentences in each target language. (9) shows the number of participants who correctly answered at least 80% of the questions (participants were awarded at least four of five tokens)

(8)

	'not in a quiet manner'	'not at all'
L2 group		
L1=Japanese (L2=English)	55%	60%
L1=English (L2=Japanese)	10%	97.5%
Control group		
Japanese	7.5%	97.1%
English	100%	100%

[2.] In addition to these test sentences, the following test sentences are used.
   [(i)] Taro-wa   hon-o   sizukani yomda   ga Suzukisan-wa   sosinakatta
        Taro-TOP   book-ACC quietly   read.PAST but Suzuki-TOP   so.do.not.past
        'Taro read the book quietly, but Mr. Suzuki didn't do so.'
   [(ii)] Taro-wa   hon-o   sizukani yomda   ga   Suzukisan-wa   sinakatta
         Taro-TOP   book-ACC quietly   read.PAST but   Suzuki-TOP   do.not.PAST
         'Taro read the book quietly, but Mr. Suzuki didn't *e*.'

(9)

	'not in a quiet manner'	'not at all'
L1=Japanese (L2=English)	4/13	6/13
L1=English (L2=Japanese)	7/8	8/8

IV. Discussion

Although preliminary, the study's findings indicate that a logical problem of language acquisition exists in L2 English. However, several problems deserve considering. One of them is that English-speaking learners of Japanese may have acquired their knowledge of argument ellipsis through L1 transfer. In English, 'Taro read the book quietly, but Mr. Suzuki didn't read' has the same meaning as test sentence (9a), *Taro-wa hon-o sizukani yomda ga Suzukisan-wa e yomanakatta*: 'Taro read the book quietly, but Mr. Suzuki didn't read *e*'. This shows that English learners could answer correctly by applying their L1 knowledge to L2 test sentences.

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