Marking of Speech Act Distinctions in Japanese and English

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Abstract—The present study examines differences between Japanese and English with respect to speech act distinctions. In particular, the two languages are contrasted with each other in terms of overt realizations of such distinctions. It is then shown that speech act distinctions are more robustly realized overtly in Japanese than in English. The main goal of this paper is twofold. First, I show why the difference between the two languages in terms of overt marking of speech act distinctions poses a significant challenge for speakers of English to learn Japanese. Second, I demonstrate that the difference in question is more prevalent than it is usually assumed, implying that the challenge that learners face is also more prevalent. It is thus my hope to raise the awareness of this challenge among instructors as well as among students.

Index Terms—speech act, sentence types, sentence final particles (SFPs), Japanese, English

I. INTRODUCTION

When a speaker makes an utterance, s/he carries out a speech act, such as the act of making a statement or the act of informing the address of a fact. As the number of distinct speech acts far exceeds the number of distinct sentence types, a single sentence type generally takes on multiple speech acts. For example, the sentence type 'declarative' can be used for making a statement, or informing the addressee of a fact among other speech acts. In other words, each sentence type is "underspecified" for speech act distinctions (cf. Clark, 1996). While this observation holds true for any language, it applies to different degrees, depending on the language. In other words, more speech act distinctions are overtly made in some languages than others. In the present paper, I show that Japanese makes more overt distinctions than English. I also discuss why this difference between the two languages poses a serious difficulty for English speakers learning Japanese.

II. PRELIMINARIES

A. Major Sentence Types and Speech Act Distinctions

It is crucial to make a clear distinction between sentence types and speech act distinctions. Different sentence types, such as declaratives or interrogatives, differ from one another in form. In contrast, different speech acts, such as (making) a statement or (asking) a question, refer to functions; different functions may or may not be associated with distinct forms (i.e., distinct sentence types). We will discuss specific examples of "mismatches" between form and function in the relevant sense later in this section.

Three major sentence types are traditionally recognized: declarative, interrogative, and imperative sentences (König and Siemund, 2007).[1] Both English and Japanese distinguish these three sentence types overtly. English marks these distinctions syntactically whereas Japanese does so morpho-syntactically as illustrated in (1) and (2), respectively.

(1) Major sentence types in English
a. Mary made pizza.
b. Did Mary make pizza?
c. Make pizza!
(2) Major sentence types in Japanese
a. Hanako-wa   piza-o   tsukut-ta.
   Hanako-TOP   pizza-ACC   make-PST
   'Hanako make pizza.'
b. Hanako-wa   piza-o   tsukut-ta-no.
   Hanako-TOP   pizza-ACC   make-PST-Q
   'Did Hanako make pizza?'
c. Piza-o   tsukure.
   pizza-ACC   make.IMP

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[1] König and Siemund (2007) point out that the three-way distinction is also reflected in punctuations in languages, such as English: the period (.), the question mark (?), and the exclamation point (!).

'Make pizza!'

In English, interrogatives are marked with an auxiliary (e.g., *did*) preceding the subject as in (1b)[2]; in Japanese, interrogatives are marked with a question morpheme (i.e., *-no*) added to the verb as in (2b). English imperative sentences involve the nonfinite base form of the verb (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999) as in (1c); Japanese imperatives involve a special conjugated form as in (2c).[3]

For each of the major sentence types above, there are "typical" speech acts that are associated with it. For example, declarative sentences are typically used to make a statement or an assertion; interrogative sentences are typically used to request the address for information (i.e., question); imperative sentences are typically used to give orders.[4] However, the relationship between sentence types and speech act distinctions is in fact much more complicated. One obvious case is rhetorical questions, such as *Who would have guessed that?,* which is interrogative in form, but is not a question in function. It is in fact an assertion (i.e., *Nobody would have guessed that*). As far as rhetorical questions are concerned however, the relationship between the form and its function is conventionalized: question in form and assertion in function. In other words, the function (i.e., speech act) is clear as long as the address recognizes it as a rhetorical question. However, in other cases, speech act distinctions are usually not very obvious from the forms. For example, Clark (1996, p.213) points out that a simple imperative sentence like *Sit here* (i.e., form) can express a number of distinct speech acts (i.e., functions).

(3) Form and function correspondences

	Form	Response	Function
a.	'Sit here.'	'Yes, sir.'	Order
b.	'Sit here.'	'Okay.'	Request
c.	'Sit here.'	'No thanks.'	Offer
d.	'Sit here.'	'What a good idea!'	Advice

As evidenced in the distinct yet felicitous responses, one single imperative form can be associated with a number of different functions. In other words, imperative sentences as in (3) are underspecified for their speech act distinctions. As we will see, other sentence types are also underspecified for their speech action distinctions. In particular, we will scrutinize declarative sentences and their speech acts in the remainder of the paper. We will see that, while both Japanese and English do not mark all the speech act distinctions overtly, English makes fewer distinctions overtly than Japanese.

B. Difference between Japanese and English: An Example

English declarative sentences are "versatile" in that they are used for a number of distinct speech acts. For example, as König and Siemund (2007) point out, English declarative sentences like (4) can be used to make a statement or to give a directive.

(4) English declarative

It is terribly cold in this room.

In addition to making a statement, one can use sentence (4) in order to direct the address to make the room warm by pointing out that it is terribly cold. While the English sentence in (4) is ambiguous in terms of the relevant speech acts, its Japanese counterpart is not ambiguous. Compare (4) with (5a).

(5) Japanese counterparts of English declarative in (4)

  a. Kono   heya-wa   sugoku   samui.
       this   room-TOP   very   cold.PRES
       'It's terribly cold in this room.'

  b. Kono   heya-wa   sugoku   samui-ne.
       this   room-TOP   very   cold.PRES-CONFIRM
       'It's terribly cold in this room (don't you agree with me?).'

  c. Kono   heya-wa   sugoku   samui-yo.
       this   room-TOP   very   cold.PRES-INFORM
       '(I'm telling you) It's terribly cold in this room.'

Japanese declarative sentences like (5a) are used to make a statement, but cannot be used as a directive. To express the latter speech act, sentence-final particles (SFPs), such as the "confirmation-seeker" *ne* (5b) or the "informing particle" *yo* (5c) are necessary. For example, with the SFP *yo*, the speaker informs the addressee of the fact (rather than merely stating it), which implicates that an action needs to be taken to remedy the situation. The contrast between (4) and (5) shows that a single sentence form in English corresponds to multiple sentence forms in Japanese (i.e., declarative sentences with and without SFPs). In other words, more speech act distinctions are overtly marked in

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[2]The exception is a case where the subject is the interrogative pronoun (e.g., *Who made the pizza?*), where there is no auxiliary.

[3] There are two imperative conjugation paradigms in Japanese. For example, both *tsukurinasai* 'make!' and *tsukure* 'make!!' are considered to be imperative forms. The former is often referred to as the "polite" imperative, and the latter the "non-polite" imperative. Interested readers are referred to Makino and Tsutsui (1989, p.284-285) for differences between the two types of imperative forms.

[4] To make the distinction between form and function explicit, I use terms, such as "interrogative," "imperative" to refer to different sentence types/forms, and reserve terms, such as "question" and "order" for their respective speech act/function.

Japanese than in English. As we will see in Section III, what we have observed in (4) and (5) is not an isolated case; we will see other cases of speech act distinctions overtly realized in Japanese, but not in English.

C. Major Source of Difficulty for Learners

As we just saw in the contrast between (4) and (5), one and the same declarative sentence in English has more than one "translation" in Japanese. All those translations are equally grammatical. To make it worse, they have the same propositional content, and are thus truth-conditionally equivalent (cf. Blakemore, 2002, Ch. 2). In other words, their differences emerge only when they are used in context (i.e., at the pragmatic level).

This observation should be contrasted with cases where overt distinctions have semantic import (as well as pragmatic one). Let us take another type of SFPs, such as the question particle *no*, as an example.[5] The question particle is obligatory in interrogative sentences, whether it is morphologically realized as in (6a) or prosodically realized as in (6b).[6]

(6) Japanese interrogatives
a. Hanako-wa　　　　piza-o　　　　tsukut-ta-no.　　　　[=(2b)]
　　Hanako-TOP　　　　pizza-ACC　　　make-PST-Q
　　'Did Hanako make pizza?'
b. Hanako-wa　　　　piza-o　　　　tsukut-ta?
　　Hanako-TOP　　　　pizza-ACC　　　make-PST-Q
　　'Did Hanako make pizza?'
c. *Hanako-wa　　　　piza-o　　　　tsukut-ta.
　　Hanako-TOP　　　　pizza-ACC　　　make-PST-Q
　　'Did Hanako make pizza?'

An interrogative sentence without a question particle as in (6c) is ungrammatical. In addition, notice that (6c) is unacceptable even in isolation. In other words, the use of the question particle is dictated by semantics while the use of other SFPs, such as *yo* and *ne*, is dictated by pragmatics. For the ease of reference, let us call SFPs like *no* semantic SFPs, and SFPs like *yo* and *ne* pragmatic SFPs. What this dichotomy means is that the use of pragmatic SFPs is optional at least at the semantic level (while it is obligatory at the pragmatic level). In other words, errors involving pragmatic SFPs go unnoticed unless they are used as part of a discourse. On the other hand, errors involving semantic SFPs are predicted to be obvious even without discourse. In fact, the asymmetry between these two types of SFPs is consistent with Kakegawa's (2008) finding that learners tend to overuse *yo* (pragmatic SFP) while there is no such observation of errors involving *no* (semantic SFP).[7] In sum, the difficulty that learners have with pragmatic SFPs comes from the fact that, while they are truth-conditionally equivalent, Japanese sentences as in (5) are not interchangeable in a discourse since they differ from each other in speech act. It is therefore necessary for English speakers learning Japanese to make overt distinctions in their target language, which they do not have to make in their native language. This allows us to understand why the difference between Japanese and English causes difficulty for English speakers.

III. Overt Markings of Speech Act Distinctions in Declaratives

In Subsection B of Section II, we saw one instance where Japanese makes more rigorous speech act distinctions than English. In this section, we will examine a few other cases in order to establish that what we observed in Section II is a more prevalent phenomenon.

A. Making a Statement vs. Answering a Question

In Japanese, it is often necessary to overtly mark a declarative sentence whether it is used as a statement or as a response to a question. Let us take a 'why' question in (7) as an example.

(7) Japanese 'why' questions
a. Q: Dooshite　gengogaku-o　　benkyooshite　iru-no
　　　why　　　linguistics-ACC　studying　　　is-Q
　　　'Why are you studying linguistics?'
b. A: Omoshiroi　　　　kara.
　　　interesting.PRES　　because
　　　'Because (it) is interesting.'
c. A: #Omoshiroi.[8]
　　　interesting.PRES

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[5]There are two distinct question particles in Japanese: *no* and *ka*. The choice between them depends on the conjugation paradigm of the predicate. There are two distinct conjugation paradigms for verbs, which are often referred to as "short forms" and "long forms." For example, the present affirmative form of the verb 'to make' is *tsukuru* in its short form, and it is *tsukurimasu* in its long form (See Banno, Ohno, Sakane, and Shinagawa (2011, Ch. 8) for different uses of the two paradigms). The question particle *no* is used with short forms while *ka* is used with long forms.

[6] Question intonation in Japanese involves a sharp rising pitch on the final syllable (Vance, 2008, Ch. 7). The presence of such intonation is indicated by the question mark in (6b), and the absence of it is indicated by the period in (6c).

[7] We will discuss a case of *yo* overuse in Subsection B of Section III.

[8] The pound sign (#) is used to indicate the sentence is grammatical but not appropriate.

'(It) is interesting.'

The question in (7a) asks for the reason why the addressee is studying linguistics. While both (7b) and (7c) are grammatical sentences, only (7b) can serve as a response to (7a). On the other hand, while it can be used as a statement, (7c) cannot be used as a response to a question. Compare the Japanese example in (7) with the English counterpart in (8).

(8) English 'why' questions
a. Q: Why are you studying linguistics?
b. A: Because it is interesting.
c. A: It is interesting.

It is not surprising that (8b) serves as an appropriate response to the *why* question in (8a). However, given the observation with Japanese in (7), it is interesting that (8c) is also an appropriate response in English. It seems reasonable to say that a declarative sentence like (8c) is underspecified for its speech act in English, and can be used as a response as well as a statement through pragmatic accommodation. On the other hand, the Japanese counterpart in (7c) is more specified, and cannot be accommodated as a response. The contrast between (7) and (8) thus also shows that speech act distinctions are marked more explicitly in Japanese than in English.

The above contrast is not restricted to *why* questions. Questions involving the comparative and superlative construction provide other paradigmatic cases. For example, talking about Mt. Rainer, one can use the comparative sentence in (9a) and the superlative sentence in (9b) to make statements.

(9) English comparative and superlative sentences
a. Mt. Rainer is higher than Mt. Fuji.
b. Mt. Rainer is the highest in Washington State.

Importantly, these same sentences can be also used as responses to questions as in (10).

(10) English comparative and superlative questions
a. Which is higher, Mt. Rainer or Mt. Fuji?
b. What is the highest mountain in Washington State?

Observe that the English sentences in (9) are underspecified in their speech act since they can be used either as statements or as responses to a question. When used as responses, they may sound slight awkward. However, it is due to the slight redundancy that arises from the phrases that are contained in both the questions and the responses (e.g., *in Washington State*). If we disregard this factor, the sentences in (9) are equally acceptable as statements or as responses. Now, let us compare the English case with the Japanese counterpart in (11) and (12).

(11) Japanese comparative and superlative sentences
a. Rainer-san-wa   Fuji-san yori   takai.
   Rainer-Mt.-TOP   Fuji-Mt. than   high.PRES
   'Mt. Rainer is higher than Mt. Fuji.'
b. Rainer-san-wa   Washinton-de   ichiban   takai.
   Rainer-Mt.-TOP   Washington-in   number.one   high.PRES
   'Mt. Rainer is the highest in Washington.'

(12) Japanese comparative and superlative questions
a. Rainer-san-to   Fuji-san de   docchi-ga   takai?
   Rainer-Mt.-and   Fuji-Mt. between   which.one-nom   high.pres
   'Between Mt. Rainer and Mt. Fuji, which one is higher?'
b. Washinton-de   dono   yama-ga   ichiban   takai?
   Washington-in   which   mountain-NOM   number.one   high.PRES
   'Which mountain is the highest in Washington?'

Unlike the English counterpart in (9), the Japanese comparative and superlative sentences in (11) cannot serve as responses to questions as in (12); they can only serve as statements. To respond to questions as in (12), the comparative and superlative sentences in (13) must be used instead. In fact, (13) can be only used as responses, not as statements.[9]

(13) Japanese comparative and superlative sentences as responses
a. Rainer-san-no   hoo-ga   Fuji-san   yori   takai.
   Rainer-Mt.-GEN   side-NOM   Fuji-Mt.   than   high.PRES
   'Mt. Rainer is higher than Mt. Fuji.'
b. Rainer-san-ga   Washinton-de   ichiban   takai.
   Rainer-Mt.-NOM   Washington-in number.one   high.PRES
   'Mt. Rainer is the highest in Washington.'

The crucial difference between the two types of comparative/superlative sentences is in the marking of the subject: it is marked with the topic marker *wa* in the former (i.e., (11)), but it is marked with the nominative case marker *ga* in the

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[9] There is one apparent exception to this rule. Sentences like (13) can be construed as statements, where the subject receives narrow focus. Kuno (1973, Ch.2) calls this use of *ga* the "exhaustive-listing" reading. For example, (13a) can be translated as "It is Mt. Rainer that is higher than Mt. Fuji." However, given the fact that such cleft sentence is not used in isolation, sentences as in (13) are always responses of some kind. For example, (13a) can be a response to the statement *Fuji-san-wa Rainer-san yori takai* 'Mt. Fuji is higher than Mt. Rainer' as well as a response to a question like (12a).

latter (i.e., (13)).[10] Notice that the comparative/superlative sentences in (11) and those in (13) are truth-conditionally equivalent yet distinct from each other in terms of speech act. Therefore, the difference between them is another overt distinction that learners of Japanese need to make.

B. Making a Narrative vs. Answering a Question

As we saw in the contrast between (11) and (13), responses are different from statements in speech act. Furthermore, the speech act distinction is overtly realized as distinct sentence types in Japanese. In this subsection, we examine responses again. This time, responses are contrasted with narratives. Let us start with an English example. As illustrated in (14), the same sentence, such as *He is majoring in linguistics,* can be used as part of a narrative (14a) or as a response to a question (14b) in English.

(14) English narratives and responses
a. John is a student at MIT. He is majoring in linguistics.
b. What is John majoring in? He is majoring in linguistics.

In (14) too, distinct speech acts are realized in a single sentence form in English. In contrast, Japanese narratives and responses show an asymmetry in terms of SFPs. As illustrated in (15a), the SFP *yo* is not compatible with narratives.[11]

(15) Japanese narratives vs. responses
a. John-wa   MIT-no   gakusee   desu.   Gengogaku-o   senkoosite   imasu-(*yo).
   John-TOP   MIT-GEN   student   is   linguistics-ACC majoring   is-INFORM
   'John is a student at MIT. (He) is majoring in linguistics.'
b. John-wa   nani-o   senkoosite iru-no. Gengogaku-o   senkoosite   imasu-(yo).
   John-TOP   what-ACC majoring   is-Q   linguistics-ACC majoring   is-INFORM
   'What is John majoring in? (He) is majoring in linguistics.'

In contrast, *yo* is compatible as part of a response as shown in (15b). Since *yo* is not semantically required as discussed earlier, it is optional as part of a response as in (15b). Put it differently, a sentence with *yo* can be used as a response to question, not as a part of a narrative in Japanese. In contrast, no such asymmetry exists in English as (14) shows. The contrast between (14) and (15) thus constitutes another case where a speech act distinction is overtly made in Japanese but not in English.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As we started out with the distinction between sentence types and speech acts, there are mismatches between the two in any language. Specifically, we saw that English sentences tend to be more versatile than Japanese sentences in terms of speech act distinctions. We examined several cases where speech act distinctions are overtly realized in Japanese but not in English. One such instance is a case where pragmatic SFPs, such as *yo*, are involved. It has been observed in a large body of literature that, while SFPs are introduced relatively early in the classroom, the mastery of them usually does not take place until a late stage (Kakegawa, 2008; Sawyer, 1992 among others). In the present study, I argued that the difficulty associated with (pragmatic) SFPs stems from the fact that they render truth-conditionally equivalent sentences. In other words, the presence or absence of SFPs is determined at the pragmatic level. What this implies for language pedagogy is that it is necessary to practice SFPs in context, not in isolated sentences.

We also examined cases where SFPs are not involved, such as *kara* 'it is because.' In such cases as well, we saw that Japanese tends to make more speech act distinctions overtly than English, posing a serious difficulty for English speakers learning Japanese. The several cases we examined in the present paper are by no means comprehensive. For one, there are other distinct Japanese sentence forms that correspond to the same English sentence. In addition, the *wa/ga* distinction we touched upon (see footnote 10) permeates through the language. While the number of cases I discussed is relatively limited, I hope to have successfully shown (i) Japanese makes more overt speech act distinctions than English; (ii) why this asymmetry between the two languages poses a serious challenge for learners of Japanese; (iii) this issue and the problem are not limited to cases involving SFPs but they are more prevalent than previously thought.

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[10] In fact, the distinction between (11) and (13) holds for other sentences that involve *wa* and *ga*. Kuroda (1972) points out that virtually every English sentence has two distinct Japanese translations, differing in *wa* and *ga*. For example, the English sentence *A dog is chasing a cat* can be translated as *Inu-wa neko-o oikakete iru* or *Inu-ga neko-o oikakete iru*. These two Japanese translations are truth-conditionally equivalent, but they differ in speech act. The comparative/superlative constructions in (11) and (13) are thus specific instances of the dichotomy between *wa* and *ga*.

[11] Recall from Subsection C of Section II that learners tend to overuse *yo*.

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