# Toward an Interface between the Japanese Way of Thinking and the English Way of Expressing Things: A Proposal for a Teaching Material

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Abstract

This is a proposal for a teaching material for an English composition class that works as an "interface" between the Japanese way of thinking and the English way of expressing things. It is based on the implications of semantic studies in Japanese linguistics and Japanese-English contrastive studies. It is expected to be effective for the learners to avoid producing English sentences that are syntactically acceptable but semantically unacceptable.

Keywords: English composition, Japanese semantics, pedagogical implications, teaching material

## 1. Introduction

What process is there when Japanese learners of English produce English sentences? It is quite probable that they first think in Japanese, make Japanese sentences in their minds, then reconstruct the ideas so that they fit the syntactic structures of English, and finally produce the sentences orally or in writing. If so, the Japanese way of thinking can considerably influence the learners' production of English sentences. In order to verify this hypothesis, research was carried out in a free English composition class.

This paper first describes the research and its results, points out the problems and appeals for a solution. It then examines some preceding studies in Japanese semantics and Japanese-English contrastive studies, and finally proposes a teaching material with an "interface" between the Japanese way of thinking and the English way of expressing things.

## 2. The Research: How the Learners Think and Write

It was a bilingual composition. A group of third-year students of a college of technology were first told to write their ideas freely in Japanese on a topic that they chose. Then, they were told to translate their writings into English as much as they could.

By comparing the Japanese and the English sentences, the number of English sentences whose subject and predicator were based on the Japanese [ ‥‥wa + ‥‥da ] formula was counted (also, [ ‥‥ga + ‥‥da]). The purpose was to examine whether the subject of the English sentences directly came from the Japanese [ ‥‥wa ] word, and at the same time, the predicator from the Japanese [ ‥‥da ] word. As is often said, the direct translation of the Japanese [ ‥‥wa + ‥‥da ] into the English subject and predicator sometimes causes semantic problems (not syntactic ones). Some popular examples are, that "Boku-wa unagi-da," does not usually mean "I am an eel," and "Kon'nyaku-wa futoranai," does not usually mean "Kon'nyaku does not get fat."

**Table 1** shows the results. It includes (1)the average number of English subject and predicator pairs written, (2)the average number of them based on the Japanese [ ‥‥wa + ‥‥da ] formula, and (3)what percentage of them were syntactically acceptable but semantically not acceptable. As was expected, a considerable proportion of sentences fell into category (3).

Table 1

|  | (1) Total | (2) -wa+ -da formula | (3) Unacceptable |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mean | 13.80 | 9.65 | 2.20 |
| SD | 6.67 | 4.21 | 2.48 |

n=20

Proportion of (3) to (2)：**22.8%**

The fact that those sentences are syntactically acceptable but semantically not acceptable means that the learners have acquired those English structures; however, they can not use them appropriately because of the influence

of the Japanese way of thinking.

Considering the above, we can say that it is not enough to present correct syntactic structures in English to the learners and make them acquire them in order to have them express their ideas in English sentences appropriately. There should be something like an interface between Japanese and English.

## 3-1. Some Semantic Analyses of Japanese Sentences: What are Their Implications for English Composition Class?

In the field of Japanese linguistics, there are many discussions on the notion of "subject", usages of [ ---wa ] and [ ---ga ], some of which can give us implications for English composition class.

Since Ohtsuki(1897) claimed more than a hundred years ago that the Japanese sentence always consists of "shugo"(subject) and "setsumeigo"(descriptive, which actually meant predicator), there have been heated discussions as to whether it is true of all the Japanese sentences, what "shugo" is, whether the notion of "shugo" can be (or should be) replaced with "shudai"(topic), and so on. There is still no conclusion.

This means that some Japanese sentences actually have a subject (one grammatically equivalent to English) and others do not. One research reported that only one third of spoken Japanese sentences clarify the subject (Mizutani(2001)). Therefore, the first option for learners is that they might have to make up a subject in English which does not exist in the Japanese sentence in their minds. For example, when a Japanese wants to express "Koko-wa doko?" in English, s/he tends to say, "Where is here?" Actually, the subject "I" which is used in the English sentence is not used in the Japanese sentence. Therefore it is very hard for her/him to produce the sentence "Where am I?"

The next issue is the various functions of the particles [ ---wa ] and [ ---ga ], such as whether they function the same or differently, which of them expresses the subject, the differences of nuance between [ ---wa ] as the subject and [ ---ga ] as the subject, and so on (Summarized in Noda(1996)). Reviewing the voluminous examples in the literatures, it is worthwhile for learners are to remember that both [ ---wa ] and [ ---ga ] can be the subject in an English sentence depending on each case, that they sometimes have almost the same nuance and other times different ones, that [ ---wa ] sometimes expresses the topic rather than the subject, and that while [ ---wa ] usually functions as a general comment about the subject, [ ---ga ] sometimes functions as an exclusive comment (like, "This one does/is, but not others.") In the last case, one option for learners is the use of a cleft sentence which emphasizes the subject. For example, "It was the Tigers that won yesterday," is better than "The Tigers won yesterday," when expressing "Hanshin-ga kinou kattan-da."

The third issue is that both [ ---wa ] and [ ---ga ] can express an object, time, place, an instrument,... many elements other than the subject. In some cases it can even mean the predicator. For example, "Jinsei"(usually expressed as "life") as in "Jinsei-wa ichidodake-da," can be expressed as the predicator "live" as in "You only live once."1) The implication here is that the learners need to know many different instances of [ ---wa ] and [ ---ga ] other than the subject.

The fourth issue is the different patterns of meaning in the combination of [ ---wa] and [ ---ga] plus [ ---da ], such as, "Does either one of [ ---wa ] and [ ---ga ] mean the topic and the other the subject?," "Are both of them the subjects?," "How many patterns of meaning are there?," and so on. Although there are many different patterns of meaning, there does not seem to be a certain rule about how each pattern should be expressed in English. For example, the famous sentence from Mikami(1960), "Zou-wa hana-ga nagai," can be expressed as "The nose of the elephant is long," or as "The elephant has a long nose," and there is no significant difference of nuance between them.

One thing the learners should note here is the difference between the use of [ ---ga ] as a general and an exclusive comment about [ ---wa ]. In the latter case, the learners need to emphasize the comment about the [ ---ga ] part. For example, in order to express "Jazu-wa Amerika-ga honba-da," they can say, like "America is the home of Jazz," or "Jazz is best enjoyed in America."

## 3-2. Some Implications of Japanese-English Contrastive Studies

Here are some implications of Japanese-English contrastive studies about setting the subject and the predicator in English. The most frequently referred to is the preference for the use of non-human subjects (and at the same time humans as the objects) in English but not in Japanese. One option for the learners here is, when they want to describe what becomes of a human, they should not necessarily use the human as the subject, but they could possibly use the cause of the situation as the subject.

Another issue is the difference between the active and

the passive voice. There is a tendency for Japanese sentences to focus on the consequences and English sentences on the cause (Ikegami(1981), Ando(1986), Yoshikawa(1995)). As a result, when a Japanese speaker feels like using the passive voice and leaving the cause unmentioned, it is sometimes more natural to use the active voice in English to clarify the cause and the result. Therefore the Japanese learners should note that they may sometimes have to choose to use the active voice and clarify the cause in English even when they feel like using the passive.

## 4. A Proposal for an English Composition Class Using an "Interface"

As claimed before, it is not enough for learners to acquire the correct syntactic structures of English in order to express their ideas in semantically acceptable sentences. At the same time, they need to be able to analyze the semantic structures of the Japanese sentences that they have in their minds. They should practice English compositions flexibly considering the Japanese semantics and the English syntax at the same time.

In order that the learner can do that, this paper proposes a teaching material that consists of two facing pages with the considerations on Japanese semantics on the left page and those on English syntax on the right page (See **Appendix 1**).

Each page offers options for analyzing the semantic structures and building the syntactic structure as shown below, and each point offers a practical example.

The Key Points (options) for the Analyses of the Japanese Sentences (on the left)

> 1. Make up a subject that is missing in the Japanese sentence
> 2. Distinguish between [ ⋯wa ] and [ ⋯ga ] as the subject
> 3. Different instances of [ ⋯wa ] and [ ⋯ga ] other than as the subject
> 4. Two patterns of the combination of [ ⋯wa ][ ⋯ga ] + [ ⋯da ]
> 5. Use of a non-human subject and a human object
> 6. Change from the passive voice in Japanese to the active voice in English

The Basic Syntactic Structures of English Related to the Setting of the Subject and the Predicator (on the right)

> 1. The standard: "Subject" + "Predicator"
> 2. The inverted subject, with a preceding predicator
> 3. "There+BE ⋯" expressing the existence of the subject
> 4. "It" as the null subject for sentences to refer to time, weather, and so on
> 5. "It" as the preceding subject followed by the real subject of "to+verb" or "that+clause"
> 6. "It" as the subject in a cleft sentence followed by the part to be emphasized

Each time the learners practice free composition in English, they consult this material as an interface between their ideas and their writings. By keeping such a practice, it is expected that they will gradually learn to express their ideas in the English way.

Note
1) This example was provided by Mr. CHIDA Jun'ichi in his lecture at the COCET assembly 2007 in Kyoto.

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# Appendix 1 (Teaching material)

## 日英語ギャップのハードルを越えよう

自分の頭で考えた日本語を元とした日本語から英文を作成する際には、発想法の違いがギャップとなり、正しい意味が伝わらない英文になることがある（つまり、日本語の直訳で正しい場合とそうでない場合がある）。オリジナルの英文を書く際はこの左右のページを見て、日英両面から色々な選択肢があることを意識しながら書こう。

### 第1部：日本語の意味構造に関する必要知識

1. 日本文には主語があるとは限らない→存在しない主語を補う

   昨日、映画に行ったんだ。→文脈から「僕は/私をたられ」などを補う。I went to the movies yesterday.

   何歳ですか。→文脈から「あなたは/～さんは」などを補う。How old are you?

2. 「～は」「～が」に注目：主部で一番意味要素の否かの検討（トピックであっても主語と は限らない）

   今日は日曜だ。「今日」は主語：Today is Sunday.

   今日は仕事だ。「今日は」は主語では無い：I have to work today.

3. 主部以外と解釈すべき「～は」「～が」の代表的パターンの区別 ｜目的語・道路・等・場所/方法｜

   頭痛がするんです。→目的語：I have a headache.　　人生は一度だけだ。→道路：You only live one.

   今夜は忙しいぞ。→時：We will be busy tonight.　　ここは禁煙です。→場所：You can't smoke here.

4. 「～が」を区別して英文に反映させる工夫（「が」の判別理由）

   今日の試合は大事なのです。Today's game is important.

   今日の試合こそ大事なのです。Today's game is especially important. / It is today's game that is important.

   口頭で言う時にToday'sを強調して Today's game is important.

5. 「～が」の両方が使われているケース

   (1) 「は」の複数に関するコメントとしての「が」→どちらも主語になり得る。ニュアンスにあまり差は出ない。

   東京は大学が多い。

   a) Tokyo has many universities.　　b) There are many universities in Tokyo.

   Tom は足が長い。

   a) Tom has long legs.　　b) The legs of Tom are long.

   (2) 「は」に関する排他的コメントとしての「が」→どちらも主語になり得るが、どちらが中心的なニュアンスを持つかで微妙にニュアンスが異なる

   →って感じ方が異なる。

   ジャズはアメリカが本場だ。（他の国ではなくアメリカが）

   a) Jazz is best in America.　　b) America is the home of Jazz.

   旅行は電車が一番だよ。（車ではなく電車が）

   a) A trip is best enjoyed on the train.　　b) The train is the best for a trip.

### 第2部：英語の基本的文構造（主語・述語に関して）についての必要知識

1. 基本型：主語＋述語

   Tom likes skiing.　Tom が主語、likes が述語

   Tom is a student.　Tom が主語、is が述語

2. 倒置：述語＋主語

   Then, at last, came the main guest of the party.　guest が主語、came が述語。「ドラマチック」な言い方。

3. there＋BE存在文

   車が多いです。There are many cars.（cars が主語：多くの車が存在する。）

   うちは3人家族です。There are three people in my family.（people が主語：3人の人が存在する。）

4. 仮主語it＋真主語（to～/that～）

   It is easy to play the guitar. It は仮主語、to play the guitar（ギターを弾くこと）が真主語

   →ギターを弾くのは簡単だ。

   It is natural that we have to work.　It は仮主語、that we have to work（働かなくてはならない）が真主語

   →働かなくてはならないのは当然だ。

5. 空主語it（実体のない it）

   It is three o'clock.　時間関係

   It was rainy yesterday.　天候・気温・雰囲気など

6. 強調構文：it＋強調部＋that＋残り全部

   Tom broke the door yesterday.（Tom は昨日ドアを壊した）

   →It was Tom that broke the door yesterday.（昨日ドアを壊したのはTomだ）

   →It was the door that Tom broke yesterday.（昨日 Tom が壊したのはドアだ）

   →It was yesterday that Tom broke the door.（Tom がドアを壊したのは昨日だ）

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英訳時の注意点のまとめ

1：日本文の中に英語の主語にできる意味要素があるか否か

2：主語の候補となる意味要素が複数ある場合どれを選ぶか（自分にとって使いやすい/よりニュアンスが近いと思う…）

3：倒置をとる英文の基本構造が複数ある場合どれを選ぶか（同上）