

Effect of Zero Anaphora in Intercultural Communication

Gordon G. Wilson
Yuzuru Takigawa

I Introduction

As in the Japanese proverb *Subete iwanu ga hana* “Not saying everything is beautiful,” it has been believed that an implicit conversation style is better suited for communicating with others in Japan. Among implicit communication strategies such as indirect expression and the use of incomplete sentences, a common linguistic phenomena contributing to implicitness and vagueness in Japanese discourse is the use of zero anaphora referential form.

While Japanese people seem to unconsciously and unproblematically use the zero anaphora referent in daily conversation, non-native speakers of Japanese may have difficulties understanding Japanese conversational themes containing zero-anaphora subject since it often carries thematic information in conversation (Takigawa & Hansen, 2001). This paper will explore how the use of zero anaphora subject affects the efficiency of Japanese discourse including non-native speakers of Japanese, specifically between non-native and native speakers of Japanese. I will also attempt to suggest a possible interpretation of the reason why the zero anaphora use in the conversation causes difficulties in understanding among non-native speakers. Finally, I will discuss a solution to at least reduce these difficulties.

II Theoretical framework

Many studies (Clancy, 1980; Fox, 1987; Givon, 1983; Hinds, 1983; Takigawa & Hansen, 2001; Tomlin, 1987) have considered the use of referential expressions in spoken discourse data. They examined how the speaker makes a decision when choosing different types of linguistic expressions in discourse. They made the suggestions that the choice among referential forms such as full NP, pronouns and zero anaphora are all determined

by factors such as time, episode boundary and thematicity.

Clancy (1980) has shown that the overall thematicity of the participants in English and Japanese spoken narrative data has relations with the using different linguistic forms. She claimed that zero anaphora or pronouns are used for more thematic participants. Takigawa and Hansen (2001) showed that thematic information is more likely to be expressed in the subject position in Japanese and it is more likely to be referred to with an inexplicit form, zero anaphora.

Kashima and Kashima (1998) discussed that there are connections between culture and use of zero anaphora subject. They mentioned that languages spoken in collectivist cultures, i.e. Japanese, syntactically allow the zero anaphora subject whereas languages in individualist cultures such as English, German, and French do not syntactically allow it. Kitayama (1998) supports Kashima and Kashima (1998) and suggests that English does not allow a zero anaphora subject since English speakers base their understanding of events on the presence of an Agent who operates the action. This conception of Agent necessitates an explicit sentence subject to fully describe the conversational environment.

Clancy (1986) examines the differences in communication style between English and Japanese and discuss the presupposition that for Japanese communication it is the listener's responsibility to understand what the speaker is referring to. Kitayama (1998) further mentions that Japanese tend to feel rude when speaking overtly. These differences in conversation style between English and Japanese are also supported by Tsuda's (1984) research on sales talk among American and Japanese salesmen and Yamada's (1992) research on business discourse in the U.S. and Japan. I propose that mismatches in these culturally based styles of communication are at the heart of many miscommunications and misunderstandings.

1. Research problem

Previous studies have considered the relationship between thematicity and the explicitness of reference (Clancy, 1980; Fox, 1987; Givon, 1983; Hinds, 1983; Takigawa & Hansen, 2001; Tomlin, 1987), culture and the explicitness of reference (Kashima and Kashima, 1998), or the difficulties in intercultural communication related to differences in culture and conversational style (Clancy, 1986; Kitayama, 1998; Tsuda, 1984; Yamada, 1992). However, there are no studies which explored specifically the use of zero anaphora subject and communication difficulties among non-native speakers of Japanese.

In this study, I will examine the relationship of the use of zero anaphora referent in Japanese discourse and the cause of the difficulties between a native-speaker of Japanese and non-native speakers by investigating how the non-native speakers assume the non-overtly mentioned item from the context. Use of zero anaphora relies on the listener to fill-in-the-blanks so to speak, but L2 speakers of Japanese whose native language does not emphasize this type of cooperative communication are inexperienced and often unable to do so adequately.

This investigation is valuable particularly because the discussion in Kashima and Kashima (1998) and Kitayama (1998) considered zero anaphora subject in relation to only culture in general, and Clancy (1986) discussed only the differences in conversation style between English and Japanese. This analysis is also useful for second language learners and teachers as it identifies particular problematic aspects of language and culture that can be targeted for learning.

2. Definitions

I will briefly give a theoretical definition of thematic information and zero anaphora subject. Thematic information is defined as the “center of attention” which is operated extralinguistically. Tomlin (1983) explains that it could be identified by examining the goal of the particular communicative event and the focus for the real world activity. In his study of English hockey game commentary, the center of attention is most typically projected to a player with the puck since his action would be the most important in a game. Also, in Clancy (1980)’s study of pear story narratives, a main character in the story who overall obtains the center of attention is defined as “thematic.”

In Japanese, it is believed that the NP marked with *ga* in the subject position in the deep structure is syntactic subject (Kuno, 1973). Shibatani (1985, 1990) also suggests that certain NPs which are marked with *ga* and which occur sentence-initially in deep structure are the prototypical subjects. He discusses that there is a range of subjects with different case markers in Japanese. However, by testing these subject NPs with several different syntactic processes such as reflexivization and honorification, he claims that certain NPs with *ga* are the most prominent syntactic subject. Since we are dealing with syntactic subject here, a zero realization of the relation is also included in this category.

It is important to understand that Japanese zero anaphora subject is different from syntactic subject in such languages as Spanish and French which can also be deleted. In

Spanish, a subject agreement is marked on verb. For example, the verb *tener* “to have” conjugates as *tengo* “I have” for the first person singular, and *tienes* “you have” for the second singular. Therefore, the subject is obvious from the conjugated verb form and a listener does not have to make an assumption from the context what was deleted, but can notice from the verb form.

However, in Japanese, since the NP with the case marker is completely deleted and the verb does not mark the subject agreement, it is impossible to tell the deleted subject from any linguistic information but only from the contextual information.

III Data, Methodology and Hypotheses

The data considered in this paper is 2 sets of natural spoken discourse in Japanese: One conversation between two native speakers of Japanese (Conversation (1)), and one conversation between an American and Japanese (Conversations (2)).

Conversation (1) is a phone conversation between two women in the same age group who have been very close friends for 20 years. Conversation (2) is between a Japanese woman and an American woman who has studied Japanese at college level and have been living in Japan for 13 years. They have been friends for a year and a half, but they are close friends and often talk about cultural differences between Japan and the U.S.

The American woman in (2) has been an English professor at a Japanese university for 10 years and is proficient in Japanese in all 4 skills (aural, oral, reading and writing). “Proficient” here means that not only she has no problem in daily life, but also she can translate academic papers into Japanese or English, participate in department meetings which are conducted in Japanese, and give lectures in Japanese. She is also very aware of the difference between Japanese and American cultures and very sensitive about her behavior within the Japanese culture.

There are many referents expressed with zero realization in the collected data, however, since we are dealing with only zero anaphora subject in this study, I will not include the discussion on non-subject referents expressed with zero anaphora.

The parentheses in the data indicate that an item in it is not overtly expressed, thus zero anaphora subject is used. In both data, the initiator of a conversation containing new thematic information is labeled as S, starter, and the ones who had to figure out the zero anaphora indication R, responder.

1. Hypotheses

Previous research (Clancy, 1986; Kitayama, 1998) suggest that in Japanese communication it is the listener's responsibility to understand what the speaker is referring to whereas in English the speaker is responsible for overtly mentioning what is meant to be said. If this is true, we can reasonably make assumptions of certain behavioral tendencies between Japanese and Americans as follows:

- 1) Japanese are more implicit speakers and Americans are more explicit speakers.
- 2) A Japanese listener depends on the context more to understand what is mentioned by a speaker, and an American listener depends less on the context (and more on explicit meaning) to understand what is mentioned by a speaker.

Within each language system, both speakers and listeners have similar assumptions and experiences when dealing with conversations. However, when a speaker/listener from one communication style converses with a speaker/listener from a different communication style, miscommunications and misunderstands abound. Undoubtedly, low L2 grammatical proficiency is often the culprit, but even in cases of near-native speakers, miscommunications due to underlying cultural conversational styles are present.

Combining native Japanese and English speakers/listeners, we can create 4 hypothetical circumstances for communication difficulty:

- 1) From the speaker's point of view:

1)-1. Japanese speaker with an American listener

The Japanese strategy expects the American to infer meaning to understand and complete the Japanese intention. But the American strategy does not add any meaning to it and takes the utterance at face value. Thus, the Japanese intended meaning of the utterance is incomplete and the end result is that the Japanese is misunderstood by the American.

1)-2. An American speaker with a Japanese listener

The American expects Japanese to understand his or her intention only from what is explicitly mentioned. But Japanese adds meaning beyond the American's specifically mentioned meaning. This results in the American being misunderstood by the Japanese

due to the added meaning.

2) From the listener's point of view:

2)-1. Japanese listener with an American speaker

The American speaks explicitly to communicate his/her intention. But Japanese adds meaning beyond the American's utterance. Therefore, Japanese misunderstands an American.

2)-2. An American listener with a Japanese speaker

Japanese implicitly communicates Japanese's intention and expects the American to add meaning. But the American does not add meaning to what Japanese mentions and as a result misunderstands the Japanese intended meaning.

Note the four perspectives involved in this construction. Both Japanese and Americans in this example experience being misunderstood and misunderstanding their conversational partner.

IV Results

I will first examine the discourse data between two Japanese (Conversation (1)) to show how native speakers conduct conversation using zero anaphora subject without misunderstanding each other. I will then examine the discourse data between an American and Japanese, conversation (2), to illustrate how an American reacted to zero anaphora subject.

1. Conversation between 2 native speakers of Japanese

Conversations (1) is between 2 native Japanese speakers. It is a segment of a phone conversation between two female Japanese speakers who have been friends for over 20 years. This is a segment of their first conversation in over a year.

R recently notified S via email that she is getting a divorce. S then telephoned R to discuss this event. After an initial greeting characterized by small talk about how long it had been since they talked and recent weather changes, S initiates the discussion of the main reason for the phone call, i.e. talk about the divorce.

S-1: Nee, sore de, (rikon wa) doo na-tta?
 say by the way (divorce) how become-PAST
 “Say, how is (the divorce issue)?”

R-1: Aa, raishuu (watashi-tachi wa) saiban (o suru).
 Oh next week, (1SG-PL TOP) court (OBJ do)
 “Oh, (We will have) court next week.”

S-2: Taihen da yo ne, (rikon wa).
 Difficult COP PTCL PTCL (divorce TOP)
 “(Divorce is) difficult, isn’t it?”

R-2: Demo (watashi wa) bengoshi makase da kara (rikon wa) raku yo.
 but (1SG TOP) lawyer reliance COP because (divorce TOP) easy PTCL
 “But (divorce is) easy since (I) completely rely on the lawyer.”

S-3: Jyaa....
 Well
 “Well,”

In the above conversation, all the parentheses indicate that the referents in them were not mentioned explicitly, but rather, referred to with zero anaphora. The syntactic subjects in the sentences are the underlined referents and they are crucial to the conversation since the subjects are carrying the thematic information in the conversation. Notice that the underlined arguments are all referred to with zero anaphora. Thus, unless the participants in the conversation realize what is not overtly mentioned in the conversation, it is impossible to understand the topic of the conversation.

S and R were talking about a different and unrelated issue immediately before this segment of the conversation. R’s divorce was not the topic of the conversation until S initiated it covertly in S-1. In S-1, S changed a topic from the previous one to the divorce issue, which is the main topic of the conversation for this phone call. S used the discourse marker *Nee* ‘say’ to change the topic, but she did not overtly mentioned what she wanted to talk about. Rather, she used zero anaphora and let R figured out the topic.

As seen in R-1, R did not have a problem understanding what S indicated in S-1.

Notice how smoothly the conversation went without the thematic information overtly mentioned. Once the topic is established and confirmed by S and R in the initial dialog (S-1 and R-1), they kept using zero anaphora for referring such words as *rikon* 'divorce' in S-2, and the first person *watashi* and *rikon* 'divorce' in R-2. Although it is very common to drop personal pronouns since the referent is usually obvious in Japanese, it is characteristic of the zero anaphora subject in Japanese conversation to refer to the most thematic main topic of the conversation, i.e. divorce, in this conversation.

In S-3, S changes the topic by using another discourse marker, *jyaa* 'well.' After the indication of changing the topic, S and R went on to discuss the possibility of R coming to visit S to change the living environment for a while.

Next, consider an example from a conversations in Japanese between a native Japanese speaker and near-fluent Japanese L2 speakers whose native language is English. Conversation (2) is between 2 females at a lunch meeting. Three days prior to this meeting, S had cancelled an invitation from R for a dinner party at the last minute. This is the first time they had met following the cancellation. The following dialogue shows that S (native Japanese speaker) initiate discussion about the cancellation with an apology.

S-1: Kono aida (dinaa o kyanseru shi-te) gomen ne.
the other day (dinner OBJ cancel do) sorry PTCL
"Sorry (for canceling dinner) the other day."

R-1: Nani?
what
"What (are you sorry for)?"

S-2: Hora, kayoobi.
see Tuesday
"Remember? Tuesday."

R-2: Aa, dinaa? Daijoobu. Shinpai shi-nai de.
Oh dinner all right worry do-NEG please
"Oh, dinner? It's OK. Don't worry."

S-3: Denwa shi-ta toki ryoori chuu tte it-te-ta desho.
 phone do-PAST when cooking during that say- - PAST probably/right
 “When I called, you said that you were cooking.”

Dakara (tabemono ga) amat-ta n jya naika to omotte....
 because (food SUBJ) remain-PAST wonder think
 “lit. So, I was wondering if (the food was) remained.”
 (So, I was wondering if you had left over.)

R-3: E?
 pardon
 “What?”

S-4: Tabemono.
 food
 “Food.”

R-4: Aa, tabemono. (Tabemono o) tsuku-tta kedo, reitoo shi-ta kara heeki.
 Oh food. (food) make-PAST but freeze do-PAST because OK
 “Oh, food. I made (it), but I froze (it), so (it’s) OK.”

Generally in this conversation, S is expressing her regrets that she had to cancel after R had already prepared for the dinner. Again we see the main topic introduced with zero anaphora by the native Japanese speaker in S-1, but in this case the native English speaker of L2 Japanese doesn’t catch the reference and asks for clarification (R-1). S still does not mention the word “dinner” in S-2, but rather just give the hint of a word “Tuesday”, the day R invited S over for dinner. R in R-2 finally understands what S is talking about.

Additionally, even after R responds to the clarified subject of the dinner party, she still misses the reference to the food that she made in S-3. Notice here that S mentioned *ryoorichuu* “cooking”, it is reasonably assumed that S is talking about food, but R was not sure what S was talking about, as a result, R’s response was to request clarification.

One interesting phenomena here is that both in R-2 and R-4, R repeats what was mentioned implicitly by S; *dinaa* “dinner” in R-2 and *tabemono* “food” in R-4. This con-

versational style was not observed between the two native speakers previously shown (Conversation (1)).

V Summary and conclusion

In this paper, I examined as a pilot study how the use of zero anaphora in Japanese conversation affects the understandings of non-native speakers of Japanese. Specifically, I explored the relationship between zero anaphora subject and native English speaker's difficulties following L2 (Japanese) conversation themes.

As Kashima and Kashima (1998) show, zero anaphora subject use may be very much related to culture. If so, L2 learners of Japanese have to acquire not only the language but also the culture to be fluent in Japanese. Clancy (1986) examined how the child-mother relationship communicates cultural understanding and teaches children how to think and behave in culturally appropriate ways. Since L2 learners do not have mothers to teach them culture, they must find other ways to acquire the cultural understanding, including zero anaphora perception, necessary for fluent application of the L2.

Ohta (1999) outlined how an interactional routine may be acquired in adult L2 acquisition contexts and suggested that participation is essential to acquire an interactional routine. Although beginning level students may not be primary participants, they have peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) which has been shown to be a key part of socialization processes.

Ohta's research examined L2 language socialization of the particle *ne*, which is very salient thus may be fairly easy to acquire through peripheral experience and exposure. While zero anaphora use is not as salient as the particle *ne*, it nevertheless deserves teacher's and researcher's attention. I believe that zero anaphora heavily contributes to L2 learners miscommunications and misunderstandings and that they would truly benefit from the development of teaching methods that help develop awareness and understanding of this slippery grammatical and cultural item.

Ohta's work illustrates that it is possible to teach cultural aspects of language in the classroom. Her research and this project cumulatively suggest that it is important for cultural context and applications of the language to be taught continuously from the earliest classes. Cultural differences in language use exist and L2 learners do socialize their use of L2 in one way or another. Fluency is possible only if L2 speakers can accurately apply the language socio-linguistically. In an immersion setting, language learners are

surrounded by cultural context; although this level of cultural contact is impossible in a classroom, students benefit from even minimal attempts to introduce culture into the classroom.

References

- Clancy, P. M. (1980). Referential Choice in English and Japanese narrative discourse. In Chafe, W. (Ed.), *The Pear Stories: Cognitive, Cultural, and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production* (pp. 127-201) Norwood: Ablex.
- Clancy, P. M. (1986). The acquisition of communicative style in Japanese. In B. B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs (Eds.), *Language socialization across cultures*. (pp. 213-250). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fox, B. (1987). Anaphora in Popular Written English Narratives. In Tomlin, R. (Ed.), *Coherence and Grounding in Discourse* (pp. 157-174) Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Givon, T. (1983). Topic Continuity in Spoken English In Givon, T. (Ed.), *Topic Continuity in Discourse: Quantitative Cross-Language Studies* (pp. 47-93) Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hall, J. K., & Brooks, F. B. (1985). *Interactive practices, L2 interactional competence and SLL/A in classrooms: An integrative theoretical framework*. Unpublished manuscript. University of Georgia.
- Hinds, J. (1983). Topic Continuity in Japanese. In Givon, T. (Ed.), *Topic Continuity in Discourse: Quantitative Cross-Language Studies* (pp. 47-93) Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kashima, E. S., & Kashima, Y. (1998). Culture and language: The case of cultural dimensions and personal pronoun use. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 29*, 461-486.
- Kitayama, S. (1998). *Cultural psychology of self and emotion*. Tokyo: Kyoritsu syuppan.
- Kuno, S. (1973). *Structure of the Japanese Language*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ohta, A. S. (1999). Interactional routines and the socialization of interactional style in adult learners of Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics, 31*, 1493-1512.
- Schmidt, R. (1983). Interaction, acculturation and the acquisition of communicative competence. In N. Wolfson and E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and second language acquisition* (pp. 137-174). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Shibatani, M. (1985). Shugo Prototaipu Ron (Theory of Prototypical Subject). In *Nihongogaku (Linguistics of Japanese) Oct. vol. 4* (pp. 4-16).
- Shibatani, M. (1990). *The Languages of Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tagigawa, Y., & J. Hansen (2001). Linguistic Treatment of Thematic Information in Japanese. In *Dynamis, 5*. Kyoto University.
- Tomlin, R. (1983). On the Interaction of Syntactic Subject, Thematic Information, and Agent. In *English in Journal of Pragmatics 7* (pp. 411-432).
- Tomlin, R. (1987). Linguistic Reflections of Cognitive Events. In Tomlin, R. (Ed.) *Coherence and Grounding in Discourse* (pp. 455-479) Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Tsuda, A. (1984). *Sales Talk in Japan and the United States*. Georgetown University Press.

Yamada, H. (1992). *American and Japanese Business Discourse: A comparison of interactional styles*. Ablex.

(2001年10月26日受理)