

Original Paper

The Light Verb “Suru” in Japanese Lexical-Conceptual Structure and Sources of Learning Difficulty

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Abstract

As frequently observed in second or foreign language learning, the Japanese light verb “suru” may cause much learning difficulty. Most previous studies focused on the surface description of “suru” in terms of its role in some particular Japanese lexical structure or verbal formation in a particular syntactic environment. This paper assumes that the light verb “suru” drives certain particular Japanese lexical-conceptual structure, and language-specific lexicalization patterns must be learned as such. It offers a linguistic analysis of the sources of the light verb “suru” in structuring particular verbalization patterns and relates this analysis to potential sources of learning difficulty in second or foreign language learning. Instances of cross-linguistic influence or learner errors in learning the Japanese lexical-conceptual structure driven by “suru” are from some early stage American students learning Japanese as a foreign language. This paper implicates a lexicon-driven approach to teaching Japanese lexicalization patterns.

Keywords

suru, lexical borrowing, lexical-conceptual structure, verbalization, cross-linguistic influence, language transfer, interlanguage

1. Introduction

Most previous studies of “suru” focused on the surface description of Japanese word formation or specific word activities in particular syntactic environments (Shibatani & Kageyama, 1988; Kageyama, 1999; Ito & Sugioka, 2002). This paper offers some linguistic analysis and explanations of: (1) The sources of lexical borrowing with a focus on certain Chinese characters borrowed into classic Japanese and English or Western words borrowed into modern Japanese and how such borrowed lexical items are combined with and adapted to the use of the Japanese verb “suru”. In other words, this paper

describes and explains how Chinese/English/Western lexical items are used with “suru” to produce a particular type of verb, either a transitive or intransitive verb. This lexically based combination not only produces a peculiar verbalization pattern but also new lexical collocations frequently used in contemporary Japanese. (2) The sources of learner errors as frequently observed in early stage learners of Japanese as a foreign language who tend to create errors in producing the two types of lexical structure involving “suru”: VN-suru and VN/N-o-suru. For example, (a) **nihongo o benkyoo o suru* (I study Japanese), (b) **heya o sooji o suru* (I clean my room), (c) **tenisu o asobu* (I play tennis), and (d) **yakyuu o asobu* (I play baseball). Such errors may be caused by lack of knowledge of the functional nature of “suru” which is required for a verbalization pattern or object phrase by using the particle “o”. The particle “o” should not occur twice as in (a) and (b) respectively, and the verb “asobu” should not occur in (c) and (d) respectively. This may be a phenomenon of cross-linguistic transfer from the lexical-conceptual structure of learners’ native language or lack of knowledge of “suru” as a transitive verb required for particular nouns. This paper explores sources of such a peculiar combination with lexical borrowing and learner errors by delineating two types of “suru” in Japanese lexical structure in order to propose a lexicon-driven approach to teaching such Japanese lexicalization patterns.

2. Gairaigo-Suru in the Japanese Verbalization Pattern

The verbalization pattern of *gairaigo* (i.e., borrowed verbal noun from other languages) -*suru* with two particular phenomena. The first is *kango* (compound Chinese characters) -*suru*, and the second is *katakanago* (English/Western words) -*suru*.

(1) *Nihonbunka o kenkyuu-suru*.

I do **research** on Japanese culture.

(2) *Sonomondai no kaiketsuhoo o kentoo-suru hitsuyoo ga aru*.

We have to **consider** the solution of that problem.

(3) *Heya o sooji-suru*.

I **clean** my room.

(4) *Nihongo o benkyoo-suru*.

I **study** Japanese.

(5) *Karera wa gijutsu kyooryoku o yakusoku-suru*.

They **promise** a technical tie-up.

In (1)-(5), *kenkyuu-suru*, *kentoo-suru*, *sooji-suru*, *benkyoo-suru*, and *yakusoku-suru* are the pseudo-Chinese readings for the same characters: *yanjiu*, *jiantao*, *saochu*, *mianqiang*, and *yueshu*. The semantic content and syntactic function of each such item (i.e., a verb and a verbal noun) are also borrowed from Chinese. Most verbal nouns can be attached to “suru” and may also be used in the “VN-o-suru” structural pattern. In fact, they are two different complementation structures in syntax. Although the basic Chinese sentence structure is SVO, Chinese does not have inflectional morphology

for various grammatical functions. Thus, Chinese characters' parts of speech are not indicated by inflectional morphology of any kind. For example, the surface forms of nouns and verbs or verbal nouns remain the same. In (4) "*benkyoo-suru*" means "study" in Japanese, which is a lexically adapted meaning in Japanese through lexical borrowing. However, in Chinese, "*benkyoo*" itself can be a verb or a noun. Similarly, in (5) "*yakusoku-suru*" means "promise", which also follows this particular Japanese lexical structure. However, in Chinese, "*yakusoku*" itself can be a verb or a noun.

(a) *Nihongo no benkyoo o suru ka shinai ka?*

N/Japanese PART/POS VN/study PART/OBJ V/do V/do-study

(b) *Paateii o suru.*

N/Party PART/OBJ V/do

In (a) the "suru" is regarded as a single verb, and it must be assumed that the VN's meaning of "study" is a direct object of "suru", which is a light verb in Japanese and serves and relays the meaning of the head VN. As in (b), the first verbal noun functions as regular noun, and the particle "o" is needed to introduce the object as in "*benkyoo o suru*". In contrast, the combined form of "VN-suru" definitely constitutes a morphological word (cf., Kageyama, 1999). The "VN-suru" as a lexical compound contains a suffix attached to a head noun to make up a compound word. In terms of its lexical structure, "suru" must be used as part of the "suru" lexical compound, and such a lexical compound is idiomatic. This particular type of "suru" activates the head VN and plays an important role in grammatical function (cf., Kageyama, 1999; Matsuoka, 2004), because it depends on the head VN's meaning and, without the latter, it does not have its own lexical content.

As a universal linguistic phenomenon of lexical borrowing, in order to adapt borrowed items into the existing Japanese linguistic system, including its lexical categories, Japanese divides the borrowed Chinese words into two parts of speech (i.e., lexical categories) into the verbal noun used with "suru" and the regular noun. The juxtaposed and combined form of "VN-suru" thus becomes a specific verbalization pattern in Japanese. Thus, sources of ungrammatical or nonnative like expressions as commonly observed in learner errors, such as **Yuushoku-suru* (*yuushoku o taberu*, eat dinner); **Tegami-suru* (*tegami o kaku*, write a letter); **Yakyuu-suru* (*yakyuu o suru*, play baseball) (c.f., Ito & Sugioka, 2002); **Ocha-suru* (*ocha o nomu*, drink tea) (cf., Matsuoka, 2004) can be discussed and explained in a more meaningful manner. Such expressions might also occur in some Japanese native speakers' nonstandard or substandard speech, but the explanations of such sociolinguistic variations are beyond the linguistic issues under the current discussion. As observed, the production of the "VN-suru" of *garaigo* compounds is much higher than *wago* (i.e., origin Japanese) compounds. For example, "suru" can be attached to some of the origin Japanese verbs by changing verbs into verbal nouns.

(c) *Hon o tachi yomi-suru.*

N/book PART/OB VN/stand VN/read V/do

"Stand reading a book."

(d) Kao ga hi yake-shi ta.

N/face PART/SUBJ N/sun VN/browned V-PAST/do

“My face is sun-browned.”

In (c) “suru” is compounded into two verbal nouns in the “VN-VN-suru” construction. We also can see a noun and a verbal noun in conjunction with “suru” in the “N-VN-suru” construction as in (d). Such kinds of compound verbs cannot be highly produced, because they are constrained by some Japanese language-specific lexical, morphological and syntactic components (Tanomura, 1988; Itoo, 2002). In contrast, only foreign words can be easily combined with “suru” to produce numerous new Japanese verbs. This linguistic phenomenon is related to some Japanese historical cultural borrowing. In the 5th century, Japanese borrowed many kanji/Chinese characters from China by Japanese Buddhists through cultural borrowing. At that time, they recorded the borrowed Chinese characters in katakana as from a foreign language. Once they created katakana and hiragana, they changed the shape of certain Chinese characters and adapted them into the existing Japanese linguistic system. Such modified or adapted Chinese characters were called Japanese kanji, kango or kango-suru compound verbs. Nowadays kanji and kango have become part of Japanese national language. Many Japanese native speakers even do not realize that kanji and kango are in fact the borrowed lexical items. However, they realize katakanago is the gairaigo or loan word, which is also called katakana-eego (i.e., Japanese English pronunciation or accent).

(6) Sensee ga ronbun no kakikata ni tsuite **adobaisu-shite** kudasatta.

“My teacher gave me **advice** on how to write a thesis.”

(7) Yuushoosenshu ni **intabyuu-shite**, kiji o kaita.

“I wrote an article based on my **interview** with the champion player.”

(8) Kanojo wa shigoto o subete **kyanseru-shite**, ryokoo ni dekaketa.

“She **canceled** all the work and went on a trip.”

(9) Shuushoku shiken de wa mazu shorui shinsa ni **pasu-suru** koto da.

“For the employee examination, first you have to **pass** a section on document inspection.”

(10) Mondai o toita ato, machigai ga nai ka doo ka **chekku-suru**.

“After I solved a problem, I **checked** to make sure I didn’t make any mistakes.”

(11) Tanaka-san wa sensee kara shiryoo o 5bu zutsu **kopii-suru** yoo ni tanomareta.

“Mr. Tanaka was asked by his teacher to make five **copies** of each document.”

(12) Daigaku no jiyuu ni tsuite, hitokoto **komento-shite** moraemasu ka.

“Could you give a word of **comment** on the liberalization of universities?”

(13) Atarashii waza ni **charenji-suru**.

“I’m going to **challenge** the new technique.”

In (6)-(13) (cf., Sasaki, 2002), the katakanago-suru compound-verbs have become more idiomatic expressions rather than their equivalent kango-suru compound-verbs in modern Japanese. Based on

some research findings, katakanago-suru forms are for more informal expressions than kango-suru forms. For example, the katakanago compound-verb in (6) “*adobaisu-suru*” has almost completely transformed to kango compound-verb “*jogen-suru*” and became conventional usage. However, this does not mean “*jogen-suru*” is no longer in use but there are some different nuances of meaning and different intentions of speakers as implicated in the two compound-verbs. Also, in (7) “*intabyuu-suru*” is used more often than its equivalent kango compound “*shuzaihoomon-suru*”. In (8)-(10) the use of “*kyanseru-suru*”, “*pasu-suru*” or “*chekku-suru*” depends on the difference of the speaker’s age, sex or social status or intention. In fact, “*kyanseru-suru*” or “*torikesu*”, “*pasu-suru*” or “*gookaku-suru*”, and “*chekku-suru*” or “*kakunin-suru*” can be switched by the speaker in different situations, but the kango-suru is traditionally used for formal written documents for identifying a person’s name or rank title. In (11)-(13) the katakanago-suru compound-verbs like “*kopii-suru*”, “*komento-suru*” and “*charenji-suru*” are more commonly used than “*hukusha-suru*”, “*kaisetsu-suru*” and “*choosen-suru*”. Those expressions became some conventional Japanese usages for particular types of communication. As a consequence, some uses of katakanago-suru have been taken a firm hold on the national Japanese language. Although most of them are used only in informal speech or writing, they are still not truly established expressions in the standard national Japanese language. This paper argues that the use of the katakanago-suru forms reflects Japanese social and cultural aspects of language development. For example, with the adoption of Western lifestyle, katakanago-suru as in “*kisu-suru*” (give a person a kiss) is expected to replace kango-suru as in “*seppun-suru*”.

According to some views, when Japanese people visit United States here or meet some Americans or people from the United States, they usually would like to speak English including katakanago English if they can. They intend to show their consideration of respecting America and its people or to show their new or open mindedness (cf., Ishiwata, 1988). Because all speakers are rational actors, they consciously know what linguistic choices may best serve their communicative intentions (cf., Elster, 1986; Myers-Scotton, 1997; Liu, 2004). In terms of language transfer, like any other cross-cultural and/or cross-linguistic transfer, katakanago cannot change the Japanese national language overnight. Some usages of katakanago are not commonly accepted as normal Japanese expressions, but they are used only for some specific purposes or needs. In Japanese big cities, we can see katakanago of foreign words are used far more than necessarily in advertisements or commercials because businessmen intend to make products fascinating and being different from others in order to attract more consumers. Katanago-suru and Katakana-o-suru forms still continue to be produced highly in Japanese ordinary life. Katanago is not only borrowed from English or Western languages but also is changed as part of Japanese language. This language borrowing phenomenon is closely related to the adoption or borrowing of sociocultural, economic and linguistic aspects of other languages (cf., Liu, 2005).

3. Cross-Linguistic Influence in Learning Japanese Lexical Structure

One of the peculiar Japanese lexicalization patterns is the one in which a borrowed lexical item is combined with “suru” to produce either a transitive or an intransitive verb. As mentioned earlier, such borrowed lexical items are mostly from English and Chinese. For example, (a) *nihongo o* v.t.[*benkyoo-suru*], (b) *getsumatsu made ni* v.i.[*benkyoo-suru*], (c) *hoteru o* v.t.[*chekkuauto-suru*], and (d) *atarashii seekatsu e* v.i.[*sutaato-suru*]. (Note: v.t. = transitive verb, v.i. = intransitive verb). In (a) “benkyoo” is a borrowed noun from Chinese, and “benkyoo-suru” together functions as a transitive verb. In (b) “benkyoo-suru” together functions as an intransitive verb. In (c) “chekkuauto” is a borrowed noun from English, and “chekkuauto-suru” together functions as a transitive verb. In (d) “sutaato” is a borrowed noun from English, and “sutaato-suru” together functions as an intransitive verb. This pattern is called “verbalization” by means of using “suru” to make the borrowed noun into a verbal noun. This means that one part of speech of a borrowed lexical item is changed into another part of speech, either a transitive or an intransitive verb or both. What must be emphasized here is that without “suru” as part of the lexical unit, such a verbalization pattern would be impossible. This lexical combination produces a peculiar verbalization pattern in Japanese. The potential learning difficulty or confusion may be caused by another type of “suru” which functions as a transitive verb like other transitive verbs in Japanese.

(14) **Terebi-geemu o asobu. (Terebi-geemu o suru).*

“I play a TV game.”

(15) **Geemu o asobu. (Geemu o suru).*

“I play a game.”

(16) **Toranpu o asobu. (Toranpu o suru).*

“I play cards.”

(17) **Huttobooru o asobu. (Huttoboo o suru).*

“I play football.”

(18) **Piano o asobu. (Piano o ensoo-suru/hiku).*

“I play the piano.”

(19) **Gitaa o asobu. (Gitaa o ensoo-suru/hiku).*

“I play the guitar.”

(20) **Heya no sooji suru. (Heya no sooji o suru).*

“I clean my room.”

(21) **Heya o sooji o suru. (Heya o sooji-suru).*

“I clean my room.”

The representative learner errors for the study are from the translation tasks, the multiple choices, and the sentence-building exercises by some early stage American students learning Japanese. In (14)-(20) “suru” functions as an independent transitive verb like other transitive verbs in Japanese. In (14)-(17)

the English verb “play” is directly translated into Japanese violating the Japanese lexical structure for the specific objects like sports or games. In (18)-(19) the musical instrument cannot be used as the direct object of a transitive verb. In this case, “suru” is used as a light verb, but it cannot describe a definite meaning of action. Thus, “suru” must be attached to the headword “ensoo” to activate a verbalization pattern as “ensoo-suru”. While in English the items of sports, games and instruments are introduced as the direct object by the verb “play”, in Japanese only sports or games are introduced as specific objects by the single verb “suru”, for the instrument items are introduced as the direct object by the verbalization pattern “ensoo-suru” or single verb “hiku”. In other words, the instrument items themselves cannot be the direct object of “suru”. Part of the reason for the learner to use the Japanese “asobu” is that because the nouns of the direct object are katakanago, they are borrowed lexical items from English, and the learner may overgeneralize the English predicate-argument structure into the target production. In Japanese, when “suru” is translated into English, it not only means “do” but also is used with certain nouns as a fixed expression, such as *Arubaito o suru* (I do a part-time job), *Paateii o suru* (I have a party) and “*Goruhu o suru*” (I play golf). In a certain sense, we can say that such a usage of “suru” with certain nouns as its direct object becomes idiomatic. In (20) “suru” is a transitive verb and takes an object of kango phrase “*heya no sooji*”. In other words, this “sooji” is a noun and its function is the same as other object nouns of “suru”. Because the particle “no” functions as a possessive to link nouns, the object marker “o” is required. But in (21) the compound-verb “sooji-suru” is a transitive verb itself and requires an object noun “heya”. For American students learning Japanese at an early stage, these two types of “suru” may become confusing and cause some learning difficulty. These two types of “suru” as in “*heya o sooji-suru*” and “*heya no sooji o suru*” can be used interchangeably, depending on which part is being emphasized, in this case either the object being cleaned of the activity of cleaning itself. It is important to note that this “suru” is a lexical verb in Japanese rather than an auxiliary verb “do” in English (cf., Kageyama, 1999).

Based on the analysis of these learner errors, this paper recognizes two types of language transfer: intralingual transfer vs. interlingual transfer. Learner errors in producing the verbalization pattern using “suru” belong to intralingual transfer as in (20)-(21), and learner errors in using equivalent verbs from learners’ native language, rather than the required “suru” as an independent verb, belong to interlingual transfer as in (14)-(19). In Japanese classes, many American students have leaned Spanish, French or other languages at middle and/or high schools. Japanese is usually a third foreign language for them. Thus, it becomes necessary for us to understand foreign language learning beyond second or first foreign language learning from some new perspectives. Departing from the view that third language acquisition is the same as second language (L2) acquisition in terms of the general learning process, researchers claim that adult third language learners bring with them a wealth of knowledge and strategies that L2 learners do not. They argue that while adult third language learners make use of similar general cognitive capabilities to those of L2 or first foreign language learners, they bring to the

new learning process their prior second or foreign language learning experience and strategies. It has been recognized that the role of interlanguage in further language learning becomes crucial and relevant to a discussion of interlanguage transfer (cf., Wei, 2003, 2006).

This paper proposes a lexicon-driven approach to teaching Japanese lexicalization patterns. It argues that grammatical structure is driven by lexical structure and sufficient knowledge of a particular lexical structure determined by particular verbs is crucial to acquiring the target grammaticalization patterns. These two types of “suru” should be taught in terms of their respective lexical structure. For the Japanese verbalization pattern, learners should be taught that some borrowed lexical items become verbalized by means of “suru” as a functional verb and learn them as lexical units. For the verb “suru”, learners should be taught how to use “suru” as an individual verb taking some particular nouns as its direct objects.

4. Language Transfer in Second Language Lexical Structure

The nature of language transfer in foreign/L2 learning has been studied by researchers from various theoretical perspectives and remains to be explored. Beyond the earlier studies and some highly recognized traditional L2 acquisition research models and theories, some recent models have advanced this particular field of study from various perspectives, such as the Competition Model (CM) (MacWhinney, 1997), the Psycholinguistic Model of L2 vocabulary acquisition (PM) (Jiang, 2000), the Modified Hierarchical Model (MHM) (Pavlenko, 2009), and the Bilingual Lemma Activation Model (BLAM) (Wei, 2002, 2003, 2015).

MacWhinney (1987, 1989, 1992, 1996, 1997) proposes the CM to explore how both first language (L1) and L2 learning are governed by constructive, data-driven processes relying on universals of cognitive structure. From a functionalist and connectionist point of view, the CM attributes L1 and L2 development to learning and transfer. Most relevant to the issues of language transfer is the CM's claim that the learner's L1 and L2 differ in their degree of processing independence. The CM further claims that bilingual processing involves “competition” between the two languages in every level of processing, and it is the stronger “cues” of one language's lexicon, phonology or grammar that win the competition. This predicts that early L2 learners will transfer all aspects of their L1 that can possibly be transferred. This is because in early stages of L2 learning, learners' L1 cues are obviously stronger than the equivalent L2 cues. According to the CM, due to learners' parasitic L2 lexicon, phonology or grammar, language transfer is predicted to occur before L2 cues become strengthened and strong enough to win the competition. The CM provides a plausible way of exploring the nature and sources of language transfer in L2 learning.

Jiang (2000) proposes the PM to investigate what factors may influence L2 vocabulary acquisition and how L2 lexical information is represented in the mental lexicon. The PM offers a conceptual framework in which some unique features associated with L2 lexical development and representation

can be characterized and understood. This model suggests that in the early stages of L2 learning, L2 lexical representation in the mental lexicon is fundamentally different from that of L1. Semantic and syntactic specifications are highly integrated in L1 lexical representation (Levelt, 1998), but they are not so in L2 lexical representation (Jiang, 1999). This is because the established L1 lexical system and semantic specifications tend to be activated to block or interfere with Lexical development in L2 (Jiang, 2000).

Pavlenko (2009) proposes the MHM to explore cross-linguistic differences in the level of conceptual representation in the bilingual lexicon. This model assumes that bilingual “conceptual representations may be fully shared, partially overlapping or fully language-specific” (Pavlenko, 2009, p. 146). The recognition of language-specific lexical concepts has important implications for not only theories of bilingual processing but also the nature and sources of language transfer (Green, 1989; Pavlenko, 1997, 2003; Costa, 2005). The MHM further assumes that it is the degree of cross-linguistic conceptual equivalence that has different implications for language transfer in L2 learning.

Wei (2002, 2003, 2015) proposes the BLAM to explore that nature and activity of the bilingual mental lexicon in L2 learning. This model views language transfer as the creative activation of L1 knowledge at different levels of consciousness and the activation of highly automatized L1 knowledge in the absence of conscious control. One of the major assumptions underlying this model is that in L2 learning or interlanguage (IL) development, bilingual systems contact each other and language transfer is one of the outcomes caused by languages in contact. The BLAM recognizes that learners’ production or formalization of a given L2 may be affected not only by their L1 but also by the current of their IL. This implies that there is no need to redefine the term “language transfer” in order to interpret IL data. Following the above lines of thinking, this study suggests that due to the nature and activity of the bilingual mental lexicon in the process of L2 learning, language transfer does not work independently but accommodates to natural development processes (i.e., IL development). It assumes that such an accommodation is indispensable for successful L2 or foreign language acquisition and can be predicted as learners’ IL system moves in the direction of the target language system.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the nature of and structural constraints on the two types of “suru” in the Japanese lexicalization patterns in order to explore the sources of learner errors. Based on the analysis of some most commonly occurring learner errors, this paper proposes a lexicon-driven approach to “suru” in Japanese lexical structure. It reaches the following initial conclusions.

- 1) Lexicalization patterns are language-specific and drive language-specific grammatical constructions. Such lexicalization patterns must be understood and learned as they are.
- 2) Most grammatical errors are caused by learners’ lack of knowledge of the target language lexical structure and/or cross-linguistic influence from their L1, L2 or other language (i.e., language transfer

from other language(s) that learners know).

3) The two types of “suru” should be taught in terms of their respective lexical structure. For the Japanese verbalization pattern, learners should be taught that some borrowed lexical items become verbalized by means of “suru” as a functional verb and learn them as lexical units. For the verb “suru”, learners should be taught how to use “suru” as an independent verb which takes some particular nouns as its direct objects.

4) Lexical borrowings and their adaptation to the target language lexical structure should be taught and learned as fixed or idiomatic lexicalization patterns.

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