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# Error in the third person -s: a case study

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## Abstract

Language samples from four groups of Japanese learners of English are examined to identify a simple, but common and persistent grammatical error: failure to add -s to the third person singular of regular verbs in the present tense. The error is analysed in the light of theories of second language acquisition, differences between Japanese and English, and the structure of the Japanese junior high school syllabus. Consideration is given to the factors that will affect teachers of intermediate students in deciding whether to treat this error, and the nature of the procedures they might adopt to do so.

日本人英語学習者を対象に行った調査の結果、三単現の「s」のつけ忘れが多くの中級レベルの学習者に共通すること、また、学習者にとって三単現の「s」がなかなか習得できない文法課題であることが判明した。本稿では、日本人英語学習者に三単現 s の習得を困難にさせる要因について、(1) 第二言語習得理論、(2) 日本語と英語の相違、(3) 中学校学習指導要領、の3つの観点から考察を行う。この考察を踏まえ、教師側が留意すべき点と、この問題へのアプローチの可能性についても言及する。

## 1 Introduction

Whether we regard them as unfortunate obstacles to native-like accuracy, or as valuable stages in a learner's development, errors are an inevitable part of the experience of learning and teaching a foreign language. Attention to error - which is not the same, we should note from the outset, as correction of error - is an important part of the duties of the language teacher. In class, teacher-directed treatment of student errors may often take place on an ad-hoc basis, but there is much to be gained from a more systematic approach to the identification and analysis of learner performance, including errors. In this case study, I will examine a simple grammatical error commonly made by Japanese students - verb agreement for the present tense third person singular of regular verbs - in the light of their native language, their learning context, and of theories of second language acquisition.

## 2 Collection of samples

The language samples dealt with in this study were produced by Japanese high school and college students studying English in their native country. Sample 1 was taken from written work produced by a class of 42 third-year high-school students (referred to hereafter as S1), specialising in nursing, but learning English as a foreign language as part of their general

curriculum, including two fifty-minute periods per week of oral communication, for one year, in addition to other English classes throughout their three-year high school career. Sample 2 was taken from the written work of two classes of second-year junior college students (S2a: 17 students, S2b: 21 students), taking one ninety-minute period of composition per week. Sample 3 was taken from recorded interviews with two classes of first-year junior college students (S3a: 17 students, S3b: 18 students), taking two ninety-minute conversation classes per week; and sample 4 from similar interviews with two classes of second-year junior college students (S4a: 19 students, S4b: 19 students), also taking two ninety-minute conversation classes per week. Students in S2, S3 and S4 are all majoring in English at college level.

### 3 Errors and mistakes

Before beginning to analyse an error pattern - and, therefore, before using any such analysis to devise steps that will help students to correct or eliminate the error - we need first to be reasonably certain that what we are dealing with is in fact an error, and not simply a mistake. This is not necessarily an easy task. The latter, according to Brown (2000: 217), is 'a failure to utilize a known system correctly'. The possibility that a 'known system' might exist, for the language learner, as something significantly different than a 'taught system', will itself need some consideration later. The samples of student language examined in this study represent a synchronic snapshot rather than a diachronic trend: not a recurring pattern in the performance of a single learner, but a tendency to produce an L2 feature incorrectly, in the same way, in a significant proportion of a two different groups of students of similar age and experience, sharing the same L1. They also show a certain degree of self-correction, a characteristic of mistakes and not of errors, according to Brown, although in S1, this was mainly teacher-prompted or even teacher-imposed rather than genuinely spontaneous. Despite these caveats, though, the patterns that the students produced are clearly errors in the sense that they are 'noticeable deviation[s] from the adult grammar of a native speaker' and which therefore reveal 'a portion of the learner's competence in the target language'.

The error pattern dealt with here can be said to be 'overtly idiosyncratic', and open to plausible interpretation in context, when analysed using the procedure developed by Corder (1971; in Brown, 2000: 220-21). Both of Corder's principle analytic tools - translation, and reconstruction of the target sentence - will be applied in the examination that follows.

### 4 The third person -s error

Following a lesson on after-school activities, the S1 students were given a worksheet focusing on adverbs of frequency such as 'always', 'often' and 'never'. They were asked to complete a number of short speaking and writing tasks individually and in pairs, eventually writing two sentences about their partner's habits. The 42 members of the class produced a total of 66 sentences in this section, 21 of which failed to add '-s' to the verb for the third person singular in

the present simple tense: for example, \*'Satomi always eat dinner'. A further 16 sentences originally contained the verb '-s' error, and were then modified (either independently or in response to teacher-prompting) to give a correct form. Two sentences (by different students) gave 'studies' as 'studys', and the remaining 27 sentences made no verb '-s' error (see Appendix I, Table 1).

Japanese students are taught that English verbs take an additional '-s' for the third person singular of the present tense in their first year of formal English instruction. Traditionally, Japanese EFL teaching, in schools at least, tends to favour a deductive, teacher-fronted approach to the study of grammar. In this particular case, students will have been presented with the relevant rule and given some meta-language to deal with it: '三单現' ('san tan gen', basically an abbreviation of 'third-person singular present'). This could be said to represent, in Brown's terms, one particular 'known system'. The high rate of errors revealed by the S1 students (in their sixth year of formal English instruction) would seem to show, though, that many of them have not yet acquired this aspect of the language successfully.

The S2 students, with two more years of English instruction, also showed a tendency to make errors with the third-person -s. The students were asked to produce, in class, a 150-word essay on the subject of a currently popular actor. In one class (S2a) 12 students produced essays containing instances of third person singular verb agreement, containing a total of 21 instances of the present tense third person singular of regular verbs of which 17 were correct, and 4 showed an error in omitting the -s (including one self-corrected). In the second class (S2b), 7 students used the regular third person singular in their essays, giving a total of 14 instances, of which 10 were correct, and 4 contained third person -s errors. Combined results for S2 are shown in Appendix II, Table 2.

The S3 and S4 students were interviewed over a 90-minute period (in pairs for about ten minutes each), on a series of questions dealing with personal and family topics, of which the students were informed in advance. S3a students produced only 6 present tense third person singular regular verbs, including 3 correct usages and 3 errors; S3b students produced only 1 correct usage, 4 errors and 1 self-corrected error. S4a students produced 7 correct usages and 7 errors; and S4b students no correct usages but 5 errors. Combined results for S3 and S4 are shown in Appendix I, Tables 3 and 4.

How might we account for the persistence of such an apparently basic error at an intermediate level? I will explore three possible explanations: negative transfer from the students' L1; interlanguage development; and (in Sample 1) interference from activity design.

### 5.1 The role of the task

Although ostensibly part of a course in oral communication, the activity that produced the sentences in Sample 1 can be seen not so much to promote opportunities for communicative speaking and listening, as to serve functional and structural purposes, targeting practice in

descriptions of frequency and habit, and in the positioning of adverbs of time (a feature of Japanese that, in fact, more closely resembles English), respectively. Third-person verb-agreement was only implicit in the final section of the worksheet, in which students were asked to 'Write two sentences about your friend's habits', but it was not explicitly prioritised, and errors made in this area do not affect the transmission of meaning to any noticeable degree. The worksheet gave students one example third-person sentence - 'Keiko rarely takes a bath after school!' - but by this stage in the activity, they had already encountered four written samples of verbs in the first person (two examples, and two they had produced themselves), and possibly several more orally, if they had followed class instructions to discuss their habits with their partner, in addition to the instructions printed on the worksheet. It must surely be a possibility that some of the third-person -s errors found in Sample 1 are attributable to copying. It is worth noting that a number of students elected to copy the exclamation mark from the example (see Appendix I, Table 5), even when writing sentences whose content would not seem to warrant it. This might suggest that they were completing the task mechanically, rather than paying great attention to the overall meaning of their utterances.

This case cannot be made, though, for the -s errors occurring in Samples 2, 3 and 4, in which language forms to be used were determined by the communicative and contextual demands of writing an essay about a contemporary figure (S2) and talking about self, family and friends (S3 and S4). Sample 1, in which use of the third person singular simple present was prescribed, is rich in examples of the target form - 66 sentences - whereas the other samples are much less so: only 31 instances in the more than five hours of interviews that go to make up Samples 3 and 4, for example. The resulting small size of the samples suggests not only that some considerable caution is advised when making generalizations, but also that opportunities for learners to practice the third-person regular present simple in their output may be rather limited. Nevertheless, the persistent presence of the error (running at 23% in the written sample, and an aggregate 64% in the spoken samples) suggests that we must look beyond activity design alone to account for student difficulties with the third-person -s.

## 5.2 Verb inflection in Japanese and English

Japanese and English exhibit a number of significant structural differences, even in basic simple present sentences. The English sentence 'Satomi eats dinner' is formed in Japanese as follows:

<sup>1</sup>[里美] <sup>2</sup>[は] <sup>3</sup>[夕食] <sup>4</sup>[を] <sup>5</sup>[食べます]

<sup>1</sup>[Satomi] <sup>2</sup>[wa] <sup>3</sup>[yushoku] <sup>4</sup>[o] <sup>5</sup>[tabemasu]

<sup>1</sup>[Satomi] <sup>2</sup>[*topic marker*] <sup>3</sup>[dinner] <sup>4</sup>[*object marker*] <sup>5</sup>[eat]

Among other differences, such as word order (SVO in English, SOV in Japanese), the frequent omission of subjects and subject pronouns in Japanese, and the use of postpositional particles to mark topics, objects etc, it can be seen that, in Japanese, verbs do not inflect to agree with their subject. The English 'I study' translates as '私は勉強します' (watashi wa benkyo shimasu) and 'she

studies' as '彼女は勉強します' (kanojo wa benkyo shimasu). A strong application of the theory of negative transfer, or interference - 'the use of a native-language pattern or rule which leads to an error or inappropriate form in the target language' (Richards and Schmidt, 2002: 294) - might lead us to expect that Japanese students, in producing simple present sentences, would encounter particular difficulties in at least two major errors. One is word order, but this is an area where, in fact, Japanese learners of English tend *not* to have trouble. Rutherford (1987: 44) reminds us that

where L1 and L2 have different orders we seldom find the L2 learner resorting to the basic word order of his native language, perhaps because ample evidence for establishing the correct L2 order is available from the very onset of the learning experience for the new language in question.

None of the S1 students produced sentences like \*'Satomi dinner eats'; but, as we have seen, many students in all four samples made errors in the second major area of L1/L2 difference: subject-verb agreement.

### 5.3 Developmental sequences and learner interlanguage

Third person singular verb agreement is a simple, regular, and easily stated rule of English grammar. The *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (1990: 446-47), for example, deals with it only very briefly, explaining that:

Regular verbs have the following forms:

- A base form EG *walk*
- An 's' form EG *walks...*

The 's' form is used for the third person singular of the present tense.

Simplicity is also a defining characteristic of the treatment of this rule as it appears in what will be, for most Japanese learners, their first formal encounter with the grammar of written and spoken English, the junior high school textbook. Appendix II shows the first occurrences of the third-person -s rule in four textbooks currently approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) for use in junior high school English classes. All four textbooks represent the first year of a three-year English course for students aged between 11 and 14. As can be seen, the glosses vary in the amount of detail that they give, and could in fact be represented (as in the descending order given in the appendix) on a spectrum with *New Horizon* more deductive, relying most heavily on grammatical explanation and metalanguage, and *Sunshine* more inductive, relying on analogy with the structure and usage of the target students' L1.

However, despite this apparent simplicity (which may in itself be deceptive: none of the four explanations, for example, mentions that modal verbs like 'can' do not modify in this way), evidence from research into the acquisition of L1 English by children suggests that this grammatical morpheme is acquired particularly late in their linguistic development; see, for

example, the classic study by Roger Brown (1973), cited by Lightbown and Spada (1999: 5). H. D. Brown (2000: 69) suggests that, although the evidence has not been unchallenged, there are indications from research that morpheme acquisition order in L2 English does resemble that experienced by native speakers learning their mother tongue. A consequence of this 'natural order argument', Thornbury writes (1999: 19), is that 'attempts to subvert the natural order by sticking rigidly to a traditional grammar syllabus and insisting on immediate accuracy are foredoomed'. This might sound a cautionary note in any attempt to diagnose and treat the students' error. Judged in terms of a natural order of acquisition, the Japanese junior high school English syllabus may well seem to be a futile exercise in subversion. Lightbown and Spada's abridged version of Brown's L1 findings puts the third person singular simple present '-s' late in the sequence of development (eighth out of nine morphemes cited). As the four textbooks cited above show, Japanese junior high school students are introduced to it after approximately 6 months of English study, after plural '-s', copula and articles, but *before* present progressive '-ing', regular and irregular past forms, and the possessive '-s', all morphemes which precede it in the supposedly 'natural' order. Seen in this light, their failure to have mastered it accurately some four or five years later might not, in fact, be an aberration. Instead, it may simply be a stage not yet reached; in other words, a form taught but not yet mastered. In one particular model of second language acquisition, that of Krashen and Terrell (1983), these students' awareness of the theoretical existence of the concept of the 'san tan gen' might be considered as 'learned', rather than 'acquired' knowledge.

Alternatively, the third person -s error may be viewed as a form of interlanguage. The development of a learner's interlanguage need not resemble a straightforward journey towards native-like accuracy, through the progressive accumulation of entities, and elimination of errors. Instead, as Brown (2000: 228) points out, it is possible to identify in learner language a stage 'characterized by some "backsliding", in which the learner seems to have grasped a rule or principle and then regresses to some previous stage'. Although we cannot have access to the whole of their five, six or seven years of English-learning experience, it is certainly possible that many of the students sampled here may have *seemed* to have mastered this point - a 'known system' - at various stages, through initial teaching, review and testing, without having in fact truly acquired it.

## 6 Fundamental considerations in dealing with learner errors

As we have seen, then, not only is subject-verb inflection a linguistic feature of English alien to Japanese speakers, it is also one believed to be acquired relatively late by all learners of English, as either L1 or L2, even if it is taught and ostensibly 'learned' early in the Japanese junior high school classroom. It is not a feature of the language specifically targeted by any of the activities sampled here. Furthermore, errors made in this morpheme impede neither the transmission of meaning nor, for the most part, the successful completion of the tasks involved.

All of these factors have to be taken into consideration when devising teaching strategies to address this particular error. One potential strategy is, conceivably, not to treat the error at all. One rationale behind such an approach might include a strong adherence to the theory of developmental sequences, suggesting that intermediate students may not yet be ready to acquire this particular morpheme accurately. Evidence from a number of error analyses and morpheme acquisition studies (many of which are summarised by Ellis, 1990: 136-141) suggests that there are significant limits to the efficacy of instruction to alter these sequences. It is also possible that some curriculum designs may be aiming primarily at fluency rather than accuracy, and therefore might not wish to place too much emphasis on correcting this kind of error. S1 students were following a course in oral communication, among the aims for which - as promulgated by the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT, 2003: II.II.1) - are the fostering of 'a positive attitude toward communication' using 'basic sentence patterns and grammatical items that are required for communicative activities', but also noting that 'analyses and explanations of language elements should be minimized'. S3 and S4 students, though, were taking college-level courses in conversation, and S2 in composition, in which toleration of 'noticeable deviation[s] from the adult grammar of a native speaker' would surely not be acceptable.

In fact, further arguments both linguistic and practical also exist, in favour of intervention to treat this error. The prevention of fossilization, the process 'in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language' (Richards and Schmidt, 2002: 211), must be one such important consideration. Further practical imperatives will be, in certain teaching situations, the need to prepare students for examinations in which accuracy certainly is a priority, or for future employment or study abroad in which inaccuracy may be less tolerated than in general conversation. Assuming, then, that the teacher has decided that the error does need to be treated, what form might such treatment take?

## **7 Refocusing on form to treat the third person -s error**

Rutherford (quoted in 5.2 above) sees exposure to early and 'ample' evidence of English word order as a possible contributory factor to the general avoidance of learner error in that area. Japanese junior high syllabuses do, as we have seen, introduce English regular third person verb agreement early, or perhaps prematurely. It is less clear whether subsequent learner exposure in junior high, high school and college English syllabuses actually provides learners with 'ample', appropriate or even sufficient evidence for effective acquisition of this particular morpheme, and this may be a fruitful and necessary area for further study. But even without a complete overview of the learning environment and experiences of the groups of students, it has been possible, as we have seen, to identify why an error may continue to occur beyond the initial teaching of a particular morpheme. This identification can form a basis for remedial teaching and practice.

The nature of the error itself also suggests the nature of the remedial strategies that will



be needed to deal with it. The circumstances under which the third-person -s error could actually result in an error of meaning - a failure of communication - are, I think, very limited. One such possibility is confusion, in speech, between the indicative and imperative mood, in which a third-person -s error declarative sentence (for example, '\*Satomi go to bed') is interpreted as a command ('Satomi, go to bed'). It might conceivably be possible to devise an activity that would make use of this situation, but it would probably be rather contrived, and would fail Thornbury's (1999: 26) criterion of 'ease'. A more logical approach would be to take advantage of the 'teachability' of this particular grammar point - which is also perhaps one reason for its early appearance in the Japanese junior high school English syllabus - to construct a series of review exercises which would supplement early, traditionally more deductive teaching with a more active approach, not simply inductive consciousness-raising, but actually requiring students to diagnose and correct their own errors and (re)construct rules, focusing less on a supposedly acquired-because-taught 'known system', and more on a continuously evolving 'learning system'.

## 8 Conclusion

As we have seen, the third-person verb agreement error may be attributable to a number of factors, including negative transfer from the students' L1, their development of a learner interlanguage, the developmental sequences of second language acquisition, and (in S1, if not in the other three samples) contextual factors including the nature of the task that produced the error itself. It is not an easy task to place an error firmly and solely within any single category - a combination of factors may be responsible in many cases - and it may also be misleading to assume that all learners are making these errors for the same reasons, even in apparently relatively homogenous groups of students. It is possible to argue that because, as we have seen above, the error does not seriously affect the communication of meaning in any of the given tasks, the decision on whether and/or how to deal with it depends to some extent on our pedagogic goals: that is, on the balance that we wish to strike between accuracy and fluency of student output. However, as we have seen, though, there may be good practical reasons to promote accuracy and treat errors, even in those cases where our principal pedagogic goal is fluency and, in this case, a true assessment of the long-term effectiveness of any remedial teaching procedures adopted to treat the error will have to take both of these goals into account. It is clear, though, that there is a need for such treatment at the intermediate level: although third-person verb agreement is *taught* in the first year of junior high school, we should not assume that it is necessarily *learned* there.

**Appendix I****Table 1 - Sample 1**

Verb '-s' correct	27	41%
Verb '-s' error	21	32%
Non-verb '-s' error	2	3%
Verb '-s' error, modified	16	24%
Total	66	100%

**Table 2 - Sample 2**

Verb '-s' correct	27	77%
Verb '-s' error	7	20%
Verb '-s' error, modified	1	3%
Total	35	100%

**Table 3 - Sample 3**

Verb '-s' correct	4	33%
Verb '-s' error	7	58%
Verb '-s' error, modified	1	8%
Total	12	100%

**Table 4 - Sample 4**

Verb '-s' correct	7	37%
Verb '-s' error	12	63%
Verb '-s' error, modified	0	0%
Total	19	100%

**Table 5 - Sample 1**

		! included	% including !
Verb '-s' correct	27	3	11%
Verb '-s' error	21	4	19%
Non-verb '-s' error	2	2	100%
Verb '-s' error, modified	16	5	31%
total	66	14	21%

**Appendix II**

Introduction to the present tense third person singular of regular verbs in four current Japanese junior high school English textbooks

Textbook	Unit (total) Page (total)	Sample sentences	Gloss	Gloss (my translation)
<i>New Horizon English Course 1</i> (2002)	6 (11) 50 (111)	I like Japan. Becky likes Japan.	主語がI, you以外で単数の場合、動詞にはsまたはesがつく。	When the subject is other than 'I' or 'you' and singular, 's' or 'es' is added to verbs.
<i>New Crown English Series 1</i> (2002)	6 (9) 50 (107)	I like dogs. She likes dogs.	自分や相手以外の人(もの)の状態や動作について説明するときの言い方。	Expression used when explaining the situation or action of someone/something other than oneself or the addressee.
<i>Total English New Edition 1</i> (2004)	3 (11) 31 (119)	My mother works in a library.	自分や相手以外の人について「～します」と言う。	When saying that someone other than oneself or the addressee 'does something'.
<i>Sunshine English Course 1</i> (2003)	6 (12) 48 (115)	I like oranges. Nancy likes oranges too.	「～さんは・・・します」と言うとき。	When saying that '[third-person honorific] does something'.

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