

-Te iru in L2 Japanese in an L1 Romanian Setting. A Pilot Study

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Abstract

This paper investigates the learning of the Japanese aspect marker *-te iru* by native speakers of Romanian. The results of a pilot study based on a comprehension task show that intermediate learners of L2 Japanese with L1 Romanian interpret *-te iru* target-like, with one exception: the habitual interpretation, especially with activities. Non-facilitative transfer effects are found mainly in the activities condition, where no clear distinction is made between the progressive and the habitual values of the *-te iru* predicates. I argue that the higher percentage of habitual responses given by the L2 learners is indicative of L1 transfer. In spite of the fact that L1 Romanian lacks an overt marker of the progressive, the acquisition of the *-te iru* marker in L2 Japanese is affected by transfer from the native language. The results also reveal that intermediate learners have acquired the resultative value of *-te iru*, in support of the view that it is easier to learn a property that is absent in L1.

Keywords: *-te iru*, aspect marker, L2 Japanese, L1 Romanian

Introduction

Previous research on the aspect marker *-te iru* in L2 Japanese has focused on settings in which the native language of the learners was English, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, German, Russian, Bulgarian, and Ukrainian,¹ but to the best of my knowledge, no studies have looked into the learning of this aspect marker by native speakers of Romanian.

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the learning of *-te iru* in L2 Japanese in an L1 Romanian setting. Data from a new learning context can

¹ Gabriele–Hughes 2015: 271–300.

contribute to a better understanding of the role of the native language in the acquisition of aspect.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the main properties of the aspect marker *-te iru*, with a focus on its core semantic value and on the way in which this value interacts with the aspectual value of the predicate with which the marker co-occurs. The description is limited to the data directly relevant to the experimental study presented in Section 4. Section 3 summarises the main findings reported in previous studies on the acquisition of *-te iru* in L2 Japanese. Section 4 includes my own pilot study on *-te iru* in L2 Japanese in a learning setting in which the L1 of the learners is Romanian.

I. Main values of *-te iru*

The vast majority of studies assume that *-te iru* is ambiguous: it can have both a progressive (see 1 below) and a resultative/experiential reading (as in 2 and 3).^{2 3 4 5}

- (1) Ken ga utatte iru.
Ken NOM sing-te be-PRES
'Ken is singing'.
- (2) Mado ga aite iru.
window NOM open-te be-PRES
'The window is open'.
- (3) Ken wa hon o san-satsu kaite iru.
Ken TOP book ACC three-CL write-te be-PRES
'Ken wrote three books'.

The presence of certain adverbs, such as *ima* (now) or *mada* (yet),⁶ favours the resultative interpretation. Fujii,⁷ for example, notices that the resultative

² Ogihara 1998: 15.

³ Ogihara 1992: 2.

⁴ Shirai–Kuroko 1998: 253.

⁵ Shirai 2000: 327.

⁶ Ogihara 1998: 11.

⁷ Ogihara 1998: 15.

value of *-te iru* is possible in the presence of adverbs of the type *ima*, while the experiential value is obtained with adverbs that locate the situation in the past, such as *kyonen* (last year).

According to Shirai⁸ and Sugita,⁹ *-te iru* can also have a habitual value, illustrated in (4) below. This reading arises even in the absence of quantificational adverbs, as long as the predicate denotes an event and the sentence contains a ‘relevant discourse topic’.¹⁰

- (4) Ken wa saikin kuruma de gakkoo e itte iru
 Ken TOP these days car INSTR school to go-te be-PRES
 ‘Ken goes to school by car these days’.

The preference of all of these values depends on the aspectual properties of the predicate. When associated with activities that denote durative atelic situations, the progressive interpretation prevails; in (5a) the sentence is preferentially interpreted as denoting a situation that is ongoing at speech time. Activities can also have a habitual value, especially in the presence of habitual adverbs (5b).

- (5) Taroo wa umibe wo hashitte iru.
 Taro TOP beach LOC run-te be-PRES
 (a) ‘Taro is running on the beach’. (progressive)
 (b) ‘Taro runs on the beach’. (habitual)

More marginally, an activity predicate with *-te iru* can also have a resultative/experiential value.^{11 12 13 14} For example, the sentence in (6) can be interpreted as either progressive or resultative.

- (6) Ken ga ofuro de nete iru.
 Ken NOM bathroom LOC sleep-te be-PRES
 (a) ‘He is sleeping in the bathroom’. (progressive)
 (b) ‘He is asleep in the bathroom’. (resultative)

⁸ Shirai 2000: 333.

⁹ Sugita 2009: 245.

¹⁰ Kiyota 2008: 206.

¹¹ Ogiwara 1998: 15.

¹² Ogiwara 1999: 50.

¹³ Shirai 2000: 334–336.

¹⁴ Sugita 2008: 346.

With accomplishments, too, the preferred interpretation is the progressive one. However, with accomplishments, as well, *-te iru* can also have a habitual and a resultative value, as in (7b) and (7c).

- (7) Kare wa hon wo kaite iru.
 he TOP book ACC write-te be-PRES
 (a) ‘He is writing a book’. (progressive)
 (b) ‘He writes a book’. (habitual)
 (c) ‘He has written a book’. (resultative)

With achievements, however, the resultative interpretation is the preferred one.^{15 16} The sentence in (8) can have three interpretations: the preferred one is the resultative, but it can also have a habitual or a progressive interpretation.

- (8) Steve wa kyōkai de kekkon shite iru.
 Steve TOP church LOC wedding do-te be-PRES
 (a) ‘Steve is married in church’. (resultative)
 (b) ‘Steve is getting married in church’. (progressive)
 (c) ‘Steve marries in church’. (habitual)

With the resultative value, the predicate associated with *-te iru* denotes a situation that is the result of a past event. Certain studies consider this the perfective aspectual value,¹⁷ illustrated in (9).

- (9) Kaeru ga shin-de iru.
 frog NOM die-te be-PRES
 ‘The frog is dead’.

Japanese has a special class of predicates that I will call *clothing verbs*, such as *haku* (wear) as in *kutsushita-wo haku* (put on socks). These have been analysed as accomplishments by some linguists,¹⁸ whereas others argue that they have ambiguous behaviour: they behave like achievements or like accomplishments.¹⁹ When the focus is on the action of putting on

¹⁵ Shirai 2000: 341.

¹⁶ Sugita 2008: 346.

¹⁷ Sugita 2008: 347.

¹⁸ Hara 2016: 46.

¹⁹ Shirai 2000: 351.

clothes, the verb behaves like an accomplishment and triggers the progressive reading. When the focus is on the punctual change of state, it behaves like an achievement; therefore, the interpretation is resultative. These verbs, in combination with *-te iru*, can have a progressive, a habitual, and a resultative value.

- (10) Kare wa kyōshitsu de jīnzu wo haite iru.
 he TOP classroom LOC jeans ACC dress-te be-PRES
 (a) ‘He is putting on the jeans in the classroom’. (progressive)
 (b) ‘He wears jeans in classroom’. (habitual)
 (c) ‘He is dressed in jeans in classroom’. (resultative)

Kindaichi²⁰ noticed that stative predicates (*jōtai dooshi*), which express existence (such as *iru* [to be] [+ animate] and *aru* [to be] [- animate]), are incompatible with the *-te iru* marker.

Based on the preferences of Japanese native speakers, the interpretation of *-te iru* can be summarised as follows.²¹

	Activities	Accomplish-ments	Achieve-ments	Clothing verbs
Progressive	+	+		+
Habitual				
Resultative			+	+

Table 1. The interaction of *-te iru* with aspectual classes of predicates. Preferred readings.

II. Aspect in L2 Japanese

The vast majority of studies on the L2 learning of *-te iru* focus on L1 English settings. They investigate the learning of the resultative and the progressive interpretations of this aspectual marker, often in relation to the aspect

²⁰ Ogihara 1999: 11.

²¹ The table does not include state predicates since the pilot study did not include sentences with state predicates.

hypothesis.^{22 23 24 25 26 27 28} There are four main predictions that derive from the aspect hypothesis:

- a) learners initially tend to use past/perfective markers with achievements and accomplishments; later, the use of these markers is extended to activities and states;
- b) for languages that have the progressive aspect, the marking of the progressive starts with activity predicates and is then extended to accomplishments and achievements;
- c) learners rarely incorrectly overextend the progressive marking to statives;²⁹ and
- d) in languages in which the distinction between perfective and imperfective is morphologically marked, the perfective past is produced before the imperfective past; the imperfective is used initially for states and activities and is then extended to accomplishments and achievements.

Additional factors, such as L1 transfer, input data, the formation of prototypes, instruction, and universal constraints, can explain why some of the results do not follow the acquisitional patterns predicted by the aspect hypothesis.

Bardovi-Harlig³⁰ considers that there are two major approaches to the form-meaning correlation: one that correlates the morphological form with the semantic types of verbs (the across category analysis) and another one that establishes which semantic types of verbs are marked by which morphological form (the within category analysis). She notices that less prototypical meanings of tense-aspect markers are more difficult to acquire. Shirai³¹ states that ‘if the learners are exposed to less prototypical meaning first, it might have a positive effect on the acquisition of prototypical meaning’. The aspect hypothesis can be accounted for in terms of prototypicality and frequency in the input: ‘prototypical semantic notions may be correlated

²² Li–Shirai 2000: 129–148.

²³ Shirai 2000: 358.

²⁴ Shirai 2002: 44.

²⁵ Shirai–Kuroko 1998: 252.

²⁶ Martelle 2011: 10.

²⁷ Andersen–Shirai 1996: 533.

²⁸ Mc Manus 2013: 299.

²⁹ Shirai 1991: 67.

³⁰ Salaberry–Shirai 2002: 10, 129–149.

³¹ Salaberry–Shirai 2002: 15.

with the frequency with which some forms may be reflected in language use'.³² When beginning to learn the L2, learners tend to use the verbal morphology in the same biased way as they were exposed to in the input.³³ As the learners' level of proficiency increases, the association between the lexical aspect and verbal morphology strengthens.

Sugaya and Shirai³⁴ probed into the possible effects of L1 transfer on the patterns predicted by the aspect hypothesis. They questioned whether the predicted association between *-te iru* and the progressive interpretation would emerge in the case of L2 learners whose L1 lacks overt progressive marking. The L2 Japanese learners that took part in the study had English, German, or a Slavic language as their L1. The results confirmed, for the learners of lower proficiency, the prediction of the aspect hypothesis related to the early association of the *-te iru* aspect marker with activity verbs, but only for the learners whose L1 has an overt progressive morpheme. Other studies have revealed that the resultative value of *-te iru* was more difficult than the progressive one when it was not available in the L1 of the learners.³⁵

Pedagogical intervention in the development of L2 learners of tense-aspect morphology could have an important effect on the acquisition tense-aspect patterns.³⁶ Ishida,³⁷ for example, investigated the role of formal instruction on the learning of the aspectual marker *-te iru* in L2 Japanese. Unlike previous studies, Ishida provides evidence against the predictions of the aspect hypothesis. The participants did not find the resultative interpretation of this aspectual marker more difficult than the progressive interpretation. The author accounted for the results in terms of order of explicit teaching of the two values of *-te iru*. In the textbooks that were used with these L2 learners, the resultative value was introduced four months earlier than the progressive.

Other studies have noticed that L2 learners sometimes need to unlearn certain aspects of their L1³⁸ 'in the absence of explicit input that indicates which properties of the first language (L1) are ruled out by the L2 grammar'³⁹ and consider that the acquisition of a new semantic representation is easier than the preemption of the existing L1 representation. The learners will have to rule out some of their L1 semantic representations; for instance,

³² Salaberry–Shirai 2002: 4.

³³ Salaberry–Shirai 2002: 92.

³⁴ Sugaya–Shirai 2007: 19.

³⁵ Shirai–Kuroono 1998: 264.

³⁶ Salaberry–Shirai 2002: 15.

³⁷ Ishida 2004: 377.

³⁸ Gabriele 2009: 372.

³⁹ Gabriele 2009: 372.

the resultative interpretation associated with achievements will have to be ruled out by the Japanese natives who learn English.⁴⁰

Many of the studies mentioned above revealed several factors that can determine the acquisition route of the Japanese *-te iru* marker. Under certain conditions, learners can deviate from the predicted patterns of the aspect hypothesis due L1 transfer, proficiency level, input/interaction, and instructional effects.^{41 42}

III. The Study

1. Aim and predictions

The aim of this pilot study is to investigate the learning of the *-te iru* aspect marker by L2 Japanese students whose native language is Romanian. Romanian does not have a morphological marker for the progressive aspect.⁴³ It uses the simple present or the imperfective past in contexts where Japanese uses *-te i*. The Romanian sentence in (11) below can refer to a situation that is on-going at speech time (i.e., it can have a progressive interpretation), but it can also denote a habitual situation. Importantly, a simple present or an imperfective past does not have a perfective value (with the exception of special written registers).

- (11) Copilul se joacă în parc.
 child-the refl plays-PRES in park
 a) ‘The child is playing in the park’.
 b) ‘The child plays in the park’.

If L2 learning is subject to L1 transfer during the early stages,⁴⁴ it is likely that *-te iru* in Japanese could represent a vulnerability for the Romanian learners. For example, we would expect them to associate the semantic representation of the Romanian present simple with the one of a Japanese

⁴⁰ Gabriele 2009: 394.

⁴¹ Salaberry–Shirai 2002: 15.

⁴² Sugaya–Shirai 2007: 9.

⁴³ This is the standardly assumed view, but see Avram (2003) and Stoica (2015) for a different point of view.

⁴⁴ Schwartz–Sprouse 1996: 41.

present tense sentence with *-te iru* (for example, they might make errors of the type illustrated in [12]).

- (12) Ken wa ima sushi o taberu.
Ken TOP now sushi ACC eat-PRES
Intended: 'Ken is eating sushi now'.

The Romanian learners are expected to interpret the *-te iru* predicates as progressive and habitual but not as resultative. Gabriele's⁴⁵ view, on the other hand, predicts that the resultative interpretation of a present tense sentence should be acquirable, given the fact that the learning of this value would not require preemption in an L1 Romanian learning setting.

The main questions that are addressed in the study are the following.

- a) Do Romanian learners of L2 Japanese show the preferred associations between aspectual classes and *-te iru* predicted by the aspect hypothesis?
- b) Are their early associations affected by L1 transfer?

2. Participants

Fourteen L2 learners of Japanese took part in the study. They were all native speakers of Romanian (age range: 20–30 years). They were all university students (language students) at the University of Bucharest. They had all been studying Japanese for three years at testing time. Their proficiency level was B1 (N3),⁴⁶ and they had all been formally taught the values of *-te iru* prior to the test. A control group of 14 native speakers of Japanese also took part in the study.

⁴⁵ Gabriele 2009: 377.

⁴⁶ The Japanese Language Proficiency Test has five levels: N1, N2, N3, N4, and N5. The lowest level is N5 and the most advanced level is N1. N3 is an intermediate level. Compared to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, N5 and N4 would correspond to A1 and A2 (beginners), N3 to B while N2 and N1 correspond to the C level.

3. Task

In order to answer the questions in Section 4.1, I used a comprehension task that included 24 test sentences balanced across four conditions. In all the sentences, the predicate was a present tense one.

a) *-te iru* with activities (the same example as in [6] above, presented here with all of the readings):

- (13) Ken ga ofuro de nete imasu.
 Ken NOM bathroom LOC sleep-te be-PRES.POL
 ‘Ken is sleeping in the bathroom’. (progressive)
 ‘Ken sleeps in the bathroom’. (habitual)
 ‘Ken is asleep in the bathroom’. (resultative)

b) *-te iru* with achievements:

- (14) Steve wa kyōkai de kekkon shite imasu.
 Steve TOP church LOC marry do-te be-PRES.POL
 ‘Steve is getting married in the church’. (progressive)
 ‘Steve has got married in the church’. (resultative)
 ‘Steve gets married in the church’. (habitual)

c) *-te iru* with accomplishments:

- (15) Kare wa niwa de sakana no e wo kaite imasu.
 he TOP garden LOC fish GEN picture ACC paint-te be-PRES.POL
 ‘He is painting a picture of a fish in the garden’. (progressive)
 ‘He paints a picture of a fish in the garden’. (habitual)
 ‘He has painted a picture of a fish in the garden’. (resultative)

d) *-te iru* with predicates that refer to putting on/taking off clothes:

- (16) Watash wa kyōshitsu de jīnzu wo haite imasu.
 I TOP room LOC jeans ACC wear-te be-PRES.POL
 ‘I am wearing jeans in the classroom’. (progressive)
 ‘I wear jeans in the classroom’. (habitual)
 ‘I am dressed with jeans in the classroom’. (resultative)

The participants received a Google form questionnaire, without a specific time limit. They had to choose one of three comprehension variants, as in (17), that is they were required to choose the answer that correctly explained the meaning of the sentence, in accordance with the aspectual properties of the predicate and the contribution of *-te iru*.

- (17) Kare wa kawa de oyoide imasu.
 he TOP river LOC swim -te be-PRES.POL
- a) The sentence refers to a temporary action, ongoing at the moment of speech.
 b) The sentence refers to a general/habitual situation.
 c) The sentence refers to a completed situation, with a result in the present.

4. Results

The overall results showed that the L2 learners chose the progressive interpretation more often than the habitual and the resultative ones. The results are summarised in Table 2.

Group	Progressive	Resultative	Habitual
L2 learners	48.8% (n=164)	25.9% (n=87)	25.3% (n=85)
Japanese native speakers	58.3% (n=196)	27.7% (n=93)	13.9% (n=47)

Table 2. Overall results.

The results of an ANOVA test showed that, overall, the number of progressive, habitual, and resultative interpretations given by the intermediate students who learn Japanese as L2 differs significantly ($F [2.26] = 11.2, p < .001$). A series of post-hoc tests showed that, overall, the Romanian students chose the progressive interpretation ($M = 11.7, SD = 3.62$) more often than the habitual one ($M = 6.07, SD = 2.84; t [13] = 3.43, p = .004$ [two-tailed]) and more often than the resultative one ($M = 6.21, SD = 2.15; t [13] = 3.93, p = .001$ [two-tailed]). The difference between the ‘habitual’ and the ‘resultative’ responses was not significant ($t [13] = -0.15, p = .88$ [two-tailed]).

The comparison of the overall results of the L2 learners with those of native speakers of Japanese revealed a significant difference only with

respect to the ‘habitual’ responses; the number of these responses given by the L2 students ($M = 6.07$; $SD = 2.84$) was significantly higher than those given by the natives’ ($M = 3.36$; $SD = 0.57$; $t[14] = 26$, $p = .008$ [two-tailed]).

The analysis of the results by predicate class showed that with activities, the L2 learners gave practically only ‘progressive’ and ‘habitual’ responses. The difference between these response types, however, was not significant; they did not show a clear preference for either value (progressive or habitual): $t(13) = 1.69$, $p > .05$ (two-tailed). The native speakers, on the other hand, gave a significantly higher number of ‘progressive’ than of ‘habitual’ responses: $t(13) = 5.21$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed). The comparison of the two groups further revealed that the L2 learners gave significantly more ‘habitual’ responses in the activities condition than the native speakers (37% compared to 12%): $t(26) = 2.71$, $p = .01$ (two-tailed).

Another difference between the two groups of participants is related to the resultative value. This value represents 17% for the natives, while the L2 Japanese students gave only 1% resultative responses for the activity predicates associated with *-te iru*. We can safely conclude that these participants practically do not assign a resultative interpretation to activities with *-te iru*. The only answer of this type was found with the verb *neru* (to sleep), which in Japanese is ambiguous between an activity and an achievement.

No significant difference was found with accomplishments, achievements, or put on/take off clothes predicates; the results of the two groups are similar, suggesting that the intermediate learners and the native speakers assign a similar interpretation to *-te iru* with these classes of predicates, as can be seen in Tables 3, 4, and 5 below.

Group	Progressive	Resultative	Habitual
L2 learners	82%	0%	18%
Native speakers of Japanese	90%	4%	6%

Table 3. Results. *-te iru* with accomplishments.

Group	Progressive	Resultative	Habitual
L2 learners	14%	80%	6%
Native speakers of Japanese	28%	64%	8%

Table 4. Results. *-te iru* with achievements.

Group	Progressive	Resultative	Habitual
L2 learners	36%	22%	42%
Native speakers of Japanese	44%	26%	30%

Table 5. Results. *-te iru* with put on/take off clothes verbs.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this pilot study showed that the intermediate learners of L2 Japanese associated *-te iru* primarily with the progressive value, which indicates that at this proficiency level they treat *-te iru* as a marker of the progressive viewpoint. They gave the highest number of ‘progressive’ responses with activities and accomplishments, in accordance with the predictions of the aspectual hypothesis. However, they did not differ from native speakers in this respect (i.e., they did not show a stronger bias). Their responses differed from those given by native speakers only with respect to the habitual interpretation. The significantly higher percentage of habitual responses is indicative of L1 transfer.

On the other hand, the intermediate learners did not differ from the control group of native speakers with respect to the resultative value of *-te iru* with achievements. This indicates that as early as this proficiency level, they have acquired the resultative interpretation of achievements with *-te iru*. They gave a relatively high number of ‘resultative’ responses only in this condition, whereas in all the other conditions the ‘competition’ was between ‘progressive’ and ‘habitual’ responses. These results support the view according to which it is easier to learn a property that is absent in L1. A Romanian simple present tense sentence can be interpreted as progressive and habitual but not as resultative. Non-facilitative transfer effects are found mainly in the activities condition, where no clear distinction was made between the progressive and the habitual values of the *-te iru* predicates. However, achievements with *-te iru* are preferentially interpreted as resultative (a value that is not found with the Romanian simple present), in accordance with the properties of L2 Japanese.

In spite of the fact that in the learning setting that I investigated L1 Romanian lacks an overt marker of the progressive in finite clauses, the data

showed that the acquisition of the *-te iru* marker in L2 Japanese was affected by transfer from the native language.

The data have also revealed good knowledge of *-te iru* at this proficiency level, where L1 transfer effects may be already weaker. Further research is needed; in order to get a better picture of transfer effects in the acquisition of *-te iru* in L2 Japanese, one should look at the way in which lower proficiency level students interpret predicates that occur with this aspect marker.

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