Discourse characteristics of English in news articles written by Japanese journalists: ‘Positive’ or ‘negative’?

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1 Research aim
This research project aims to detect, if any, distinctive discourse/pragmatic features in the English written by Japanese professional ‘users’ of English, that are journalists who contribute to English newspapers issued in Japan. The main research question of this study is, “What, if any, are differences in the use of English between Japanese professionals and native speakers of English, even though the Japanese writers have already acquired this language at the level of mastery, and use it in an international context?”

2 Background: learners or users?
This research focus is inspired by a recent debate, re-raised mainly by the ‘English as a Lingua Franca’ school (ELF, Jenkins 2000; Seidhlofer 2004), on the validity of ‘native speaker’ as the ultimate/absolute goal in second language acquisition (SLA). In SLA, it has been the usual practice to compare the use of English by nonnative speakers (NNS) and that by native speakers (NS), finding out differences between them, and to conclude that there is still a need for NNSs/learners to acquire this language further (Cook 1999, 2002, 2007). In other words, it is ‘native speakers’ who are ‘models’ in language acquisition, and never-ending approximation to them is required on the part of learners, especially in the Expanding Circle (i.e., EFL countries such as Japan); Outer Circle Englishes (e.g., Indian English) are considered as ‘institutionalized’, and consequently given a similar status to that of Inner Circle Englishes (e.g., British English), which Kachru (1985) characterizes as ‘established’ (For a critical discussion on this distinction, see Hino 2009).

Such a tendency has been typically seen in learner corpus studies (LC, Granger 1998, 2002). For example, a well-known corpus of varieties of English, the International Corpus of English (Greenbaum 1996), covers only Inner and Outer Circle Englishes as legitimate varieties, while Expanding Circle ones are compiled with the label of ‘learner’ corpus (the International Corpus of Learner English). Along with a somewhat ‘default’ method of analysis called ‘Contrastive Interlanguage...
Analysis’ (Granger 1998, 2002), this research direction leads researchers in LC/SLA to presuppose that all NNSs aspire to behave like NSs and therefore, the ultimate model of the use of the language is a ‘native speaker’.

However, this NS-based orientation has been, in recent years, ‘under fire’ (Granger 2009, p. 18), mainly by some SLA researchers such as Cook (1999) and proponents of English as a lingua franca (Jenkins 2000; Seidlhofer 2004). What they argue is that not all NNSs hope to use this language like NSs, and more fundamentally, that a language learner in SLA, who has, by definition, a mother tongue, will be a bilingual user, not a monolingual speaker of a language. That is, a prescriptive norm of monolingual native speakers over bilinguals is highly questioned. As a counter movement against learner corpus studies, Seidlhofer compiled an ELF ‘user’ corpus, the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (Seidlhofer 2004; VOICE 2011). This corpus collected English within the Expanding Circle as a legitimated variety, and has been followed by other ELF corpus projects such as ELFA (A Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca for Academic Settings, Mauaran 2003, 2006, 2007) and ACE (the Asian Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca, Kirkpatrick 2010).

Although some distinctions between learner corpora and user corpora are guaranteed, such as whether a speaker is in a real context of language use, Expanding Circle Englishes (at the moment, mainly Europeans’) are codified with the different labels (i.e., learners or users), resulting in a situation where leading scholars in each field admit that samples of a learner corpus is similar to those of a user corpus (Seidlhofer 2004; Granger 2009). In fact, even Prodromou (2006, 2008), an ELF researcher, casts doubt on the proficiency level of samples in the VOICE, and outlines some proposals concerning the required conditions of what he calls ‘successful bilingual speakers’.

While considering some of the previous discussions and referring to several studies cited above, this author felt the increasing necessity of compiling a ‘user’ corpus, totally distinct from existing learner corpora in the Expanding Circle. To this end, the author, in 2005, launched a corpus compilation project called a 'Japanese User Corpus of English' (JUCE, Fujiwara 2007). This corpus, still small in size and limited in register, aims to compile data of the use of English by Japanese professional users. What the corpus intends to reveal is an ultimate attainable level of the second language, and whether or not professional users of English still transfer their L1 linguistic features or culture, even at the level of mastery.

Saito Hidezaburo, a distinguished early scholar of English linguistics in Japan, states; ‘The mastery of a language has for its final object the expression of the exact light and shade of meaning conceived by the speaker. ... In short, the English of the Japanese must, in a certain sense, be Japanized’ (Saito 1928, p. 5). Furthermore, Nishiyama Sen, a well-known simultaneous English translator in Japan, comments that "Japanese who speak English are likely to express themselves using a style and vocabulary originating in Japanese" (Nishiyama 1995, p. 1). Therefore, by analyzing English used by Japanese professional English writers and that by Inner Circle writers, this research attempts to identify differences between them in style or discourse.

3 Research

As mentioned above, this study aims to empirically detect discourse/pragmatic features of English written by Japanese professional users. To attain this object, the author compiled a Japanese User Corpus of English, currently an approximately-one-million-word corpus of various news articles written by Japanese writers, and a self-made corpus of TIME (hereafter, TIME) comparable to the JUCE in size, genre, text length, and so forth. Both corpora were grammatically annotated by CLAWS4, a built-in part-of-speech tagger in Wmatrix 3 (Rayson 2009), both developed at Lancaster University.

These two corpora, the JUCE and the TIME, are compared in the following two phases; 1) part-of-speech (POS) analysis as the exploratory approach and 2) keyword analysis focusing on a particular linguistic item as the confirmatory approach. Firstly, using the methods of multivariate analysis such as cluster analysis and correspondence analysis, it was found that there is much possibility to distinguish these two types of English writers, and that some POS tags characteristic of a seemingly Japanese variety of English are perhaps prepositions (PP), articles (AT), adjectives (ADJ), and common nouns (NN) (see Figures 1 & 2).
These parts of speech are normally employed to form noun phrases and much use of them naturally results in less use of pronouns. Then, this survey more closely analyzed the use of personal pronouns in the JUCE data, considering ‘overuse’ and ‘underuse’ of each pronoun, compared to the TIME and other Inner Circle English data. These comparisons revealed a clear tendency for Japanese writers of English to underuse nearly all personal pronouns, especially plural pronouns that can refer to people in general (e.g., we, you, and they).

Considering the obtained findings, this survey tentatively concludes that 'Japanese English', in reflecting Japanese language, potentially has some characteristics such as more use of content nouns with the definite articles, and less use of personal pronouns, especially plural pronouns that can refer to people in general (e.g., we, you, and they).

Japanese ‘professional’ writers can be regarded as a L1 transfer. Furthermore, in SLA, they are called even ‘negative’ transfers in that these are, to a significant degree, not correspondent to the NS use, and also ‘fossilized’ in that even after finalizing the process of acquiring this language, they still show ‘deviant’ use from the NS standard.

However, as mentioned before, it is apparent that the Japanese professionals intelligibly and effectively use it in an international context, conveying news to the world through English. Also, Biber et al. (1999) refer to the use of ‘we’ or ‘you’ as problematic since the referent is often obscured by the overuse of these pronouns. Thus, this study can provoke more discussions on the validity of ‘native speaker’ as the ‘ultimate’ goal; Is this a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ transfer?

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References


