The English Copula Be: Japanese Learners’ Confusion
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Abstract
This paper describes the problems that Japanese learners have with the English copula be. Although Japanese desu and da are widely believed to be equivalent to the English copula be, this is a misunderstanding which is possibly one of the greatest causes of learners’ confusion. The author analyzes the problems that Japanese learners have with the copula be in three other contexts: the auxiliary verb, subject-verb agreement, and the negative sentence construction.

Introduction
Quite a number of mistakes concerning the copula be were observed when I taught English to sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students in Japan. Among their typical mistakes in syntax was the usage of the copula be. Here are some examples:

1) *I from Kyoto.
2) *I sleepy.
3) *Dad cooking in the kitchen.
4) *John given a new laptop on Christmas.
5) *I was open the window.
6) *We are write letters to each other.
7) *Are you from Osaka?
8) *Are your mother a good cook?
9) *I’m not play the piano.
10) *What time were you get up?

In Examples (1) and (2), the students missed the copula am. This problem seems to come from the difference between the sentence structures of Japanese and English. For sentences in which a copula is required in English, the corresponding sentences in Japanese do not require a copula (Dalrymple, 2004). Let us call this problem copula dropping. Examples (3) and (4) also involve missing the copula; however, the difference between these and Examples (1) and (2) is that the copulas are required as auxiliary verbs in the progressive aspect (3) and the passive voice (4). Let us call this problem auxiliary verb problem. The auxiliary verb problem also confuses Japanese students with the syntactically ill-formed sentences such as those in (5) and (6). The next examples (7) and (8) involve the conjugation of the irregular verb be. Basically, Japanese verbs are not conjugated for person or number although they do change in form to reflect honorific considerations that have to do with respect, humility, and politeness (Cipris, 2002, p. 6). Consequently, Japanese students are not used to the copula and subject-verb agreement. Let us name this problem subject-verb agreement problem. The last cases, Examples (9) and (10), happen when students are confused about interrogatives and negative sentences with copula be structures and those with ordinary verb structures. This last problem will be called negative structure problem for convenience. Each problem mentioned above will be discussed in the following pages.

The Copula Dropping Problem
Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) argued that although some linguists call the English copula be “a linking element” (p. 56), their position is that the copula be “is not merely a semantically empty grammatical operator” but it means a “stative relation” (p. 56). Meanwhile, the Japanese desu is not a linking element, and is not always required to express a stative relation either, although desu is widely believed to be equivalent to the English copula be. This will be discussed again later.

11) Watashi wa Kyoto no
    I       TOPIC Kyoto GENITIVE
    shusshin desu.
    from am
    ‘I am from Kyoto.’
Translation of Japanese sentences such as the one in (11) has led many people to believe that desu is equal to the English copula be. This alleged view can be found in many sources. For example, The JapanesePage.com (n.d.) says that “desu is a grammatical form that can act like to be in English,” and The Copula (n.d.) defines desu as a polite form of da, “which behaves very much like a verb.” However, whether desu is equal to the English copula be or not is open to question.

(12) Watashi wa Kyoto no
I TOPIC Kyoto GENITIVE
shusshin da.
from am
‘I am from Kyoto.’

Example (12) is a less formal form of (11). Comparing (12) with (11), people are usually convinced that desu and da have the same meaning and that desu is a more formal form than da. There is another theory concerning da. Yoshikawa (n.d.) argues that while both da and desu used to be categorized as auxiliary verbs, they are completely different from English auxiliary verbs. He defines them as a sonzai-shi (existential particle) A bit of evidence in support of this is the fact that desu/da can be replaced by de aru, and aru expresses existence.

(13) Watashi wa Kyoto no
I TOPIC Kyoto GENITIVE
shusshin.
from
‘I am from Kyoto.’

Example (13) does not include either desu or da, and is also an informal form of (11). Interestingly, without the so-called copula be, (13) has the same meaning as (11) and (12). Therefore, desu and da are not essential to complete a sentence. They are optional. In other words, they cannot be copulas exactly like the English be, because when a copula is needed in a sentence in English, it is obligatory. Japanese is one of the languages in which the copula is not required (Dalrymple, 2006). This system is easier to understand when sentence (14) is considered.

(14) Minako wa kawaii.
Minako TOPIC pretty
‘Minako is pretty.’

In Japanese, adjectives can combine directly with the subject (Dalrymple, 2004). On the other hand, in English, predicative adjectives require the copula be in order to be joined with the subject. As a result, the use of the copula is obligatory in English. Thompson (2001) analyzed the mechanism of Japanese in which adjectives work like verbs and inflect “to show tense and condition” (p. 305). He concluded that this Japanese phenomenon might cause Japanese students to drop the copula be mistakenly (p. 305).

Considering the fact that these particles of Japanese, desu and da, which are usually considered to be equivalent to the English copula be, are optional, the Japanese particles desu and da do not function as the English copula be does. As a result of the mistaken assumption that they do function similarly, Japanese students mistakenly drop the copula be in English sentences when Japanese sentences do not need desu or da.

The Auxiliary Verb Problem
From my experience of teaching English in Japan, I can say that most Japanese students can only give can, must, may, shall, and will and their past tense forms as examples of English auxiliary verbs. There are few students who can recall do, does, and did as auxiliary verbs. Almost none of the students would mention is, am, are, was, and were. Because the name “be-verb” is completely fixed to the copula be, the progressive aspect and the passive voice are taught to “assemble” with “a be-verb + a present participle” and “a be-verb + a past participle” respectively. Even some teachers might believe that be’s in these cases are also be-verbs.

(15) Dad is cooking in the kitchen.
In this sentence, since the participle cooking itself includes the idea of progression or continuity, the copula is a semantically empty element, although it is required struc-
turally to show the tense (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 56). For beginning students, the copula *be* is exactly the “semantically empty grammatical operator” (p. 56) that traditional theoreticians discussed. This is because it might be too difficult for language beginners to understand that the copula *be* exists to imply that an incomplete state is continuing under a stable situation (p. 56). As a result, the students drop *be* because the so-called “be-verb” is not an auxiliary verb for them. They might think that the sentence already has the verb *cooking*; another verb cannot be needed.

(16) John was given a new laptop on Christmas.

Similar to the above-mentioned case, the past particle *given* itself carries the passive meaning. The copula *was* is required only to show the tense but is semantically empty. Moreover, there might be misunderstanding that the past participle *given* is a past form of *give*. If the passive sentence, “Fish are fried by my father every Friday” is considered, the confusion between the past tense and the past particle of a verb is even clearer. Thus, it is no wonder that students drop *be* and form the passive voice incorrectly, as in Example (4). With all due respect to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, one might prefer to define *be* in the progressive aspect as “progressive *be,*” and *be* in the passive voice as “passive *be*” (Dixon, 1991, p. 18). This definition might help students understand these formations a little better.

In contrast, the ungrammatical sentences in (5) and (6) are examples of the confusion that causes Japanese students to use auxiliary *be* in an inappropriate way (Thompson, 2001). It seems that students put the verb *be* mistakenly or intuitively before a main verb after forming a connection between the subject pronouns and the verb *be*, while orally practicing such combinations, “I am,” “you are,” “we are,” and “we were.” Thus, this type of error may be a side effect of training.

The Subject-Verb Agreement Problem

Japanese verbs are not sensitive to person and number (Cipris, 2002). Example (7) is a mistake which results from the fact that some students tend to start every interrogative with “Is…?” When students compose an affirmative sentence, this confusion is easily found. On the other hand, in (8), the student might make this kind of mistake for a different reason. This is the negative influence of the common phrase “Are you …?” As mentioned before, Japanese verbs are insensitive to person and number. Thus, students may automatically choose the copula *are* for the subject *your mother* only because *your sounds like you*. Likewise, the following mistakes are often observed in classrooms in Japan.

(17) *Are your English teacher from America?*
(18) *Are your house near here?*

The Negative Sentence Problem

This problem happens not only in negative structures but also in interrogatives. See, for example, (9) and (10). The negative sentence problem comes from the confusion between sentences with the copula *be* and those with other main verbs. The copula *be* functions just like auxiliary verbs in negative structures and interrogatives. “We place the *not* after the *be*” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 190) for negative structures and move the *be* to the initial position of the sentence for interrogatives. Unlike this pattern, ordinary verb structure needs the auxiliary verb *do, does,* or *did* which agrees in person, number, and tense as an operator. Japanese students tend to use the copula *be* in place of “dummy do” (Hussey, 1995, p. 64) with main verbs, resulting in the mistakes in Examples (9) and (10) above. Thus, they need to understand that negative constructions and interrogatives with ordinary verbs in English need “dummy do” when they are used in non-progressive tenses and in active voice. Let us review Example (9) to compare the sentence with its Japanese counterpart:
(9) *I'm (= I am) not play the piano.
Watashi desu nai hiku - piano

‘Watashi wa piano o hika nai desu.’
(I don’t play the piano.)

The syntactically ill-formed English sentence above corresponds to the Japanese sentence word by word. Many Japanese users of English have the detrimental habit of translating from their native language to the target language by matching sentences like this. If the meaning of the copula am is equivalent to desu in Japanese, the Japanese student could be satisfied with Example (9) because the direct translation for each word can still make sense, including the copula am that is mistakenly inserted. This again brings up the question of whether or not the copula be is equivalent to desu or da in Japanese. Let us consider the following example one more time:

(19) I don’t (= do not) play
Watashi ?? nai hiku

the piano.
- piano.

This sentence (19) illustrates the fact that there is no word in Japanese that corresponds to the English auxiliary do. Students might be confused as to why (19) has the extra word.

Conclusion
It seems that most problems with the verb be discussed in this paper come from the misunderstanding that Japanese desu and da are equivalent to English be. I agree with Tokizaki (2002) that while Japanese desu and its informal form da are not “true copula verbs,” the syntactical status of desu and da is not clear, and that they could be considered to be particles. A diagram that defines desu and da as having exactly the same meaning as the English copula be will cause confusion for Japanese students. What is more, in spite of the fact that auxiliary be is very important in English to form interrogative and negative constructions (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 98), it is challenging for Japanese students to form interrogative and negative sentences, choosing a correct construction either with the copula be or without it. In one, the copula be functions as an auxiliary verb, while in the other, the ordinary verb structure needs an auxiliary verb, do, does, or did, as a dummy verb. Finally, subject-verb agreement is not a very familiar mechanism to Japanese students, either.

To overcome the problems discussed in this paper, I think that teachers in Japan should recognize that teaching English sentences by translating to the target language word for word from the native language does not really help students learn English well, as it confuses students with respect to the structure of English sentences. In addition, pattern practices of interrogative and negative sentences should take priority over exercises involving transforming affirmative sentences into interrogative and negative sentences. Ideally, students would internalize the linkage between the English sentence types spontaneously. In conclusion, I hope to dispel the misconception that the Japanese particles desu and da are equivalent to the English copula be.

Endnotes
1. The article the here has no counterpart because Japanese does not have articles.
2. Same as in note 1.
References


