

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) *Is 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 participle *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 participle 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 - pi-
 ano

'Watashi wa piano o hika nai desu.'

(I don't play the piano.)¹

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.²

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.

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