Null Prepositions in Wh-Questions and Passives: UG and L1 Transfer in Japanese Speakers’ L2 English

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Even when L2 learners of English show accurate knowledge of verbs subcategorization in declarative sentences, they often omit required prepositions in wh-questions and relative clauses (e.g., Klein, 1993, 1995). Previous studies argue that this “null prep(osition)” results from non-target representations of wh-related constructions in the interlanguage. Dekydtspotter et al. (1998) claim that consideration for economy in computation leads L2 learners to adopt A’-binding involving pro along with preposition incorporation into verbs, which results in null prep. Klein (2001) contends that the conflict between L2 learners’ knowledge of their L1 and/or natural languages (i.e., P-stranding is prohibited in most languages) and L2 input (i.e., P-stranding is frequently observed in English) permits learners to choose optional null operator movement, which requires a null preposition as a licenser.

However, recent studies (Handa, 2004; Tanaka, 2005; Hokari et al., 2008) have found that null prep also arises in pseudo-passive sentences, which do not involve A’-movement. This implies that Dekydtspotter et al.’s and Klein’s accounts may be insufficient since their proposals only account for null prep in constructions with A’-movement, and hence cannot explain why null prep appears in passive sentences. Even though their accounts potentially apply to passive sentences, there exists further data indicating their inadequacy: Handa (2004) reported that null prep occurred more often in pseudo-passive sentences than in wh-questions. That is, we need a theoretical explanation for the occurrence of null prep in passive constructions and the different frequencies of occurrence in passives and wh-questions.

Handa’s (2004) data are, however, not entirely reliable in that the native control group did not behave as expected due to a lack of appropriate contexts for passive sentences. We carried out an experiment to overcome this problem. We conducted a grammaticality judgment task with 56 Japanese learners of English. We prepared one active declarative sentence, two passive sentences and two wh-questions for three prepositional verbs (speak to, wait for, talk about) (cf. (1)). Every sentence followed a short context written in Japanese. Individual as well as group results showed that null prep occurred more often in pseudo-passive sentences than in wh-questions, consistent with Hanada’s findings.

We argue that null prep is derived from learners’ knowledge of the markedness of P-stranding in general, as suggested in previous studies. In addition, P-stranding is more marked in passive sentence than in wh-questions (van Riemsdijk, 1978; Law 2006) and pied-piping of a preposition is disallowed in passive sentences, in contrast to wh-questions. These typological facts along with L2 input may lead to in L2 learners’ productions which showed more null prep in passives than in wh-questions. Furthermore, L1 may have some influence: When an object of a postposition is extracted in Japanese passive sentences, the postposition cannot be stranded as well as pied-pied but must be omitted (cf. (2)), which bears a surface similarity to null prep in the interlanguage. In short, learners produced null prep based on their innate knowledge (i.e. UG) as well as their L1 grammar, which resulted in differences between passives and wh-constructions.
(1) a. Active declarative sentence
   Hanako spoke ___ the transfer student after the morning meeting.
   b. Passive 1 : V + (P)+ CP (when clause)
   Hanako was spoken ___ when she was about to leave.
   c. Passive 2 : V +(P) + PP (locative/temporal PP)
   Last night, Hanako was spoken ___ on her way home.
   d. Wh question 1 : V + (P)+ CP (when clause)
   Who did Hanako speak ___ when she was at the station?
   e. Wh question 2 : V +(P) + PP (locative/temporal PP)
   Who did Hanako speak ___ on her way home from school?
(The positions where a preposition should be supplied are underlined for the purpose of exposition.)

(2) a. Hanako-ga Taro-ni hanasikake-ta.
   Hanako-NOM/FOC Taro-to speak-PAST
   ‘Hanako spoke to Taro.’
   b. *[DP Taro]-ga Hanako-ni [PP [DP ti [P ni]]] hanasikake-rare-ta.
   Taro-NOM/FOC Hanako-by to speak-PASSIVE-PAST
   ‘Lit: Taro was spoken to by Hanako.’ (P-stranding)
   c. *[PP Taro-ni]-ga Hanako-ni [PP [ti] [P ni]] hanasikake-rare-ta.
   Taro-to-NOM/FOC Hanako-by speak-PASSIVE-PAST
   ‘Lit: To Taro was spoken by Hanako.’ (Pied-piping)
   d. [DP Taro]-ga Hanako-ni [PP [DP ti [P φ]]] hanasikake-rare-ta.
   Taro-NOM/FOC Hanako-by speak-PASSIVE-PAST
   ‘Lit: Taro was spoken by Hanako.’ (Correct passive)

References