

# Developmental View of Aspectual Marking in Japanese- and English-language Narratives

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## Abstract

This study investigated the aspectual marking of an event of a fictional story in Japanese and English-language narratives. Considerable differences were found in verbalization between them. The differences are attributed to the linguistic options provided by each language. Japanese- and English-speaking children develop their linguistic proficiency by making use of the expressive options offered by the native language. The results support Berman and Slobin's (1994) proposal that experiences are filtered through a choice of perspectives, and through the set of options provided by the particular language into verbalized events.

## 1. Introduction

Every language has a different way to talk about an event. This study investigated how native Japanese and English speakers verbalize events in a narrative story, to demonstrate that a particular language has its own specific way of verbalizing events. This way is deeply influenced by linguistic features or options available in that particular language. Children develop their linguistic proficiency by making use of the expressive options offered by the native language.

The theoretical background of this study is Slobin's work on "thinking for speaking" (Berman and Slobin 1994; Slobin, 1991) in the field of L1 acquisition. He claimed that language does not shape our thought; it acts as a "filter" on the way we talk about it. The world does not present "events" to be encoded in language. Rather, experiences are filtered – through a choice of perspectives, and through the set of options provided by the particular language - into verbalized events.

The present study examined these arguments in regard to Japanese- and English-language narratives. Fictional stories elicited from Japanese-speaking children and adults, and English-speaking children and adults were analyzed to explore the linguistic features of their verbalization. The focus of the study is aspectual marking in narrative discourse, since the preference for it is deeply connected to the linguistic possibilities provided by a particular language.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Japanese- and English-language Narratives

Japanese-language narratives were elicited from Japanese-speaking children aged from 3 to 11 years of age and adults. They were divided into ten groups according to their age.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Further information about the subjects can be found in Inaba (1999).

Each group had ten subjects. English-language narratives were adopted from a database. Transcripts gathered by the use of the same picture storybook as the present study are available in the CHILDES archive.<sup>2</sup> English-language stories were elicited from the English-speaking children, ages 3, 4, 5 and 9, and adults used in the study. Each group consisted of twelve subjects.

### 2.2 Selected Scene

The texts analyzed in this study are oral narratives derived from a picture storybook without verbal text, called "Frog, Where Are You?" (Mayer, 1969). The aspectual marking for the falling event in Picture 17, which depicts the boy and dog in the mid-fall from a cliff, was picked up in the analyses.

## 3. Encoding by Native Japanese Speakers

Table 1 shows the distribution of the subjects' aspectual marking for the event. The numbers show the proportion of simple, complete, and *-teiku* forms used by subjects who mentioned the falling event with verbs.

Table 1: Aspectual Marking for Picture 17 by Japanese-speaking Children and Adults

Age (N=10)	Simple Form %	Complete Form %	-teiku Form %
3	20	80	0
4	30	70	0
5	0	100	0
6	33	67	0
7	33	67	0
8	50	50	0
9	20	80	0
10	40	50	10
11	0	90	10
Adult	0	100	0

Three kinds of aspectual marking were found in Japanese-language narratives. The complete form is the most common encoding across all ages. It emerges in the early stage of development, suggesting that children already have a linguistic command of this form.<sup>3</sup> The number of people using the simple form is relatively small. None of the adults used it. The progressive form that was used in English-

<sup>2</sup> See the CHILDES project (MacWhinney, 1991) for further details.

<sup>3</sup> This finding confirmed the research conducted by Clancy (1985), reporting that the complete (past) form was acquired in the early stages of Japanese first language acquisition.

language narratives was not found in Japanese-language narratives.

It should be noted here that the complete form is a specifically Japanese form. It expresses the idea of completion of the action, emphasizing not the process or the action itself, but the result.<sup>4</sup> It also expresses the idea that someone did something that he should not have done, or something happened which should not have happened. It can be used in a situation in which the event is beyond one's control, implying that things turned out in a surprising or regrettable way.

#### 4. Encoding by Native English Speakers

Table 2 shows the distribution of aspectual markings for Picture 17 by English-speaking children and adults. Three kinds of aspectual marking were found in English-language narratives. The simple form was the most favored way to recount the event across all ages. It emerges in the early stage of development, and it is the most common encoding in mature English-language narratives. They used the simple form both in the past and present tense (See Table 3), in contrast to the Japanese narrators who used the simple form only in the past tense. The progressive form is also used in the early stage of development. The children used it as a picture description strategy. It should be noted here that none of the Japanese narrators used it. The perfect form is rarely used for this scene, although the complete form is the most favored way among Japanese narrators. It suggests that English, too, has a specific way to talk about the event, reflecting each perspective for this event.

Table 2: Aspectual Marking for Picture 17 by English-speaking Children and Adults

Age (N=12)	Simple Form %	Perfect Form %	Progressive Form %
3	67	0	33
4	73	0	27
5	100	0	0
9	100	0	0
Adult	84	8	0

Table 3: Tense Marking for the Simple Forms by English-speaking Children and Adults

Age (N=12)	Past Form %	Present Form %	Number of Simple Form %
3	75	25	8
4	50	50	8
5	64	36	11
9	67	33	12
Adult	20	80	10

<sup>4</sup> See examples as follows:

*Tom wa shukudai o yatte shimatta.*

'Tom has finished his homework.'

*Kate wa nihongo o wasurete shimatta.*

'Kate has forgotten Japanese.'

#### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Japanese- and English-speaking narrators showed quite different aspectual marking for encoding the event. Japanese-speaking narrators strongly favored the complete form, while English-speaking narrators favored the simple form. This is one of the rhetorical differences between Japanese and English-language narratives. This provides further evidence that a particular language has its own specific way of verbalizing events.<sup>5</sup>

The preference for encoding the event is related to the linguistic features of each language. English-speaking narrators used the progressive form as a picture-description strategy in the early stage of development. However, Japanese-speaking children did not use it, since it is grammatically inappropriate to encode this particular event in Japanese. These findings indicate that the way of verbalization is deeply influenced by the linguistic features or linguistic options available in a particular language.

Japanese- and English-speaking children showed a similar preference to the adults' encoding. Japanese-speaking children favored the complete form, and English-speaking children favored the simple form. Even the youngest children in each language groups manifested the same preference as the adults, suggesting that they already had command of the predominantly used form. In developmental terms, the distribution of the favored form moved toward the adults' distribution in both languages. Thus, Japanese and English-speaking children develop their linguistic proficiency by making use of the expressive options offered by their native language.

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<sup>5</sup> Inaba (2003) presented that the anchor tense in Japanese and English-language narratives is different.