

Socio–Linguistic Issues Reflected in Sentence Building —analysis of a short composition in three high schools

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(1) Introduction

The objective of this paper is to clarify socio–linguistic issues, in particular, the correlation between school ranking and students' first language production ability.

When we think of “difference among high schools”, the question is how it shows up in the use of first language according to the “ranking” of high schools. The way we investigate this problem is to have students write a short composition which is separated from academic competence as far as possible to see how many elements of the sentence, Kanji or Chinese characters and syllabaries they use. We thought that students at “higher” schools may write with more elements, more Kanji and more syllabaries. The survey was done in three different schools in Saitama prefecture, a suburb of Tokyo. The results show there are some differences.

First, we will state the ranking of high schools and society. Second, the sociolinguistic issues are discussed. Third, explanations about three high schools are given. Fourth, the methodology and results of the survey are shown.

(2) Ranking of High Schools and Society

When we talk about education in Japan, we usually consider the severe competition of the entrance examination for colleges and universities. But, actually, it is said that competition begins at the junior high school level nationwide, when the students choose which high school to go to. Eventually, each school has a “deviation value” (percentile ranking) and what we call the “difference among high schools” has become

popular among people concerned with entrance examinations.

Taking the example of Saitama prefecture, this tendency has become clearer during the last ten years and one can tell by the names of the school how "bright" the students going there are. The deviation value of each high school is published every year for the benefit of students preparing for entrance examination and their parents. This, and the guidance of junior high school teachers seem to decide the "rank" of high schools.

We think that the deviation value reflects one of the social stratifications in Japanese society although people believe the basis of education in Japan is "equality". It is interesting that many Japanese deny admitting that there is a difference in language or speech according to the social class which people belong to, or even reject thinking about it. This phenomenon made us realize how clearly we are taught not to think about social stratification even though many instances are found around us. We think difference among high schools constitutes part of the social class divisions in Japan.

It is, however, difficult to define existence of the social class in Japan. Homogeneity of Japanese society is commonly pointed out by Japanologists; such as Reischauer or Nakane. Nakane states:

Although there were, of course, poor and wealthy, the differences were relative and not significant... the majority of the Japanese people have not been historically conditioned to life in a stratified community with effective lines of demarcation between groups. (1970: 147)

The survey shows, although an ordinary Japanese identifies him/herself as middle class, the saying goes: Like father, like son, the children whose parents have higher education probably will have a good education. Accordingly the social status, income and power are also transmitted. Rolen listed items to describe family background and school ranking of five high schools in Kobe (1983) such as average number of siblings in family, the percentage of working mothers, of students missing one or both parents, of students' fathers with university education, of students with their own room for study and of attending tutoring or cram school at some time during elementary school in a sample. He also looked at the percentage of *burakumin* or Koreans in student bodies. His fieldwork revealed that family background determines the life course in education and concluded that "The magnitude of the subcultural differences between types of high schools makes them the modern equivalent of nineteenth-century of in-

dustrial classes" (1983: 140). Though, we did not survey the socio-economical situation with our subjects, three schools in Kawaguchi are relatively similar in situation to those Kobe.

The difference in the attitude towards social class between the United States and Japan seems to be that people in the U. S. admit and face the fact and can deal with it publicly, whereas in Japan, people do not, and try not to admit the fact and it is almost taboo to talk about it. It also seems true there is much more language difference in the U. S. according to social class (Labov: 1972).

Education is one way to distinguish social class among people. In Japan, it is a major element as well as the income, social status and power. Moreover, the college or university they graduate from is given priority. In order to get into good and famous universities, they try to get into high schools with higher deviation values.

(3) Sociolinguistic Issues

Senior high school students are regarded as mature persons who have acquired communicative competence in their native language (Hymes: 1972). In appearance they do not have any trouble with speaking in their daily life. However, we have often heard our peers complaining that students have a hard time reading passages in the textbooks, even though they are written in their native language. Reading ability influences their academic ability. We often notice as teachers that some students only utter a limited number of words and not in sentences. Others can't speak sentences clearly in interviews. Some trouble makers share the same vocabulary, which people don't usually use. Thus, we realize these examples when we think of events in everyday life around us.

This problem can be discussed from two points of view. One is that there is no difference because all students are born with an innate ability to acquire language and they should have acquired the same level of language competence regardless of their performance in the entrance examination. The result of the exam is much more influenced by the other factors, so even though the deviation values of the schools are different, that difference does not mean anything as far as the manipulation of the first language is concerned.

The other is that there is a difference according to the deviation value of the schools. The result of the entrance examination is largely based not only on the stu-

dents' ability of the language to understand and to manipulate under a certain condition, but on the other abilities like memorizing and manipulating numbers. Also, according to Chomsky (1968), language-processing mechanisms called LAD only operate from infancy to about the age of eleven.

In this research, the task was to write a short composition. We know students always say that writing is difficult. Writing is the process of organizing one's thinking into a writing system. Written passages should have a coherent meaning. It has the logic that links cause-and-effect relationship. A story has a temporal sequence of cause and effect. Then, a reader can anticipate the future events (Scholes: 1982).

There are two spheres in language production. One is language skill and the other is thinking. It is a very controversial theme in the philosophy of language. We are not concerned with this matter here. On the whole, metacognition, beyond language, is very important to processing written and spoken messages. We assumed that students who have lower scores in academic tests may have poor metacognitive competence. Our research aimed to investigate the correlation between school ranking and students ability in Japanese language. The results reflecting the students' metacognitive competence differ accordingly.

The three different schools can be classified by the deviation value of the standard academic achievement test. The background of the students may be different. Bernstein claimed two distinguishing sociolinguistic features: "elaborated and restricted code" (1964). Restricted code is used by both lower and middle classes, and elaborated code is used mainly by the middle class.

The characteristics of restricted code that it is: transmitted more extravverbally, has inclusive relationships, is impersonal, has a vitality of the speech, and it is disjunctive, concrete, narrative and descriptive. It is highly predictable. On the contrary, elaborated code is transmitted more verbally, has a higher level of structural organization and vocabulary selection.

An elaborated code is learned in a linguistically rich environment. Then, Bernstein assumes that a differential response to educational opportunity is made by children from different social classes (1964). This is useful to explain school ranking and Japanese language abilities of the students in each school.

(4) Explanation of Three High Schools

High school (A) is a part-time high school. It was founded about fifty years ago to provide the opportunity to have a high school education for working people who complete their study. But now, just as the other part-time high schools, the situation has changed. The school is known to accept students who could not get into "full-time" high schools or those who have dropped out of them as well as those who have chosen to come to this kind of high school because they have to work during the day. Consequently, there are various types of students as for age, motivation, and attitudes. About 120 students enter in April, however after four years less than half of them graduate.

The deviation value is not known, which means the publishers don't even feel the need to know the deviation. It is ranked at the bottom.

High school (B) is the most recently founded public high school in Kawaguchi city. Because of the geographical disadvantage and the date of foundation, the school was almost destined to accept students who cannot go to the other public or private high schools. As a result many students are ashamed of the school, at least at the beginning and some of them haven't acquired the basic habits of spending an everyday ordinary life, such as getting up at a certain time, eating meals three times a day and so forth, which are sure to influence their study skills.

The deviation value of this school is around the mid-40s.

High school (C) was established in the mid-1970s and now is one of the best schools around the Kawaguchi area. The school is situated a fifteen minute walk from the JR station. The school attracts many junior high school students and it has become harder every year to get into. The reason seems to be that population of the age group for high schools had been increasing rapidly. This is not only for this high school but for the other schools which existed before and have become harder to enter. Students there are hard-working and almost all students go to colleges or universities.

The deviation value of this school is around 60.

(5) Method and Results

This research is designed to analyze a short composition of a high school student.

The procedure followed Moro's study (1982). He has been investigating language production of Japanese children.

The subjects were about forty freshmen each of the three high schools in the southern part of Saitama prefecture. The three schools can be classified as top, lower middle and low level schools by deviation values.

We asked homeroom teachers to give a question sheet and instruction. It was done in the 1st week of July in 1990.

A sentence describing one event such as;

Jiro wa kawade sakana o tsukamaeta,
(Jiro caught a fish in the river)

was given to the students. The task was to complete the sentence which constructs a story continuing the previous part. Five stimulus sentences were given at this time. Here, we observe one of them.

Collected samples are analyzed by the following criteria: (1) number of syllabaries, (2) number of Chinese characters and (3) number of sub-elements of a passage. (1) shows the length of the sentence, (2) is a possible measurement of the Japanese language ability and (3) reflects the complexity of the sentence.

Sub-elements are coded as follows:

T: conjunction
Z: predicate
S: subject
R: adjective/adverb
J: supplementary clauses
M: object
H: complement
K: subordinate clause

Samples are coded as follows:

So shi te ya i te ta be ta
(Then, grilled and ate it.)
Number of syllabaries→9
Number of Chinese characters→1
Elements→T+R+Z
Number of elements→3

The means of the number of letters, Chinese characters and elements are calculated as table 1 and number of sub-elements are shown as table 2.

Table. 1

High school	n	Syllabaries	Chinese Characters	Elements
A	40	11.28	1.53	2.23
B	44	11.57	1.91	2.84
C	45	16.22	3.07	3.48

Table. 2

High school	n	Elements							
		T	Z	S	R	J	M	H	K
A	40	16	38	10	3	9	9	4	3
B	44	25	42	10	17	2	23	3	3
C	45	25	45	22	10	13	29	5	8

School A and B are quite close in the three items. School C is outstanding. That means the students of school C write longer sentences, use more Chinese characters and construct complex sentences more than school A and B.

In all three groups the predicate is used. The subject is often omitted in A and B groups. To omit a subject is common in Japanese. C group uses more conjunctions. Conjunctions help to make sequences logical.

To give additional information more M and J appeared in C group. That means students tried to create a story more precisely. The passage such as "(Jiro) released the fish" will be added to the statement showing the reason; "because it was too young". B group and A group have more simple sentence such as; "and ate", "run away" and so on.

Besides these structural features, in A group some sentences which represent personal and emotional responses such as; "good". This can be interpreted omitting the subject (Jiro), though in that style (I) should be filled in. Then it means "I feel it is good". It is not story telling. To construct the story, the sequence of events should be considered. However, they are the comments which seem not open to the outside but closed in one's self. We can also analyze these reflections from the psychological point of views.

(6) Conclusion

Our research aimed to investigate the correlation between school ranking and student's writing ability of Japanese language. While we wish we had been able to obtain more data, we conclude our assumption is supported: short sentences written by the students of three schools in Saitama prefecture differ in the numbers of syllabaries, Chinese characters and sub-elements. One might conclude that the background of the students influences the ability for writing.

Further, we would like to find out the determiners of language production. Students are assumed to have communicative competence, however, according to our results, a lot of students seem to have trouble with writing. Then, as teachers we should give appropriate help to students. Those students have what they want to express in their mind but do not have skills to generate. Thinking and cognitive developments promote language production. On the other hand, language production promotes development of thinking as well. A single word is sometimes very powerful. "Water" enlightened Hellen Keller. Self-generated language has significant meaning for beginners. So we encourage using language in a meaningful situation.

In this research a sentence was analyzed by the numbers of syllabaries, Chinese characters and sub-elements. Other useful criteria will be developed soon. Moreover, this research was done on native language production, the implication of this research may also be applied to second language learning and teaching.

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