

Forms and functions of interrogative structures: A Contrastive Study of English and Japanese

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This resume presents results of a corpus study of English and Japanese interrogative structures. The first half comments upon quantitative distribution of respective interrogative types and the second half upon qualitative analysis of individual structures.

The quantitative results can be interpreted on three levels: the level of distribution of the main interrogative types in the two languages, the level of correspondence of the main types in translations, and the level of individual structures.

As far as the first level is concerned, the results indicate that the relative distribution of the individual main types in the two languages is quite different. Whereas English interrogatives are dominated by *wh*-questions, Japanese employs *yes-no* and *echo* questions. This can be interpreted as an outcome of different communication styles in the two languages. Kume (2000) has undertaken a comparative study of communication styles among Japanese, Americans and Chinese and regarding task oriented small group communication. Based on the results of the study, Kume classified Japanese style of communication as “floating boat” as opposed to the “building blocks” style of English. This metaphoric figure was used to depict the difference in communication style (linear in English versus circular in Japanese) as well as the difference in participation (active in English versus context based in Japanese). The interrogative main type distribution shows dominance of *wh*-questions, which by definition primarily directly inquire about a missing piece of information, on the English side and dominance of *yes-no* and *echo* questions, which are primarily used as a means of confirmation that the current understanding is shared, on the Japanese side. Kume’s conclusions about the small group task-oriented discussion style seem to be applicable on a wider scale.

The distribution of the main interrogative types of both languages shares extremely low frequency of alternative questions. We have no data to account for the possible reasons. However, since we have been encountering examples of ellipses as a means of language economy throughout the study, we can tentatively propose for

further consideration language economy as being the key motivation.

The overall results of the correspondence of the main types and their translation counterparts as appearing in the two languages is summarized into the following tables:

Correlation patterns of interrogatives and their corresponding structures within the given sub-corpora:

The most frequent patterns in both languages are: *wh*-questions - *wh*-questions, *echo* -questions - *echo* questions, *yes-no* questions - *yes-no* questions and English questions in declarative form - Japanese *yes-no* questions. Such distribution points to the fact that the main types correspond in both languages to a high degree (76% in English, 68% in Japanese). and the formal differentiation occurs on more specific levels of types and subtypes. (As was shown in Table 4 even the level of a subtype may be in some cases corresponding to a high degree).

The category of English questions in the declarative form is for the most part rendered by *yes-no* questions in Japanese. This fact indicates that the distinction that exists in English between *yes-no* question and question in declarative form is not present in Japanese or rather that the boundary between declarative and interrogative is slightly different.

The level of concrete structures revealed that some of the original assumptions were unfounded. The correlation of ellipses in English with certain level of politeness of expression in Japanese was not confirmed. Most of the Japanese samples were in the plain style regardless of the ellipsis or non-ellipsis of the English variant. The quotative marker *te* could not serve as an unequivocal marker of *echo* questions given that it was used on several occasions for emphasis.

We have noticed the same parallel structures in the two language such as:

how about ... and ... doo desuka
why don't you ... and naze ... shinai
negative tags.

as well as some language specific structures or grammatical means:

- tag questions with positive polarity in English
- substantial use of modal verbs in English
- Japanese attitude markers
- probability form of copula in Japanese

The anticipated difference in the scope of ellipsis in the two languages proved relevant. A substantial amount of English *wh*-questions rendered as echo questions, e.g. (289) or conversely Japanese *yes-no* questions rendered as echo in English, (218) can be given as clear evidence. Japanese is very modest in requiring different structural elements and thus even a very simple structure, which when translated into English cannot qualify as a complete interrogative, can be considered as such in Japanese.

The functional analysis section attempted to provide a survey of functions i.e. illocutionary forces of interrogative structures in the corpus and its sub-corpora and hence compare the scope of functions that are, besides the functions following from the primary semantics of the individual interrogative types, realized by interrogatives main types of the compared languages.

The key factor that can, to high degree, determine the outcome of an analysis, is classification. We have combined two approaches, classical Searle's approach and the somewhat revolutionary approach of Wierzbicka, which has been devised specifically for cross-cultural pragmatics' purposes.

The first part of quantitative analysis pursued overall distribution of the illocutionary forces in the individual sub-corpora regardless of the interrogative type expressing them. As expected both languages used interrogatives in accord with their primary semantics mostly for asking for a piece of unknown information or confirmation or negation of information - directive RR (request for representative). However apart from this common trend there are some interesting tendencies. (see graph D2 in appendix D. Whereas Japanese is quite conservative and uses interrogatives besides asking for information to some degree for expressing emotions or attitudes and only in very limited scope, for expressing directive proper i.e. for getting the addressee to do something apart from only providing information. English maintains a similar quantitative level of interrogatives with expressive function using interrogatives more than twice as frequently for issuing a proper directive. Analysis of the overall quantitative

results employing thirteen categories based on Wierzbicka shows that a majority of Japanese directive RR instances are constituted by interrogatives with D6 function, which is a request for repetition or further explanation of the previous utterance, and pure questions only follow. The same analysis shows that even though the interrogatives expressing directives are much more frequent in English than in Japanese mild directives verging on invitation prevail.

The second part of the quantitative analysis followed the functional distribution of individual interrogative main types. The gross results are again quite similar for both languages. *Wh*-questions as well as *yes-no* questions express in both languages the function corresponding to their primary semantics in 50 and 30% respectively. The expressive function is in the main types of both languages represented by approximately 10% of instances. However each main type of either language shows its specific tendencies. Japanese *wh*-questions are again more conservative and in functions regarding negotiating meaning or proper requests are falling behind English. Requests are more than twice as frequent also among English *yes-no* questions which are in Japanese used primarily to negotiate meaning. The main type of echo questions is most diverse as far as individual forces are concerned. However, the most frequent type of function is negotiating meaning, which in English approaches and in Japanese well exceeds 50%. English uses echo questions also for asking for information and for expressive purposes. Those are represented on a similar level also in Japanese, which means that expressive usage is comparable across all main types appearing in both languages. The main type of questions in declarative form is not sufficiently represented in the Japanese sub-corpora and thus only results of English are available. More than a half of the questions in declarative form were used to ask for information, expressive function. The remaining instances are approximately evenly shared by negotiating meaning and expressive function.

The qualitative analysis of individual structures expressing the individual functions supports results of quantitative analysis and reveals some interesting features that can be directly linked to the cultural background of the two languages. The most pronounced differences as to variety of forms were detected among instances expressing directive proper (D1-D4) where different types of structures clearly outnumbered their Japanese counterparts and among

instances expressing a request for information (D8). We have also detected a clear difference in the concepts for which the individual languages have overt distinctions or representation of which is directly required by the language structure. It is a clear distinction between the speaker and the hearer and their domains which is supported by the compulsory presence of the subject and is reflected also in rich variety of imperatives and in indirect questions. Japanese on the other hand often tends to ignore difference between the speaker and the hearer as well as any direct expressions. What Japanese does distinguish however, are politeness and honorifics' styles, male and female speech styles and attitude of the speaker toward the realized utterance.

As a conclusion we can say that the hypothesis put forward by Saddock and Zwicky assuming the universal character of main interrogative types and questions seems to be valid for the core of interrogatives in English and Japanese. The formal main types, types and sub-types distinguishable in the two languages correspond to a high degree. The most frequently expressed functions and

their ratios at least in the case of the two most frequent main types, i.e. *wh*-questions and *yes-no* questions, also correspond on a very similar level. However, there are also differences. The strongest formal main type in English are *wh*-questions as opposed to *yes-no* questions in Japanese. There is on the other hand a whole category of questions in declarative form more or less missing or better to say blending with declaratives in Japanese. The formal composition of the two languages was argued to be connected to different communication styles, i.e. direct "building blocks" of English as opposed to circular "floating boat" of Japanese. However, the communication style differences as well as functional differences such as a higher ratio of *wh*-questions rendering directives in English, or a higher ratio of *yes-no* questions asking for repetition or confirmation of the previously said as well as richer variety of possible constructions for rendering the more frequent functions can be linked directly to cultural background summarized in basic cultural scripts such as *freedom* and *liberty* for English and *wa*, *enryo*, *omoiyari*, *on*, *giri* and *amae* for Japanese.

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