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Comparative study of lexical categories in Spanish and Japanese and its influence on the acquisition of Spanish L2 by Japanese speakers

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2013-03-25 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/1481

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1. Contents of the dissertation: contributions and value

This thesis presents a thorough and novel analysis of the lack of correspondence between lexical categories in Japanese and Spanish. It focuses not only on the broad categories (nouns, verbs, verbal nouns, adjectives), but also on sub-category mismatches (among them, differences in transitivity in certain verbs between the two languages, lack of correspondence in the properties of mass/count nouns, classifiers/partitives), and therefore constitutes an unusually broad and at the same time detailed analysis on a topic that has not been hitherto explored. The author bases his analyses on a solid understanding of the relevant linguistic theories: syntax/semantic interface approaches of the last century and in particular the Generative Lexicon framework proposed by James Pustejovsky in several works since 1991. Apart from its theoretical soundness, the thesis is an important contribution to both the linguistic and the L2 acquisition/teaching literature, since it constitutes the first study that compares the lexicon of these two languages under the proposed framework. The level of theoretical detail contained in this dissertation is remarkable within the comparative studies of the lexicon in Japanese and Spanish. However, it may be said that the dissertation is unnecessarily long. In particular, the first chapter contains information that, while interesting, is not directly relevant to the research question at hand. Furthermore, it is not completely clear why the chosen framework is that by Pustejovsky and the research question is not clearly defined in this part of the thesis, although it becomes obvious later.

Chapters II and III serve to introduce the linguistic bases upon which the analysis is performed. In Chapter II, Romero overviews the literature on the interface between the lexicon and syntax, starting with the Principles and Parameters approach. Models are classified into projectionists (lexical semantics determines the syntactic behavior of arguments, since lexical items contain structural information) and constructionists (those aspects of semantics that influence syntax are part of sentences, not of lexical items). The latter claim that syntax determines the interpretation of arguments, whereas the former argue that it is lexical properties that make impositions on the syntax of sentences. This chapter is based on an appropriate and extensive study of the available literature.

Chapter III constitutes a thorough review in Spanish of the theory of the Generative Lexicon by Pustejovsky. This review is of value to linguistic students in Spanish-speaking countries. The Generative Lexicon framework claims that context makes possible the creation of novel meanings when new pairings of nouns and verbs are found thanks to the sub-lexical structure of words. This structure is systematized according to the following elements of the syntax of words: argument structure, event structure, qualia structure (constituent role, formal role, telic role, agentive role) and lexical typing structure. Different types of lexical items are proposed: natural types, artifacts, and complex or *dot objects*. Finally, several generative mechanisms (principles that control the well-formedness of phrases and sentences) connect the levels of representation explained above.

The second part of the chapter presents an interesting application of this theory to explain the origin of several errors typically found in the interlanguage of Japanese speakers learning Spanish. The errors are the product of a corpus collected by the author for the purpose of this dissertation. Nouns of several types are analyzed, including some belonging to the complex type, before turning to adjectives and verbs. The argumentation contained in this part of the chapter is well supported by the tenets of the theory that has been introduced in the first half.

Chapter IV undertakes the study of the differences in the syntactic category that words belong to in the two languages under study, Japanese and Spanish. Both functional and lexical categories are considered. As with previous parts of the thesis, the author grounds the theory in a careful revision of the linguistic literature available to date. In particular, the part about syntactic categories in Japanese is, to our knowledge, one of the most complete attempts to describe these issues in Spanish (with the exception of the papers published by Romero that contain parts of this dissertation). The two original diagrams of the continuum between the categories that Romero proposes on pages 15 and 20 set a precedent for future researchers to explore similar issues. However, it must be said that the connection between this part of the research and what has been discussed so far is not very clear, making it a somewhat incoherent continuation of the discussion.

In Chapter V, the theory about lexical categories is applied again to a comparison between Japanese and Spanish. Among the difficulties of learning Japanese for native speakers of Spanish or learning Spanish if one's native language is Japanese is that very often a word that in one of the languages belongs to a lexical category (e.g., adjective, noun) corresponds in the L2 to a word that belongs to a different one. This is an observation that has not been explored theoretically until now, as far as we are aware of. The analysis extends beyond the major categories to include the group of classifiers in Japanese that corresponds to partitive nouns in Spanish. The analysis of errors that had been initiated in Chapter III is complemented with the one carried out in Chapter V, since this time the author deals with the lack of sub-category correspondence (count-mass nouns, transitive-intransitive verbs, among others). Again, this novel approach is useful to predict potential mistakes in the interlanguage of learners and to prevent them through specifically directed exercises. Chapter VI summarizes the findings of this dissertation.

2. Results of the dissertation defense

On February 19th, 2013, the dissertation defense took place at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies. The committee was presided by Prof. Montserrat Sanz, a full professor at the Department of Spanish of that University, and was composed by Prof. Noritaka Fukushima and Prof. Masami Miyamoto, full professors at the same department, and by Prof. Arturo Escandón, associate professor at Nanzan University.

The committee evaluated the quality of the thesis and praised the independent way in which the candidate had performed the research. Several questions were asked by the members of the committee, to which the candidate provided appropriate responses. In particular, it was pointed out that the use that the author does of the concept "syntactic traits" varies between Chapter III (in which he bases his discussion on the Generative Lexicon) and Chapter IV (in which lexical categories are defined on the basis of traditional ways of classification on syntactic features). He was also asked to clarify his methodology for choosing a theoretical framework and for gathering data. It was pointed out

that the thesis lacks a chapter on methodology, to give more cohesion to the discussion, instead of stepping directly from the theoretical framework to the explanation of the data. The author was asked to make more explicit his choice of theoretical framework. About the data, the author was asked to provide translations when appropriate or glosses on correct forms when the discussion deals with errors. After this discussion, the audience was invited to pose questions to the candidate.

Finally, the committee deliberated in an adjacent room, and came to the conclusion that this dissertation not only fulfills the requirements for a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Linguistics section of the Culture Exchange Program at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies but constitutes an excellent contribution to both the field of linguistics and of L2 acquisition.