

JFL Learners' Use of Active and Passive Structures in Storytelling:
Narrators' Stances in Construal
日本語学習者のストーリーテリングにおける能動形・受動形の用法
—話し手としての事態把握の仕方に着目して—

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1. Narrative Viewpoint

When describing a story that involves multiple characters, the narrator eventually decides from whose viewpoint the given events are told. To explain this, Kuno (1987) uses the metaphor of a camera angle, with which a movie director would decide which participant to focus on when filming a scene. According to Maynard, a narrative viewpoint is an indication of “how the narrator reveals himself or herself in the narrative world when talking to the reader” (1998, p. 151). From a cognitive linguistics perspective, Langacker states that the meaning of an expression cannot be merely reduced to an objective characterization of the described situation, and that it is equally important to consider “how the conceptualizer chooses to construe the situation and portray it for expressive purposes” (1990, p. 315). Thus, narrative viewpoint is the basis of the narrator’s stances in construal.

2. Construal and Argument Structures

2.1 Objective Construal and Subjective Construal

In order to explain the concept of objective versus subjective construal, Langacker (1990, p. 328) uses the pair of statements shown in (1).

- (1) a. Vanessa is sitting across the table from me.
b. Vanessa is sitting across the table.

According to Langacker, these statements both describe the same spatial configuration, but there is a semantic contrast between them. Sentence (a) would sound more natural in a situation where the speaker is looking at a picture in the newspaper and says, “Look! My picture is in the paper! And Vanessa is sitting across the table from me!” but sentence (b) would likely be said when the speaker is actually sitting across the table from Vanessa. In other words, (a) indicates a situation with a high degree of objectivity, in which the speaker views herself from outside the scene as an alter ego, while (b) represents a situation of subjective construal, in which the speaker finds herself inside the scene and therefore does not mention herself in the statement.

2.2 Language-Specific Choice of Structures

Although it is the speaker’s choice as to which viewpoint to take, there are also preferred argument structures that may differ between English and Japanese in describing certain events. For instance, if you are lost on the street, it would be natural to say, in English, “Where am I?” as if you are objectively looking at where you are on a map. In Japanese, however, the most acceptable expression would be *Koko wa doko desu ka* “Where is this place?” as if you are actually at the scene. Similarly, for the English

sentence “Someone stole my wallet,” the most acceptable Japanese equivalent would be “*Watashi wa saifu o nusumaremashita* “(I) had (my) wallet stolen” (examples are from Ikegami, 2008, p. 2), which uses the passive form of a verb. The choice of structure that reflects the narrator’s viewpoint is made based on a language-specific preference.

Sentences produced by second language (L2) learners of Japanese may include expressions that are grammatical but unnatural in such examples as *Kare ga sore o watashi ni oshieta* “He told me about it” and *Dareka ga watashi no ashi o funda* “Someone stepped on my foot.” Such “unnaturalness” is sometimes caused by the learner’s choice of structures that are related to viewpoint. These sentences would sound more natural and acceptable if a donatory auxiliary verb and passive form of a verb are used as in *Kare ga sore o oshiete kureta* “He gave (me) the favour of telling (me) about it” and *Dareka ni ashi o fumareta* “(I) had (my) foot stepped on by someone,” respectively. The way learners often choose such expressions in Japanese is likely influenced by the way they treat viewpoint in their first language. For instance, in Japanese the giving/receiving of a favourable action tends to be described with an action verb accompanied by a donatory auxiliary verb to indicate the viewpoint, but in English the same action is commonly described in a neutral statement with the action verb alone. Also, in Japanese, passive sentences are employed in order to describe a situation by maintaining the viewpoint closer to the receiver of the consequence of an action, whereas in English this does not require the use of a passive sentence, and active sentences tend to be used to describe the same situation.

2.3 Research on Expressions Related to Viewpoint

There are some expressions known to be specifically related to narrative viewpoint in Japanese: (1) passive forms such as *Saifu o torareta* “(I) had (my) wallet stolen” and *Akachan ni nakareta* “The baby cried (on me),” (2) donatory expressions such as *Haha ga kore o kureta* “My mother gave it (to me)” and *Tomodachi ni tetsudatte moratta* “(I) had my friend help (me),” and (3) motion verbs and their auxiliary verbs such as *Keikan ga kita* “A policeman came (here)” and *Ongaku ga kikoete kita* “(I started) hearing music.” In each of these expressions, the narrator is taking a subjective stance from the viewing position of a receiver of the consequences of an event or someone/something coming toward the narrator. Moreover, even when describing a certain event that has happened to someone else, Japanese speakers are known to take a subjective stance by locating themselves within the situation they construe.

Previous studies, which examined Japanese-as-a-foreign language (JFL) learners’ use of expressions of viewpoint such as verbs in passive forms and donatory verbs in storytelling, share similar results among them. That is, learners tend to use fewer expressions of viewpoint than Japanese native speakers do and, as a result, the viewpoint tends to shift from character to character in learners’ narratives (e.g., Minami, 2020; Okugawa, 2007; Watanabe, 2012; Yabuki-Soh, 2017). Yabuki-Soh and Okuno (2022), who investigated JFL learners’ subjective construal in storytelling, also reported that learners used fewer expressions related to viewpoint than Japanese native speakers did. However, the results of their study suggest that learners do not necessarily typically take an objective stance, but that they use other devices such as expressions of emotion and evaluation (e.g., *buji ni* “safely,” *kyuu ni* “suddenly,” and *sugoku* “extremely”) instead, in order to subjectively describe the given events.

3. The Study

3.1 Method

Are JFL learners aware of the concept of narrative viewpoint, and how do they choose active and passive structures when telling a given story? In order to answer these questions, the present study examined the use of passive and active forms that were found in the narratives of 18 English-speaking learners of Japanese at the intermediate and advanced levels who had already studied and were able to use passive structures in Japanese (they had scored 85 percent or above on a grammar test that included Japanese passives). Data collection was conducted through interviews starting in May 2019 that took place in person, as well as in May 2020 and May 2021 that were conducted online. Participants told a story about a cartoon strip that involved multiple characters. Learners' use of active and passive forms was analyzed using the data from Japanese native speakers' narratives (n=14) as the baseline. Participants were also interviewed about specific expressions that they used in their story. This was done to find out what went through learners' minds when they chose those expressions. In the present study, qualitative data are examined in detail.

Before the interview session, a participant background information questionnaire that asked for each participant's gender, age, and previous language-learning experience was used. Part of this questionnaire asked the participants about their preferred language-learning style. They were asked to choose one of four options: (1) "I like to be taught or learn a specific rule or pattern of a language and be given a chance to practise and produce that feature," (2) "I like to be given language-related tasks so that I can figure out a rule or pattern of a language feature from them," (3) "Other (please specify)," and (4) "Not sure."

Figure 1 shows the cartoon strip that was used in the interview (the cartoon was created by the author based on Kim, 2001). In the story, a girl goes shopping, buys an alarm clock and a pair of shoes, and a man tries to steal her bag, but in the end, a policeman shows up and arrests the man.

Figure 1: Cartoon



There are two specific panels from the cartoon that were used as stimulus for the use of active or passive form: panel 7 or 8 and panel 10.

During the interview, participants were asked to describe, first in Japanese, what is happening in the cartoon as if they were telling the story to someone who has not seen the cartoon. They were then, after an interval, asked to tell the same story in English so that their stories would not be a translation of each other. In the follow-up interview,

participants were asked about specific expressions that they used, and what they knew or how they felt about passive forms in Japanese (e.g., “You said ‘...’ to describe what happens in panel 5. Why not ‘...’?”; “When would you think the passive form tends to be used in Japanese?”; and “Do you see any differences in the use of passive forms between English and Japanese?”). The interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission and were transcribed by the author.

3.2 Results

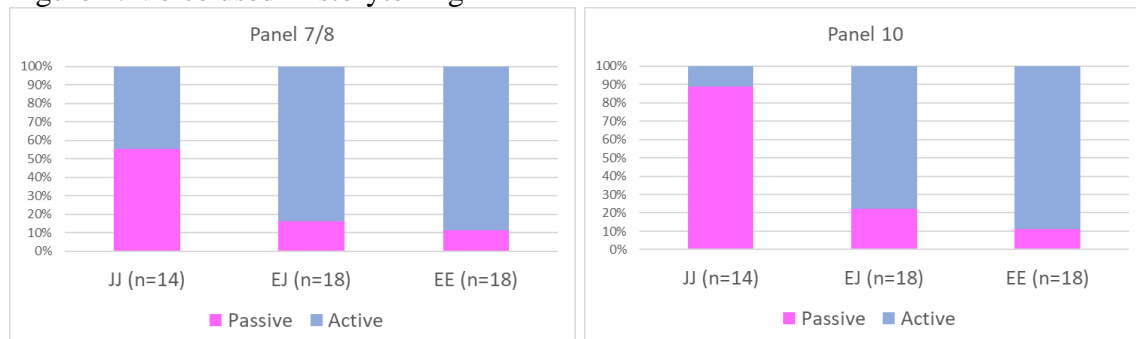
3.2.1 Japanese Native Speakers (Baseline)

Typical passive forms of verbs that were used in the Japanese native speakers’ (NSs) narratives to describe what is happening in the cartoon were *torareru* “taken” and *nusumareru* “stolen” for panel 7 or 8, and *tsukamaru* “caught” and *taiho-sareru* “arrested” for panel 10. As indicated in previous research, Japanese native speakers tended to employ passive sentences to subjectively describe an event from the viewpoint of a character who is adversely affected by the given event. In the case of panel 7 or 8, it is the girl who has her bag stolen. Native speakers’ narratives often included such expressions as *dorobō ni baggu o nusumarete ...* “(she) had (her) bag stolen, and ...” (NS01), *kaban o torareta* “(she) had (her) bag taken” (NS04), and *baggu o sono otoko ni torarete* “(she) had (her) bag taken by the man, and ...” (NS07), which were often accompanied by *shimaimashita* “ended up” In the case of panel 10, most of the Japanese native speakers took a subjective stance and described the event from the thief’s viewpoint, as in *Sono dorobō wa keikan ni taiho-sare mashita* “That thief was arrested by a policeman” (NS01), *Dorobō wa keikan ni tsukamarimashita* “The thief was caught by a policeman” (NS05), and *keisatsu no hito ni tsukamarimashita* “(He) was caught by a police person” (NS08). Native speakers often used almost identical expressions here.

3.2.2 Passive and Active Voice in Narratives

Figure 2 indicates the overall results of the use of passive and active voice found in each group’s narratives to describe panel 7 or 8 and panel 10. JJ stands for Japanese native speakers’ Japanese narratives, EJ is for JFL learners’ Japanese narratives, and EE is for the learners’ English narratives.

Figure 2: Voice used in storytelling



In order to describe panel 7 or 8, about half of the Japanese native speakers employed the passive form and described the event from the girl’s viewpoint, while only 10-15 percent of JFL learners used the passive form both in their Japanese and English narratives. This

pattern is more obvious in panel 10. Almost all Japanese native speakers used the passive form and described the event from the thief's viewpoint, but most of the learners used active voice by having the policeman as the grammatical subject of the sentence to objectively describe the same event.

3.2.3 JFL Learners

JFL learners' (NNSs) use of active and passive forms in their storytelling is now examined in detail, including the questionnaire and interview results.

In the questionnaire, one learner (NNS01) answered that she likes to learn language rules first. She used active voice to describe panel 7 both in Japanese and English (EJ: *Otoko no ko wa onna no ko no kaban o nusumimashita* "The boy stole the girl's bag"; EE: ... the suspicious guy took her bag), while using passive voice to describe panel 10 both in Japanese and English (EJ: ... *keikan ga imashita. Dorobō wa tsukamatta* "... there was a policeman. The thief was caught"; EE: After he got caught, the policeman returned the bag to the lady). The part of her interview transcript where she was asked about the use of passive forms is shown in (2).

- (2) I think it was just a matter of two different ways to say it. So, when I was saying it in Japanese, I was just focusing on telling what I can see, and for English I was doing the same thing. I wasn't exactly, like, trying to translate from Japanese to English. ... I feel like in English, we don't really use passive unless it's like a personal thing. ... When you are describing something that happened to a different person, you would not normally use passive.

While she expresses that she is not translating Japanese to English, this learner appears to have subjectively described panel 10 from the thief's viewpoint both in Japanese and English.

Another learner (NNS02), on the other hand, who answered in the questionnaire that he likes a combination of language rules and tasks, did not use passive voice both in Japanese and English to describe both panel 7 (EJ: *Otoko wa kanojo no kaban o torimashita* "The man took her bag"; EE: Jenny noticed that someone has stolen her bag) and panel 10 (EJ: *Keikan wa kite, dorobō o taiho-shimashita* "The policeman came and arrested the thief"; EE: ... the police showed up and arrested the man). When asked if the way he thinks in English affects the process of saying something in Japanese, he answered as shown in (3).

- (3) I believe so. Because I was thinking, like, the policeman is the subject of it (= what is happening in panel 10), and I was describing what he was doing. ... English is my main language.

Another learner (NNS03), who chose "Not sure" about his preferred learning style, also did not use passive voice both in Japanese and English to describe both panel 7 (EJ: *Ayashii otoko wa Aa-chan no kaban o motte hashiri dashimashita* "The suspicious man started running while holding Aa-chan's bag"; EE: ... the suspicious man is running away with the purse ...) and panel 10 (EJ: *Keikan ga ayashii otoko o tsukamaete imashita* "The policeman was catching the suspicious man"; EE: ... the policeman nearby notices

the thief and is able to catch him quite easily). This learner seemed to like the word *ayashii* “suspicious” and used it to describe the thief many times. Other learners also used similar expressions of emotion and evaluation, perhaps to describe certain events subjectively in their own way. In the follow-up interview, this learner explained how he described the story in Japanese and English, as shown in (4).

- (4) At first, I went through the story in English, and based on that version, I wanted to go from that to Japanese. So, that was kind of the original in a sense ...? [When asked if the way he thinks in English affects his way of thinking in Japanese:] Possibly ... I think, definitely.

There was another learner (NNS12) who claimed in the questionnaire that he preferred language tasks first and did not use passive voice for panel 7 (EJ: *Ayashii otoko wa ushiro kara chikazuite kaban o torimashita* “A suspicious man approached (her) from behind and took (her) bag”; EE: ... a suspicious-looking man approached her from behind. The man grabbed her bag [inaudible] swiftly around her way) and panel 10 (EJ: ... *keikan wa kare ni* taiho-shimashita* “... the policeman arrested him”; EE: ... the police came and arrested him, and ...). Interestingly, however, in the follow-up interview, he seemed to reflect and trace back how he chose to describe panel 10, as indicated in (5).

- (5) I wouldn't say I was following my “English instinct,” but it is more like how I knew how to say it. ... I think I would use passive, like, once I'm more comfortable with it, yeah, cus, I'm familiar with, like, I did remember learning some of it (=passive) independently, but I haven't really used it, passive like *taberareru*? It's like, kind of, I know of them, ... yes, I would use it, this (=panel 10) is like, everyone looked on as he was being arrested? Yeah.

During his reflection, this learner seemed to realize that he could use the passive form in panel 10 as long as he is familiar with the expression.

There was also a case in which a learner (NNS15) used passive voice in Japanese but used active voice in English to describe both panel 7 (EJ: *Kanojo no kaban ga sono otoko ni nusumare te* “Her bag was stolen by the man, and ...”; EE: He steals her basket while she is ...) and panel 10 (EJ: ... *omawari-san ni tsukamatta sō desu* “I hear that (he) was arrested by the police officer”; EE: ... there was a police officer. So, he is able to catch the robber, and ...). He answered in the questionnaire that he prefers language rules first, and he was an advanced-level learner. When his use of Japanese passive voice was pointed out to him in the follow-up interview, he answered as shown in (6).

- (6) Oh, did I? ... saying “she was told by a lady” in English, kind of makes it a bit more “formal” in a way, yeah. ... the passive form in Japanese is more like, “it was done on to me” like [switching to Japanese] 弟にケーキを食べられた、そんな感じで、何かひどいことがあった時に、その形を使う。(“I had my cake eaten by my little brother,” for something like that, I will use the form (=passive) when something terrible has happened.)

This learner seemed to understand when to use the Japanese adversative passive form and consciously used it.

The last example is of a learner (NNS16) who was at as advanced a level as NNS15, but answered in the questionnaire that he prefers language tasks first. He used passive voice in Japanese to describe panel 7, but not in English (EJ: *nusumareru n desu ne, sono mezamashi-dokei ga* “it is the case that it gets stolen, (I mean,) the alarm clock”; EE: a thief comes and takes her bag, and ...). When asked about Japanese passive form, the learner also reflected on his use of adversative passive form as shown in (7).

- (7) Oh, 「行かれた」とか？ I learned about it (=“adversative passive” in class), things like that, but ... 「行かれちゃった」ははっきり覚えてます。それは、日系人のサッカーチームでサッカーやりました。・・・サッカー大会がありました。そこの駐車場でもう一人の人と車を待ってたんです。その車が通り過ぎちゃって、その人が「あ～、行かれちゃった」って言いました。その時、ああ、そう言うんだなって思いました、「行かれた」って。(“Oh, something like “*ikareta*”? I learned about it, things like that, but ... I clearly remember “*ikare-chatta*.” ... I was playing soccer in a Japanese-Canadian soccer team. ... there was a soccer tournament. I was waiting for a car with another person in the parking lot. The car just passed by us, and the person said “Ah, *ikare-chatta*.” At that time, I thought, oh, people say something like “*ikareta*.”

Ikareta is a passive form of *iku* “go,” an intransitive verb, which can be used in Japanese but not in English. This learner, after this language “episode” that he personally experienced, seemed to notice the specific use of adversative passive form *ikareru*, which obviously stayed in his mind.

Overall, JFL learners used Japanese passive forms in a limited way compared to native speakers of Japanese in their narratives. While some learners appear to have their own way of describing subjectivity in storytelling in Japanese (e.g., the use of expressions of emotion such as *ayashii* “suspicious”), most of the learners were not aware of the differences in narrative viewpoint between English and Japanese. Their viewpoints in Japanese were largely found to be similar to those in their English narratives, with a few exceptions for learners at the advanced level.

4. Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

The results of the present study indicate the importance of learners’ awareness of the notion of viewpoint in Japanese narratives. The way the learners used passive forms in their storytelling in Japanese was likely influenced by the way they treat viewpoint in their English storytelling. There are functional differences between Japanese and English narratives in the use of expressions of viewpoint that include passive forms, and JFL learners need to pay more attention to the differences in narrative viewpoint when describing certain events in Japanese. As the study’s interview data findings show, JFL learners may benefit from noticing such differences between their first language and the target language. Japanese language instructors are encouraged to explore ways to help learners acquire the nuanced use of expressions of viewpoint and to accommodate them in their instruction.

As Ikegami suggests, “...rather than trying to let the students learn ‘grammatical rules’ by heart, emphasis should be shifted to trying to let them learn by experiencing the cognitive stances preferably taken by the Japanese speaker in construing and encoding a situation linguistically” (2016, p. 301). In conclusion, it would be beneficial for learners to acquire the preferred cognitive stances and associated expressions in context, and to employ structural devices related to subjectivity in construal in order for them to effectively describe certain events in Japanese.

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