Expressing transitive events in Japanese: Evaluation of cues in L2 corpus data

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This study takes a functional approach to language acquisition and uses corpus analysis to examine what kind of cues are available in the input provided for learners of Japanese and what cues learners themselves use in their own output. I focus on cues that are used to encode transitive events in Japanese: case-marking (nominative -ga and accusative -o), word order (canonically SOV), and animacy (the subject is typically animate and the object is typically inanimate). Unlike English, in which word order is relatively rigid and thus is a strong cue for interpreting transitive events, the language input learners of Japanese receive seems to be underspecified, as case markers can be omitted, NPs can be dropped, and word order is flexible. Using Bates and MacWhinney’s (1989) Competition Model framework, I analyze semi-structured interviews involving Japanese native speakers (input) and L2 learners of Japanese (output) taken from the International Corpus of Japanese as a Second Language. I compare L1-English and L1-Korean learners of Japanese to uncover possible influence from their L1—Might Korean learners utilize case-marking cues more, while English learners rely more on word order, based on the experience with their L1? The results show that the animacy is the most informative cue in both native speakers’ and L2 learners’ speech. Despite the L1 differences, there is virtually no difference between two L1 groups’ input or output with regard to the relative importance of these cues. In addition, while the previous studies on adult processing suggest that case-marking is the single most reliable cue for Japanese native speakers, such information is scarce in the input provided for learners, much like what has been found for children.