

*Use of English by Japanese Learners: Study of Errors*, by Tomoko Kaneko

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*Use of English by Japanese Learners: Study of Errors* is a collection of nine papers written by Prof. Tomoko Kaneko and published in *Gakuen* between 2000 and 2009. Its main characteristic is that it studies the English of Japanese students on the basis of learner corpora, i.e. electronic collections of data (written texts or transcripts of speech) produced by foreign/second language learners. In this context, Prof. Kaneko can be said to have a great deal of experience and expertise. Not only was she an early member of the *International Corpus of Learner English* (ICLE) project, one of the first attempts to build a large corpus of learner English, and later of the *Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage* (LINDSEI), the spoken counterpart of ICLE, but she may even be said to have had a pioneering role in the compilation of learner corpora. In 1987-1988 (that is, before the ICLE project was even started), she was involved with Prof. Ikegami from Showa Women's University in the collection of over 200 essays written by Japanese university students, to be sent to Prof. Randolph Quirk at University College London. More than 20 years later, Prof. Kaneko received the 2010 Award for Outstanding Corpus Studies from the Japan Association for English Corpus Studies. All this should be evidence enough that the author of the book knows what she is talking about.

The book is divided into three main sections, one devoted to spoken language grammar, the second to spoken language pragmatics and the third to written language. These sections are preceded by a preface and an introduction that set the scene for the whole volume, as well as a conclusion, which emphasizes the potential role of learner corpora in language teaching. Each main section exhibits the same structure, with three individual studies followed by a helpful summary in the form of tables briefly recapitulating the research questions, participants, data, analysis, results and discussion of each study. This structure makes it easy to compare the nine studies and to see the links between them. As regards the studies themselves, the title of the book is perhaps slightly misleading, in that (i) Japanese learner English represents the focus of all the studies, but native English as well as learner English produced by other learner populations are considered too, as reference points to identify the specific features of Japanese learner English; and (ii) error analysis plays a key role in the studies, but a wide range of other methodologies and techniques are also employed to gain insights into the topics investigated, for example frequency analysis (to determine over- and underuse in the interlanguage), type/token ratio, dispersion plot, extraction of *n*-grams, but also more qualitative approaches involving manual treatment of the data. The first study of the volume is devoted to the use of the past tense in the Japanese component of LINDSEI (LINDSEI-JP). Correct and incorrect uses of past tense forms were tagged and divided between regular, irregular, *BE* and auxiliary verbs. One surprising finding was that irregular verbs were used more correctly than the other types of verbs. Among regular verbs, it was interesting to notice that those expressing objective facts were used more correctly than those expressing the subject's feelings. In the second chapter the framework of

cognitive linguistics is applied to the study of vertical axis prepositions (*above, over, under, below*). Data from the *National Institute of Information and Communications Technology Japanese Learner English Corpus* (NICT JLE Corpus), representing different levels of proficiency, were compared with native data from the *British National Corpus* and revealed that a gain in proficiency seems to go hand in hand with a more frequent and more varied usage of the prepositions but also with more errors. The third chapter deals with Japanese students' use of their mother tongue (L1) when speaking English. In LINDSEI-JP, the proportion of L1 words amounts to less than 0.4%. Among these, interjections turned out to be particularly common, especially in the lower-proficiency group. The next three chapters deal with pragmatic aspects of Japanese learner English: the expression of negative emotions, apologies and requests. They rely on data from LINDSEI-JP or the NICT JLE Corpus, used in conjunction with native English corpora. The analysis of negative emotional expressions, in addition, examines data produced by Chinese and French learners. What these studies clearly demonstrate is that learners tend to have difficulty expressing pragmatic meanings. Their repertoire of expressions is more limited than that of native speakers (NSs), cf. for instance low-level Japanese learners' predilection for the word *sorry* to apologize, and they also use different (sequences of) strategies, e.g. a predominance of conventionally indirect strategies to make requests (while NSs prefer indirect strategies) or a tendency to increase directness in sequences of requests (NSs, by contrast, usually keep the same degree of directness). Culture also seems to play a role here. Thus, the fact that the Japanese prefer to avoid face-threatening acts may explain why they use proportionally more minimizers than the other learner populations when expressing negative emotions. The last three studies of the book are all based on written data from ICLE. First, articles, which are notoriously difficult for Japanese learners, were investigated on the basis of an error-tagged section of the Japanese component of the corpus. The corpus data confirmed Japanese learners' problems with the use of articles and showed, among others, that indefinite articles are more problematic than definite articles, basic functions more problematic than extended and exceptional uses, and articles used in free combinations more problematic than those used in idioms or lexical phrases. The following chapter on prepositions makes a distinction between free and bound uses, and reveals that bound prepositions lead to more errors among Japanese learners than free prepositions, and also that, compared with other learner populations, the Japanese students use verb + preposition combinations less often to refer to activities (e.g. *look at*), but more often to refer to communication in the passive (e.g. *be expressed in*). The last study looks at lexical phrases in Japanese learner English, compared with native English. Japanese learners appear to use fewer lexical phrases (especially 3- and 4- grams) and a more limited variety of them. They also make many errors, both in the form of the phrase and in the linguistic context in which it can be used.

Prof. Kaneko's book nicely illustrates the advantages of using learner corpora to explore and characterize interlanguage. It shows the wide range of topics that can be addressed, as well as the different approaches that can be adopted (e.g. study of a learner variety for its own sake, comparison with native data or data from other learner populations). At the same time, the book struck me as a

somewhat atypical example of learner corpus research (LCR) - though in a good way. Six out of the nine chapters investigate speech (while writing usually receives more attention) and three concern pragmatics (a neglected area in LCR). As against most learner corpus studies which rely on raw text, the studies brought together in this volume often involve some sort of annotation (mainly error-tagging or problem-oriented tagging). Measures of proficiency, which are often missing from learner corpora, are included in several of these studies, which makes it possible to examine the development of certain features according to proficiency level. Besides being considered as a group, learners are sometimes also viewed as individuals, as in Study 7, where different profiles are distinguished according to the number and type of article errors made. Multiple native norms are recognized and used in comparison with learner data, for example British and New Zealand English in Study 4, and American, Canadian and New Zealand English in Study 6. Finally, the author is not only interested in the results per se, but also in what they can say about the process of foreign language learning (cf. the role of chunk memorization among Japanese learners), an issue that many studies in LCR fail to discuss. And while a few minor points of criticism could be raised (e.g. shortage of corpus examples, lack of details about what language items hide behind certain category labels, occasional repetition of some information across the papers, relatively superficial treatment of certain results), some of them can be related to the format in which the papers were originally published, and the others should not detract from the overall quality of the book, which is a fine piece of scholarship that should be of interest to all readers (both Japanese and international) working within the frame of interlanguage research.