

Underpassivization Errors by Japanese EFL Learners: A Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract—It is widely known that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners wrongly produce passives with intransitive verbs such as *happen* and *appear*, which is called overpassivization. This study aims to explore constructions with the prototypical dative verb *give* and provide a theoretical account of errors that Japanese EFL learners frequently make based on data collected from the Japanese EFL Learner Corpus. The results reveal cases in which the sentence looks active, but its interpretation is passive, called underpassivization. For example, I gave this book, we infer that “I” is the person who offered this toy to someone. However, a detailed analysis reveals cases in which “I” refers to the recipient of the toy; that is, the speaker intended to say “I was given this toy.” This corpus-based study assumes that underpassivization errors are created by moving the recipient originating in VP to the specifier position of IP, the subject position.

Keywords—underpassivization, overpassivization, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the dative alternation

I. INTRODUCTION

This study explores grammatical errors that Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners make with the verb *give*, which is a typical dative verb—an error which I refer to as “underpassivization” [1]. Moreover, it offers a theoretical analysis of underpassivization and attempts to explain how it occurs. Verbs such as *give* and *send* are dative verbs and allow alternation between two constructions: double object and prepositional dative constructions [2, 3]. Consider the following examples.

Example (1):

- a. I gave Mary this book.
- b. I gave this book to Mary.

In Example (1a), the recipient *Mary* is placed before the direct object *this book*. This type of constructions is called the double object construction. In contrast, in Example (1b), the direct object is followed by the recipient with the preposition *to*. This is an example of a prepositional dative construction. Verbs such as *buy* are also dative verbs; however, the preposition *for* is required in a prepositional dative construction. This is shown below.

Example (2):

- a. I bought Mary this book.
- b. I bought this book for Mary.

Underpassivization errors occur when transitive verbs appear in active constructions even though they should be used in passive constructions. For example, let us consider Example (3).

Example (3):

I gave this book.

Example (3) lacks an indirect object. If you hear someone saying Example (3), you will probably think that *I* is the person offering *this book* to someone else. However, in Section 3, I show that there are cases in which *I* is the person who receives *this book*. In this case, the sentence appears active on the surface, but the speaker has an intention that is equal to the passive sentence, as in Example (4).

Example (4)

I was given this book.

This study aims to answer the following research questions.

Example (5)

- a. Based on the research on overpassivization, what structure is a sentence with underpassivization supposed to have?
- b. What do underpassivization errors have in common with overpassivization errors, which are frequently observed among EFL learners?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews the research on overpassivization errors with intransitive verbs and presents [4], who analyzes the development of the English the dative alternation by L1 English-speaking children. Section III introduces the Japanese EFL Learner (JEFLL) Corpus (the JEFLL Corpus) and presents the results of the dative alternation by Japanese EFL learners. Furthermore, it offers a theoretical analysis of underpassivization errors based on overpassivization errors. Finally, Section IV concludes the paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Overpassivization Errors

Overpassivization is a well-known error that Japanese EFL learners make [5–7]. The same errors are also identifiable among Chinese and Korean EFL learners [8]. Examples (6) and (7) are representative examples of the overpassivization errors.

Example (6):

* What was happened this morning?

(Kondo 2023: 147)

Example (7):

*The letter was arrived this morning.

(Kondo 2023: 153)

The verbs *happen* and *arrive* are intransitive; therefore, passivization is not allowed. Instead, they should appear in the active voice, as in Examples (8) and (9), respectively.

Example (8):

What happened this morning? (Kondo 2023: 147)

Example (9):

The letter arrived this morning. (Kondo 2023: 153 [6])

Other intransitive verbs that are often overpassivized are *appear*, *die*, and *exist*.

Intransitive verbs can be classified into two types: unergative and unaccusative. An unergative verb has an agent as its subject. Representative unergative verbs include *run* and *laugh*, as in Examples (10) and (11), respectively.

Example (10):

John ran.

Example (11):

She laughed loudly.

In contrast, unaccusative verbs are intransitive verbs whose grammatical subjects are not equal to their semantic subjects. *Happen*, *arrive*, *exist*, and *appear* are representative unaccusative verbs, as shown in Examples (8) and (9), respectively. Wakabayashi assumes that unergative and unaccusative verbs have different positions on the subject. Consider the following examples:

Example (12):

John ran. (Unergative verb)

Example (13):

The letter arrived. (Unaccusative verb)

When the verb is unergative, the subject is base-generated in the specifier position of VP and then moves to the specifier position of TP, as shown in Fig. 1.

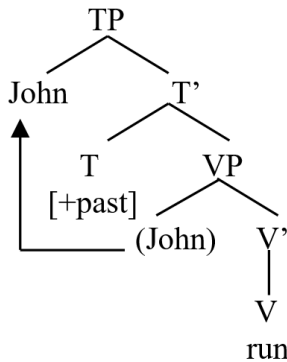


Fig. 1. Structure of Example (12) with an unergative verb.

Conversely, the subject in Example (13) is base-generated in the object position of the verb and then moves to the specifier position of TP, as seen in Fig. 2.

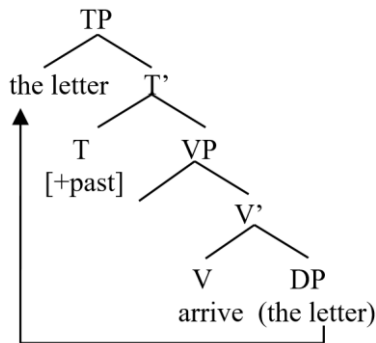


Fig. 2. Structure of Example (13) with an unaccusative verb.

Since the subject is base-generated in the object position, the sentence structure is similar to that of passivization with a transitive verb, as in Example (14). First, the object originates

in the position immediately after the verb and then moves to the subject position, as shown in Fig. 3.

Example (14):

The cake was made.

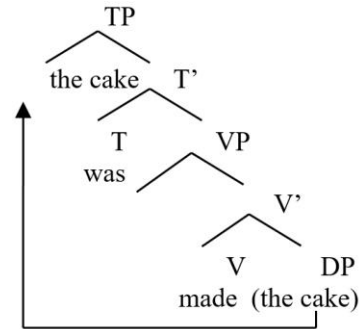


Fig. 3. Structure of Example (14) with a transitive verb [5].

Wakabayashi [7] argues that, in analogy with grammatical passivization like in Example (14), structures such as those in Fig. 3 are familiar to EFL learners, leading to overpassivization errors. Moreover, EFL learners tend to prefer active sentences when the subject is animate and passive sentences when the subject is inanimate. This provides the logic that overpassivization occurs in EFL writing when the verb is not an unergative verb, but an unaccusative verb whose subject can be inanimate. Based on Wakabayashi [7], Example (15) is assumed to have the structure shown in Fig. 4.

Example (15):

The letter was arrived.

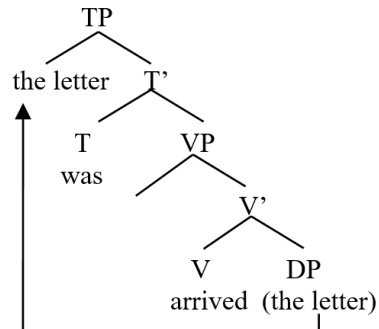


Fig. 4. Overpassivization structure of Example (15)

B. The Dative Alternation

It is widely accepted that English-speaking children acquire double object constructions earlier than prepositional dative constructions, although some children show the opposite trend [9, 10]. Fukaya [] investigated the development of the dative alternation spoken by English-speaking children using the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) database [11] and supported the view of the early acquisition of double object constructions [4, 11]. Fukaya [4] not only investigated the dative alternation, as in Examples (16) and (17) (for convenience, she calls the double object construction Type A and the prepositional dative construction Type B), but also constructions missing some elements, as in Examples (18) and (19).

Example (16):

Type A (= double object constructions)

a. Give me screwdriver. (Adam 2;03.04)

- b. Nobody will give him a carrot. (Aran 2;07.07)
(Fukaya 2022: 37)

Example (17):

Type B (= prepositional dative constructions)

- a. Let me give that to Poy now. (Nina 2;09.26)
b. Nonna gave them to you for Christmas. (Nina 3;02.12)
(Fukaya 2022: 38)

Example (18)

Type C

- a. Give me. (Naomi 1;11.21)
b. Give that lady. (Aran 2;03.02)
(Fukaya 2022: 38)

Example (19)

Type D

- a. Give paper pencil. (Adam 2;03.04)
b. Ellie gave my balloon. (Nina 2;00.03)
(Fukaya 2022: 38)

In Example (18), the direct object is missing, whereas in Example (19) the indirect object is missing. The data suggest that such constructions are observed in early periods, especially before double object constructions are observed.

III. DATA

A. The Japanese EFL Learner (JEFLL) Corpus

To answer the research questions in Example (5), I collected data from the Japanese EFL Learner (JEFLL) Corpus (Tono 2007) [12]. The JEFLL Corpus compiles writings by Japanese junior and senior students and contains approximately 670,000 words and more than 10,000 writings. Students were required to write about one of the following six topics within 20 min.

Example (20):

- a. Breakfast
b. Earthquake
c. *Otoshidama*: a Japanese New Year's tradition
d. School festival
e. Urashima Taro: a Japanese fairy tale
f. A scary dream

The students were unable to use dictionaries in their writing. Instead, they were allowed to describe the object in the Roman alphabet or Japanese when they did not know how to describe it in English. For example, consider sentence (21). The student who wrote this sentence did not know the English word *turtle*; therefore, they wrote *kame* instead, which means "turtle" in Japanese.

Example (21):

The *kame* (= "turtle") gave him a box.

B. Method

In this analysis, I collected constructions involving *give*. First, I sought all constructions with any form of *give*. Thus, sentences not only containing *give*, but other forms such as *gives* and *gave*, were collected as well. Moreover, the incorrect form of *gave*—the word *gived*—was also collected. The following is representative examples.

Example (22):

- a. Please give me a chance.
b. Breakfast gives me the power.

- c. He went to the town and he gave a lot of his kindness to the people.

- d. Everyone gived me some money in *Otoshidama* in January 1st this year.

Following Fukaya [4], the data were divided into four categories, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Four types investigated

Type	Pattern
A	SVO ₁ O ₂ John gave Mary his book.
B	SVO ₂ to O ₁ John gave his book to Mary.
C	SVO ₁ John gave Mary.
D	SVO ₂ John gave his book.

Types A and B are called dative alternations. Type A is the double object construction and Type B is the prepositional dative construction. Moreover, Types C and D were included in the analysis. Type C is a construction lacking the direct object, like with the phrase like *John gave Mary*. Type D lacks the indirect object, like in the example *John gave his book*.

In this analysis, examples such as Examples (23) and (24) were extracted from the data set: Example (23) involves a phrasal verb, *give up*, and Example (24) is a passive sentence.

Example (23):

But he didn't give up.

Example (24):

But I was given only 20,000 yen at last.

C. Data Analysis

The following table shows the number of phrases of each type.

Table 2. Results of the four types

Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Total
284	83	13	128	508

Of the 508 cases, 284 were considered Type A. The second most frequently used was Type D ($n = 128$). These are representative examples of each type.

Example (25):

Type A

- a. She gave him a strange box.
b. It gives me many things.
c. It is easy for my mother to give me some bread.

Example (26):

Type B

- a. Then she gave a box, *tamatebako* to him.
b. There is a habit that adults give money to children in Japan.
c. For instance, in the bus, we give a seat to the old man.

Example (27):

Type C

- a. We made a *Udon* and gave some people.
b. Give me, please.
c. He give some men.

Example (28):

Type D

- a. At last he gave a box.
- b. We gave three pieces of music.
- c. ... many people we must give tea and sweets, ...

D. Results and Discussion

This subsection explores the two research questions presented in the Introduction.

Research Question 1: Based on the research on overpassivization, what structure is a sentence with underpassivization supposed to have?

Table 2 shows the high occurrence of Type D phrases. The question arises as to what made Japanese EFL learners produce Type D sentences, whereas the number of Type C phrases was small. I investigated the Type D cases and focused on the direct objects used in each sentence. A detailed investigation revealed that money-related words were used as direct objects, as indicated in Table 3. Representative examples are provided in Examples (29) and (30).

Money	Others	Total
83 (65%)	45 (35%)	128

Example (29):

Money

- a. I gave much *Otoshidama*.
- b. Because I have just given *Otoshidama*, so I haven't bought anything yet.
- c. And this year I gave more money than I had expected.

Example (30):

Others

- a. In our class festival, each homeroom classes give something.
- b. We gave three pieces of music.
- c. Please give some good advice.

The existence of money-related objects suggests that Type D should be classified into two types: the Genuine Type D and the Apparent Type D. The Genuine Type D is simple as it just lacks the indirect objects. On the other hand, the Apparent Type D is what I refer to as underpassivization, and all the examples in Example (29) are considered to be underpassivization errors. *Otoshidama*, used in Examples (29a) and (29b), is a traditional Japanese custom during New Year's holidays when relatives get together. Children receive *Otoshidama*, New Year's money, from their grandparents or relatives. With this in mind, let us compare Examples (31) with (32).

Example (31):

They gave some *Otoshidama*.

Example (32):

I gave much *Otoshidama*.

On the one hand, Examples (31) and (32) appear similar because they both have an SVO structure. However, based on the traditional Japanese custom of *Otoshidama*, I argue that the intention of Example (32) is completely different from that of Example (31): in Example (31), the subject *they* is the person offering money to someone else. However, in

Example (32), whose subject is *I*, it is difficult to conclude that the student has given *Otoshidama* to another person. Instead, we can infer that the student was a receiver of money. Therefore, I argue that the student intended to write the following passive sentence:

Example (33):

I was given much *Otoshidama*.

I would like to call such phenomena "underpassivization errors." Examples (29a) and (29b) should be passivized, as shown in Examples (34a) and (34b), respectively.

Example (34):

- a. Because I have been just given *Otoshidama*, so I haven't bought anything yet.
- b. And this year I was given more money than I had expected.

Of 128 Type D cases, 71 (55.4%) concerned underpassivization errors.

The question at this point is how an underpassivization error is produced. I argue that the semantic differences between Examples (31) and (32) reflect structural differences in the subject position. In Example (31), the subject is generated in the specifier position of VP and then moves to the specifier position of TP, as shown in Fig. 5.

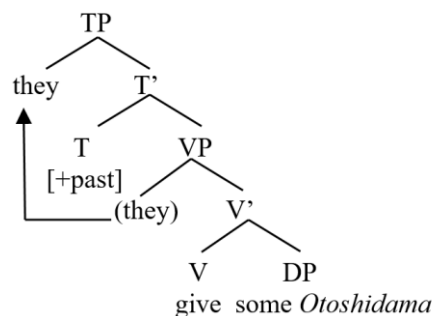


Fig. 5. Structure of the genuine Type D.

On the other hand, the subject in Example (32), *I*, is generated in the object position; therefore, the pronoun *me* first appears in the base-position and then changes to *I* after moving to the specifier position of TP. This is illustrated in Fig. 6.

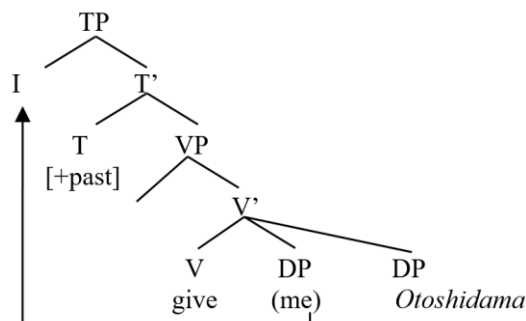


Fig. 6. The underpassivized structure of Example (32).

This is where a mismatch between the speaker and the listener occurs. Based on canonical sentences, the listener understands that *I* in Example (32) is the receiver of *Otoshidama*. However, on the speaker's side, the pronoun is assigned its semantic role of a receiver in the object position. Therefore, the speaker intends to say *I was given much*

Otoshidama, although the verb *be* leaves out.

Research Question 2: What do underpassivization errors have in common with overpassivization errors, which are frequently observed errors among EFL learners?

According to Shirahata *et al.* [5] and Kondo [6], overpassivization occurs when the verb is unaccusative and not unergative (see Examples (6) and (7)). In other words, animate subjects appear in active voice, whereas inanimate subjects appear in passive voice. Shirahata *et al.* [5] argue that this tendency can be applied to every one of us. Given this, it is clear that underpassivization has elements in common with overpassivization: the subject of underpassivization is animate and EFL learners might conclude that the active sentence is more natural than its passive counterpart. On the other hand, the subject of overpassivization is inanimate; therefore, the passive sentence sounds grammatical and as a result, overpassivization is produced.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined the dative alternation with *give* written by Japanese EFL learners, focusing on constructions that seem to lack indirect objects. A detailed investigation revealed that, among such cases, there were examples in which the sentence failed to be passivized, which I call underpassivization. Furthermore, this analysis, based on previous research on overpassivization errors, showed that underpassivization has a structure in which the subject is base-generated in the specifier of VP, shedding light on the similarity between overpassivization and underpassivization. Further research is required to explain why underpassivization errors occur in the writing of EFL learners.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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