A Descriptive-Comparative Note on Verb Transitivity in English and Japanese

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In presenting this condensation of a far longer study, the author wishes first to make his own analysis of transitive and intransitive verbs in English, using the following steps to discriminate verb transitivity. First, all verbs are divided into two groups, the verb 'be' and its substitutes, and all other verbs. Second, this group of all verbs other than 'be' and its substitutes are classified according to the possibility of taking the objective case of a pronoun such as 'him', 'them', 'himself', and 'themselves'. The members of this second group which are capable of taking the objective case under these circumstances can be considered to be transitive verbs.

In dealing specifically with substitution and transformation, it is clear that the substitution technique is not necessarily omnipotent as the criterion of discrimination of verb transitivity. There are some examples in which 'him', 'them', 'himself', 'themselves' or 'whom' cannot be substituted. However, even in these cases, pluralization will help this difficulty. If pluralization should be difficult or impossible, one then properly has recourse to the two transformation techniques set forth by Zelling S. Harris in his article, "Co-occurrence and Transformation in Linguistic Structure." Isolating the so-called active-passive transformation set forth therein, Harris sets up the following transformation rule:

\[ N_1 \text{ v } N_2 \text{ } N_2 \text{ v be Ven by } N_1 \text{ (passive)} \]

For example: The children were drinking milk. Milk was being drunk by the children. Also,

\[ N_1 \text{ v } N_2 \text{ } X \quad N_2 \text{ v be Ven X by } N_1 \text{ or } \]
\[ N_2 \text{ v be Ven by } N_1 \text{ } X \]

(X represents whatever follows N in the transformed second active sentence.)

1 Language, XXXIII (1957), No. 3 (Part I), 283–340
For example: The crowd trapped the secret police in their barracks. The secret police were trapped in their barracks by the crowd, or The secret police were trapped by the crowd in their barracks.

These rules are common rules which are well used in general. Accordingly, even if objective-case-form-substitution is not so effective, verbs in such structures can be reckoned as transitive verbs if this rule can be applied. If not, they are left generally intransitive, or in a few cases transitive. The area of application of this rule is also limited, and much narrower than the area in which the substitution technique is effective. This is the reason why transformation cannot be the main technique for the discrimination.

Within these definitions of what is transitive and what is intransitive, we can classify five groups of verbs: group (1) is always transitive, group (2) is sometimes transitive and sometimes intransitive, group (3) is always intransitive, group (4) is sometimes equational, intransitive or transitive, and group (5) sometimes equational or intransitive.

The following lists are extracted out of the *Active Vocabulary*. The criteria to discriminate each group are the writer’s own method referring to Hornby’s *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary*. As a result, among the total number of 347 verbs, the verbs belonging to group (1) are 78 (22.5%), group (2) 239 (68.8%), group (3) 14 (4%), group (4) 11 (3.3%) and group (5) 5 (1.4%).

The following is the list of verb groups.

*Group (1):* Always transitive.

admire, amuse, blame, bury, buy, cause, comfort, correct, damage, describe, discover, earn, employ, excuse, force, hand, have, imagine, interest, invite, love, mean, name, order, pardon, praise, present, raise, regard, repair, shock, suppose, surprise, thank, use, warn, welcome.

*Group (2):* Sometimes transitive and sometimes intransitive.

act, agree, allow, bathe, beat, begin, blow, breathe, call, carry, chance, complain, consider, cook, cry, cut, dance, deal, direct, do, drink, drown, eat, end, enter, examine, face, fear, find, forget, give, guess, hear, hide, hold, improve, inform, judge, keep, know, lead, leave, live, manage, marry, meat, mind, move, notice, offer, owe, paint, pay, play, point, promise, read, remember, return, save, satisfy, sell, settle, shoot, show, smoke, sound, spend, stop, study, suffer, talk, tear, think, throw, touch, try, understand, vary, wait, walk, warm, waste, water, weigh, wish, work, write.

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Group (3): Always intransitive.
appear, belong, consist, cost, die, depend, fall, happen, last, lie, listen,
quarrel, result, rise.

dream, get, grow, feel, run, ride, smell, stand, strike, taste, turn.

be, come, go, remain, seem.

The list is useful in the lexical classification. Can it, however, be useful in
the concrete utterance? Genuine transitive and intransitive verbs are easy
to discriminate if they are remembered. However, the double-sided verbs
must be based upon the above-mentioned syntactic criteria. What has to
be considered carefully is the elliptical use. For instance, 'I drink beer'
can be the elliptical sentence 'I drink' in some conversation. Is there any
difference between 'drink' in the elliptical expression 'I drink (beer)' and that
in 'We eat and drink in order to live'? There seems to be no difference
between the two from the structural point of view. We can discriminate
these two only according to the context. Such is the case with inverted
sentences such as emphatic and interrogative sentences for instance, 'It is
beer that I want to drink' and 'What will you drink?'

This, in a much truncated form, outlines the principles upon which the
analysis of verb transitivity in English has been conducted for the purposes
of leading to the comparison between English and Japanese. The analysis
was based on a mechanical technique, and hence there is indeed some residue.
It must be said that the structural meaning can scarcely be utilized in the
mechanical analysis. The present writer admits empirically such structural
meanings as (1) actor-action-goal in transitive verb construction, (2) actor-
action-modifier (instrument, place, duration, etc.) in intransitive verb construc-
tion, and (3) equation between the subject and the predicate in equational
verb construction, but he cannot deny that the meaning of these three are
too vague. It is dangerous to describe verb transitivity in terms of meaning.

Although aware that this is not a complete analysis, and further question-
ing whether a complete analysis is ever possible, the author feels that transi-
tivity is structurally discernible, rather than semantically, and has therefore
proceeded along the lines of applying the mechanical criteria in structural
linguistics.

Turning to Japanese, the typical verb-head construction with the meaning
of actor-action-goal is Noun-particle 'o'-Verb, although the N-'o'-V pattern
may not necessarily cover all the construction patterns with the meaning, actor-
action-goal. The method of discrimination put forward by Bloch is limited to members of paired verbs with common underlying words and their derivatives or root-related formations, but the extremely limited number of paired verbs in Japanese means that the method can be applied only partially. Mikami's method of classification according to the possibility of active-passive transformation is limited by the fact that active-passive transformation in Japanese does not occur as often as in English.

Observing this, the author felt that a more effective method should be sought, and might be found. He used as his thesis the goal concept of transitivity. He chose for his experiment the 1399 Japanese verbs listed in the *Kokugo jiten*, wherein the criterion for inclusion is utility and frequency of use in Japanese, without considering any other factors. Of the 1399 verbs, 594 proved to be transitive preceded by the particle *o*. The next step was the creation of four categories defining functions of *o*. The first category shows the goal of action; the second, the place where some action passes; the third, the place where action originates; and the fourth, the time when some action occurs. Of the 594 verbs, 580, or 97.7 per cent, fitted into the first category, making clear the confidence that can be placed in the particle *o* as an indicator, although not an infallible one. It did, however, appear to justify the classification of all verbs into transitive and intransitive verbs according to the syntactic level using the particle *o*. This led to the creation of three categories: genuine transitive, genuine intransitive, and double-sided verb groups. Double-sided verbs just as in English are the verbs capable of both transitive and intransitive use. For instance, *iku* (go) can appear not only in the sentence *michi o iku* but also in *gakkō ni iku*. In the latter sentence, there is no possibility of the addition of objects followed by the particle *o*.

There can be three subgroups of double-sided verbs:

1. the verbs which can be transitive verbs (I) such as *iku* (go), *kuru* (come), *törü* (pass);

2. the verbs of the same inflection both in transitive and intransitive verb use such as *hiraku* (open), *masu* (increase);

3. the verbs which can be transitive verbs (II) following the particle *o*, and also can be intransitive verbs unnecessary to supplement the object noun preceding the particle *o*, such as *nomu* (drink) and *taberu* (eat).

Genuine transitive verbs have their two subclasses; transitive verbs in the

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a 行く 道を行く 学校に行く  b 行く 来る 遠る  c 開く 増す  d 飲む 食べる
paired verbs such as *tatsu-tateru* (stand), *okiru-okosu* (make one get up); and the other verbs which can be transitive verbs (II) such as *motsu* (have), *suru* (do).

There can be elliptical expressions in which transitive verbs do not take the particle *o* and object nouns, but these are different from intransitive verb expressions. These elliptical expressions occur both in genuine transitive and double-sided verbs.

Genuine intransitive verbs have their two subclasses, that is to say, an intransitive group of paired verbs such as *tatsu-tateru* (stand), *okiru-okosu* (get up), and the other intransitive verbs such as *niou* (smell), *shinu* (die). There is no elliptical expression in such intransitive verbs group.

Here is the list of the above-mentioned verb groups. The following verbs were selected at random by the author himself.

I) **Genuine Transitive Verbs**
   a) transitive verbs in the class of paired verbs
   b) transitive verbs other than the paired verbs
      *motsu* (have), *daku* (hold), *nozomu* (hope), *osoreru* (fear), *kōmuru* (suffer), *nageru* (throw), *ataeru* (give).

II) **Genuine Intransitive Verbs**
   a) intransitive verbs in the paired verbs
   b) other intransitive verbs
      *niru* (resemble), *iru* (be), *iru* (need), *aru* (be), *saku* (bloom), *yomeru* (can read), *naru* (become), *oiru* (grow old), *shinu* (die), *yaseru* (become thin).

III) **Double-Sided Verbs**
   a) verbs which can be used as the transitive verbs (I)
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**b) verbs of the same inflection both in transitive and intransitive use**

- **hiraku** ('open' the window; the window 'opens'), **akeru** ('open' the door; night 'dawns'), **tareru** ('hang' a curtain; hair 'hangs' down);
- **fuku** (wind 'blows'; 'blow' on hot water to cool it), **warau** ('laugh' at him; he 'laughs'); **kansei suru** ('complete' something; the work 'is completed').

**c) the other verbs which can be sometime independently used as intransitive verbs and sometimes used as transitive verbs**

- **nomu** (drink), **taberu** (eat), **kiru** (wear), **yomu** (read), **benkyo suru** (study), **kaku** (write), **yorokobu** (be pleased), **kanashimu** (feel sorry), **okoru** (get angry), **nageku** (grieve), **kuffi suru** (contrive), **sekkei suru** (draw up a plan).

**Turning to the comparison,** a few observations and conclusions are in order.

1) **Different** as the structure of verb transitivity in English and Japanese may be, the structural meaning, *i.e.*, action-goal relationship, is common to both languages. (It is interesting to note in passing that of the 338 English verbs listed in the analysis of English transitivity above, 320, or 94.6 per cent, can be translated into Japanese transitive verbs, with only 18, or 5.6 per cent, failing this test.)

2) In English, the substitutability of object case form of pronouns such as 'him' and 'them' is the main criterion, whereas in Japanese the possibility of taking the particle 'o' before the verb is the principal criterion.

The second part of the study concerned the application of this analysis and comparison to the study of language learning. The objective, as stated notably by Kleinjans, is to recognize the necessity of minimizing the psychological interference between stimulus and response (production) by a systematic

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* 去る 行く 歩く 走る 出る 登る 着る 下る 泳ぐ 入る 渡る 潜る 隠す 見る 会う ある あける 垂れる 吹く 笑う 完成する ｃ 飲む 食べる 薫る 飴む 勉強する 書く 喜ぶ 悲しむ 怒る 嘆く 工夫する 設計する
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comparison of language and then anticipating the relative degree of difficulty in learning various structures.

For the purposes of this study, the assumption was made that the minimum of interference would be found in those constructions in which the pattern is most nearly similar in both languages, and that the interference would increase in direct proportion to the difference in patterns. Another factor considered was frequency of occurrence of patterns. Accordingly, 439 English sentences similar to the Japanese Noun-particle 'o'-Transitive verb pattern were extracted from Active Vocabulary. Of the 439 examples, 270 were found to fall into the English Transitive Verb-Noun pattern (They repaired the road) corresponding to the Japanese Noun-particle 'o'-Transitive verb pattern (Karera wa michi o naoshita). The assumption was made that, due to the frequency of the respective patterns in both languages, Japanese students studying English would be much accustomed to this simple pattern, and that there would be a minimum of interference. Other patterns were similarly analyzed and predictions made, taking into consideration both frequency of occurrence and difference and complexity of form.

The assumptions were put to the test when one hundred first-year students of Shakujii High School and fifty students of the same grade at the Fourth High School of Commerce were given an hour-long test. The first part of the test consisted in a list of models of nine patterns in English. On the test paper itself, an example of each pattern was printed in a rearranged meaningless order. Familiar expressions were avoided on the theory that however difficult the pattern might be, the familiar words would be overly helpful to the students. In all, seventy transitive constructions were involved. The purpose of the test was not to discover the students' competence in English, but to record a set of scores for the purpose of comparing them with the scores the following week, when the students were given that same test at a moment's notice. With seventy examples and only an hour in which to work, it was felt unlikely that the students could remember precisely what they had answered the week before.

In the second test, the students experienced almost identical difficulty in handling the different categories of patterns. In eight of the nine patterns involved, the performance was between 95 and 99 per cent similar to the performance on the earlier test. In the one exception, there was a 75 per cent similarity.

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6 cf. Note 2.
This test concerned itself with discovering whether the categorizations made had been meaningful ones, in the sense that a student had equal difficulties with the same category in two successive tests. It seems safe to infer from the results that such similarity of performance in relation to each category by each individual student on two separate occasions indicates that the application of scientific principles of analysis of pattern and prediction of difficulty are altogether justified, and that language teaching methods levels must make full use of what comparative study can predict concerning levels of interference.