
Research and Teaching Notes

Syntactical and Morphological Roots of Japanese Students'

Common Grammatical Mistakes in Writing Chinese

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Based on the language materials collected from Chinese Writing I, II, III, & IV at Meishodai in the year of 2003, this research finds that one of the most common grammatical problems of Japanese students in writing Chinese is word order confusion. This includes the misplacement of verbs, modal verbs, adverbs, complements, and prepositional phrases. The syntactical root of word order mistakes of Japanese students is that the basic word order of Chinese is Subject-Verb-Object whereas the order of Japanese is Subject-Object-Verb. The reversed positions of the verb and object in the two languages cause Japanese students' confusion in the placement of verbs and other elements. The morphological root of word order problems of Japanese students is a result of the difference between an isolating language and an agglutinative language. As an isolating language, Chinese has no verb conjugation, that is, no inflection of verbs. The meaning of a sentence depends on the order of all morphemes. In Chinese, almost every word consists of a single morpheme, whereas Japanese is an agglutinative language that relies on bound morphemes to express the meaning of the sentence. Word order in Japanese is usually not critical as long as words are followed by appropriate particles.

Introduction

The main purpose of this research is to do an error analysis in order to make students more conscious of word order in writing Chinese. The data of this research is based on the first hand language materials collected from the final examinations of Chinese Writing Skills I, II, III, and IV at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business Administration in the academic year of 2003. There are seventy-eight exam papers total. Each examination has six to nine parts. The phonetic mistakes and word choice parts of the examinations were not taken into consideration. Among the grammatical mistakes, more than two thirds are word order or related problems, or in other words, position confusion of various words in the sentences. Among them, there are different types of word misplacement. This article focuses on major errors.

Types of Word Order Mistakes

There are many kinds of word misplacement found from this research. In order to do an error analysis, they are grouped into five categories: verbs or verb related words, adverbs, modal verbs, complements, and prepositional phrases.

1. Verbs / verb related particles

1.1 Verb at the end of the sentence instead of before the object

- 学生的很都李老师尊敬。
- 等小李回来，再他吧告诉。
- 我很多吃了。
- 昨天那部电影又看了一遍。

1.2 Auxiliary verb at the end of sentence rather than after the verb

- 星期天我复习英语两个小时了。
- 星期天我两个小时复习英语了。

1.3 Auxiliary verb after the verb rather than at the end of the sentence

- 已经（是）了十二点，你还没去睡？

1.4 Redundant auxiliary verb after the verb

- 从早上七点开始了，下午五点结束。
- 万里长城建于公元前七世纪左右。

1.5 Redundant auxiliary verb after an adjective

- 昨天的晚饭不太好吃了。
- 我的寒假很有意思了。

2. Adverbs

2.1 Adverb before rather than after the subject

- 先我去图书馆，再我去体育馆。
- 你忙的话就我明天再来吧。
- 听了下田的解释，才我明白。

2.2 Adverb after rather than before the verb

- 你想去再中国旅行吗？

2.3 Adverb before modal verb rather than between modal verb and verb

- 你再想去中国旅游吗？

2.4 Adverb between modal verb and verb rather than before modal verb

- 王老师现在会一直在研究室的。

2.5 Adverb after complement rather than before verb

- 我很想考完快点儿。

2.6 Adverb after rather than before modal verb

- 最近太忙，想真好好儿休息休息。

3. Modal Verb

The Chinese translation of “Pingtian can make phone calls in English” is: “平田能用英语打电话了。” The modal verb “neng” (can) here should be before the first verb of the verbal constructions in series -“yong”. The common mistake in the following four examples from Japanese students is that “neng” and “yong” are not in correct relative positions.

- 平田能打电话用英语了。
- 平田能英语打电话用了。
- 平田能了打电话用英语。
- 平田用英语能打电话了。

4. Complements

4.1 Complement before instead of after the verb

- 在这个旅馆里我们一夜住过。
- 我三款吃过，可是不太喜欢。

4.2 Complement after instead of before the object

- 你去过上海几次？
- 他会说德语一点儿。

5 Prepositional phrases

5.1 Prepositional phrase after rather than before a verb phrase

- 我想看杂技在中国。

5.2 Prepositional phrase before rather than after the subject

- 每天早上在公园里这位老人散步。
- 在这个旅馆里我们一夜住过。

A Case Study of Word Misplacement

The following seven sentences are all wrong because of their word misplacement. The English meaning of this sentence is “ I went to the hospital to visit Suzuki-san once”. Its Japanese meaning is

「私は病院に鈴木サンを一度お見まいに行きました。」

There is only one way to write this sentence in Chinese correctly without adding a comma: “我去医院看过一次铃木。” But students wrote:

- 1) 我去医院一次看过铃木
- 2) 我去医院铃木看过一次
- 3) 我去一次过医院看铃木
- 4) 我去过医院看铃木一次
- 5) 我去过一次看铃木医院
- 6) 我看过一次铃木去医院
- 7) 我去医院看过铃木一次

The basic structure of this sentence is SVO. The predicate is composed of verbal constructions in series, and followed by a complement. Japanese students got the position of the subject “ Wo ” correct because of the similarity of the normal position of the subject in both languages. But the other parts of the sentence are out of order. Each sentence has an average of more than 2 word order mistakes. There are four major word order problems in these seven sentences:

Firstly, this sentence is composed of two verbs, which is known as, “the sentence with verbal constructions in series” in Chinese grammar. In Chinese, the two verbs have to be next to each other or with a word indicating a place in between. Japanese verbs have specific form to connect other verbs whereas Chinese verbs don't. Thus, Japanese students often don't realize that the two verbs go together. They separate the two verbs in each of the above examples except for sentence number seven.

Secondly, in sentences with verbal constructions in series, each verb relates to the subject with an action. However, the second (or the last) verb usually indicates the major action of the subject, and the first verb usually explains the place, method, or goal of the major action that the second verb indicates. Thus, the function word “ guo ” is normally after the major action verb “ kan ” to indicate the past tense of the sentence. In the above seven sentences, four of them connect “ guo ” with verb “ kan ”, the other three with verb “ qu ”. In certain cases, “ guo ” can be put after both “ qu ” and “ kan ”; however, the meaning of the sentence will be slightly changed. Moreover, a comma needs to be added after the first verb phrase.

Thirdly, the complement of frequency “ yi ci ” is composed of the numeral “ yi ” and the measure word for action “ ci ”. The position of the complement of frequency should be after the verb of action. In this case, “ yi ci ” should be after the past tense of the verb “ kan ”, that is “ kan guo ”. Only two of the seven sentences have the complement in the right position.

Fourthly, “ Lingmu ” as the object should normally be at the end of the sentence unless it needs to be emphasized. In this case, it should be at the beginning of the sentence. In five out of the above seven sentences, the object is neither at the end nor the beginning of the sentence.

Syntactical and Morphological Roots

Based on the classic categorization, world languages can be divided into three groups: inflecting, agglutinating, or isolating languages. While English belongs to the first category, Japanese and Chinese are representatives of the remaining two types respectively. As an agglutinative language, Japanese words are formed by gluing morphemes together in two major ways: 1) using suffixes or prefixes whose meaning is unique, and which are concatenated one after another, such as “o” in front of some words, and “mashita” at the end of verbs; 2) the meaning and position of nouns in a sentence are decided by the function words or case markers.

As an isolating language, Chinese does not use affixes or root modifications at all. In Chinese, each word is invariable, and meanings have to be modified by inserting additional words, or understood by context.

In his *How to create a language*, Pablo David Flores states:

The modern classification of language grammars is a continuous scale, which goes from **analytic** to **synthetic**. The more analytic a language, the more meaningless the words by themselves, so as to say, and the more important is context. The more synthetic a language, the more self-contained the words. The most analytic languages rely on context and word order to show meanings, while the synthetic languages tend to inflect words.

One of the most important rules of word order in Japanese is that in a sentence, the verb always comes at the end. This is contrasted by the basic word order in Chinese, subject-verb-object. For Example:

The sentence “Mother gave me a present” can be translated into Chinese only in one way, which is:

妈妈给我一件礼物

But it can be translated into Japanese in six different ways; although a couple of them are not normally used.

- 1) 母が 私に 贈り物を くれた。
- 2) 母が 贈り物を 私に くれた。
- 3) 私に 母が 贈り物を くれた。
- 4) 私に 贈り物を 母が くれた。
- 5) 贈り物を 母が 私に くれた。
- 6) 贈り物を 私に 母が くれた。

Two conclusions can be drawn from this:

- 1) The verb is always at the end of the sentence;
- 2) The positions of the other segments are very flexible as long as they are followed by a correct case marker, such as が、に、を、 and so on.

In Chinese, however, the position of a morpheme in the sentence is normally fixed. Otherwise, either the meaning of the sentence will be changed, or the sentence is incorrect. There are two important grammatical rules in Chinese:

- 1) The basic order of a sentence is fixed.

The basic order of a Chinese sentence is SVO. But when the object becomes the topic of the sentence, it can be at the very beginning of the sentence.

There are mainly six grammatical elements in Chinese sentences. They are subject, predicate (most of them are verbs; but also adjectives and nouns), objective, attributive, adverbial adjunct, and complement. Each of them plays a unique role in a sentence, and each of them has a special position in a sentence. Their positions in a sentence are as follows:

(Attributive) + Subject + Adverbial Adjuncts + Predicate (verb) + Complement +
(Attributive) + Objective

我妈妈常常从超市买回来很多新鲜蔬菜。

This is a ten-morpheme sentence with all six grammatical elements in it. Let's look at their roles and positions in the sentence.

我,	I, 私 : it is an attribute to modify the subject of the sentence.
妈妈,	mother, 母 : it is the subject of the sentence.
常常,	often, しばしば : it is an adverb as the adverbial adjunct to modify the verb.
从,	from, から : it is a preposition to form a preposition phrase as another adverbial adjunct to indicate the place of the action.
超市,	supermarket, スーパー : to form the preposition phrase with “从”.
买,	buy, 買う : it is a verb as the predicate of the sentence.
回来,	return, 返す : it is a directional verb as the complement of the sentence to indicate the direction of the action.
很多,	much, たくさん : it is an attribute to modify the object of the sentence.
新鲜,	fresh, 新鮮な : it is another attribute to modify the object.
蔬菜,	vegetable, 野菜 : it is the object of the sentence.

Each of the ten elements in this sentence has its role and place. They are unchangeable, and non-reversible. The three basic elements of this sentence are subject, predicate (verb) and object. Their order is always subject-verb-object.

2) As an analytic language, each word plays a certain role in a sentence.

Different from English, the Japanese verb does not inflect number or gender, however it inflects tense, negation, aspect, and mood. Whereas Chinese verb has no inflection in its forms to distinguish number, person, gender, case, mood, or tense. There is no conjugation in Chinese. It depends on the context and the related words. For example:

去,	to go, 行く;
去过,	had been, 行ったことがあります;
去了,	went, 行きました;
不去,	do not go, 行きません;
没去,	did not go, 行きませんでした;

剛去.	just went, 行ったばかり；
要去.	want to go, 行きたい；
将去.	will go, 行きます。

Unlike Japanese, the verb “去” never changes its form. It has the same meaning in all the above forms. It means nothing else but the action of going. The words before or after it add new meanings to the verb, and their positions related to the verb are inflexible. Thus, it is very difficult for Japanese learners to master the usages of these related words and their position relative to the verb. Influenced by the Japanese grammatical framework of the verb being at the end of the sentence, and having different forms, and adding suffixes at the end of verbs, the common word order problems here are either separation of the verb and the related word (Japanese: verb at the end; verb has different forms) or putting the related word after the verb when it should be before the verb (Japanese: adding suffixes at the end of verbs).

In Japanese, a core element in a sentence is the verb. The verb with a certain form tells a specific meaning. In Chinese, however, the verb itself does not provide extra meaning, but only the action alone. The most important part of a sentence often is the topic of the sentence.

Conclusion

The language material collected for this research shows that one of the common grammatical mistakes by Japanese students in writing Chinese is word misplacement. As two representatives of the three types of languages in the world, there are three major syntactical and morphological differences between Japanese and Chinese:

- 1) Most morphemes and parts of a sentence in Chinese have strict orders and positions. They are inflexible in Chinese but flexible in Japanese as long as followed by appropriate particles.
- 2) In Japanese, verbs are always put at the end of a sentence; verbs themselves have different tenses and aspects, whereas in Chinese, verbs are usually before object, and the meaning of the verb in a sentence is decided by the function words around.
- 3) The meanings of nouns in a sentence in Japanese are decided by the function words/case markers followed, whereas in Chinese, the meanings of nouns in a sentence are determined by their orders in the sentence and the context as Chinese is a topic-prominent language.

Thus, in order to help Japanese students reduce word order confusion, teachers should: firstly, introduce the basic word order of Chinese to students as early as possible, in other words, to cultivate learners' consciousness of strict constituent order of subject, predicate, object, attributive, adverbial adjuncts, and complement in Chinese grammar, especially those which are very different from Japanese language, and those which play a very important grammatical role in sentences such as adverbial adjuncts and complements; secondly, bring students' attention to the attributes of each vocabulary and different characteristics of the same word, and connect the attribution of the word and its position in a sentence; thirdly, put extra emphasis on the verb related parts in a sentence due to the characteristics of verbs in Japanese grammar. Certain exceptional cases of word order in Chinese can be introduced after students mastered the basic structure.

* All the sentences used in this research are first-hand language resources. A lot of them have more than one grammatical mistake. In order to focus on the relevant issues, some of the mistakes are ignored in the article.

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