Second Language Learners' Syntactic Knowledge of Epithets

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Abstracts

This study investigated whether Binding Theory Condition B constrained the interpretations of epithets among Japanese-speaking learners of English. The results obtained by using truth value judgment tasks revealed that they were unsuccessful in detecting Condition B violations. Because epithets are interpreted at the syntactic-pragmatic interface, it is difficult to tap syntactic knowledge while controlling the pragmatic constraints. The limitations of truth value judgments for the study are discussed.

Keywords: second language, epithets, binding

I Introduction

Chomsky's theory of universal grammar (UG) (e.g., Chomsky, 1981, 1986 and 1995) presupposes the innate knowledge of language faculty without which language acquisition is impossible. Among the sub-theories of UG, Binding theory attempts to constrain the occurrences of nominal expressions. There are three conditions in Binding theory:

(1) Condition A: an anaphor must be bound in its local domain.

Condition B: A pronoun must be free in its local domain.

Condition C: A referential expression must be free.

A reflexive pronoun, being an anaphor, is subject to Condition A. Therefore, the reflexive in (2a) is bound to the local subject DP, *Tom*, but it cannot take the long-distance subject DP, *Mike* as the antecedent. Sentence (2b) shows a pronoun cannot be bound to the local subject DP while it can be in the coreferential relationship with the non-local subject DP. (2c) shows *Tom*, a referential expression cannot be bound to the pronominal antecedent.

(2) a. Mike$_i$ said [Tom$_j$ hit himself$_{*i/j}$].

b. Mike$_i$ said [Tom$_j$ hit him$_{i/*j}$].

c. *He$_i$ said [Mike hit Tom$_i$].

Some studies have investigated the syntactic properties of epithets (e.g., Dubinsky & Hamilton, 1998; Jackendoff, 1969, 1972; Lasnik, 1989; Patel-Grosz, 2014, 2015). An epithet consists of an NP or DP, accompanied by a determiner, and it carries an evaluative feature (Patel-Grosz, 2015, p. 2). For example, *the idiot* in (3) is an epithet. It consists of NP accompanied by the determiner and bears an evaluative feature (in this case the speaker's negative evaluation of the referent).

(3) Nick$_i$ greeted the man who came to see the idiot$_i$.

Sentence (4a) shows the epithet cannot take the local subject DP as the antecedent and suggests an epithet is not an anaphor. The well-formedness of (5a) suggests the epithet is a pronoun, which is subject to Binding

Condition B. Yet, if an epithet is a pronoun, the different degree of acceptability between (6a) and (6b) cannot be easily accounted for. The distinction between (6a) and (7a) suggests types of predicates also influence the degree of acceptability.

(4) a. *Tom$_i$ criticized the idiot$_i$.

    b. Tom$_i$ criticized himself$_i$.

(5) a. John$_i$ talked with the man [who chose the idiot$_i$.]

    b. John$_i$ talked with the man [who chose him$_i$].

(6) a. *John$_i$ thinks that [the idiot$_i$ is smart.]

    b. John$_i$ thinks that [he$_i$ is smart.]

(7) a. ?John$_i$ convinced Peter that [the idiot$_i$ is smart.]

    b. John$_i$ convinced Peter that [he$_i$ is smart.]

                               ((6a) and (7a) are from Patel-Grosz, 2015, p. 89)

Patel-Grosz (2015) argued epithets are pronouns, which are subject to Condition B. She proposed the Anti-Judge Constraint to account for the different degree of acceptability between (6a) and (7a):

(8) The Anti-Judge Constraint

    An epithet cannot occur in a sentence *s* if (i) the sentence is interpreted with respect to a judge *j* that is identical to the epithet's antecedent, and (ii) the antecedent c-commands the epithet. (p. 89)

Some utterances must be evaluated from the perspective of an individual, which can be called either the judge or the evaluator. Following Stepheson (2007), Patel-Grosz (2015) argued in the case of *think* as in (6a), the judge is the matrix subject, and the Anti-Judge Constraint blocks the matrix subject DP from being construed as the epithet's antecedent. In the case of *convince*, the judge is the matrix object. Therefore, the Anti-Judge Constrains does not prevent the matrix subject from becoming the epithet's referent.

According to Patel-Grosz (2014, 2015), epithets are null pronouns modified by a nominal appositive, as shown in (9). Given that epithets contain null pronouns, sentence (3), repeated here as in (10a), is equivalent to structure as in (10b)

(9) [*pro* [the idiot]]

    equivalent to [he, [the idiot]]

                                   (Patel-Grosz, 2014, p. 95)

(10) a. Nick$_i$ greeted the man who came to see [*pro$_i$* the idiot].

     b. Nick$_i$ greeted the man who came to see [him$_i$, the idiot].

Patel-Grosz pointed out that epithets are generally speaker-oriented: that is, it is the speaker who thinks the referent of the epithet is an idiot. In a relative clause structure, as in (10a), it is the speaker who is the judge throughout the sentence. Therefore, the Anti-Judge Constraint is not violated. Because sentence (10a) also does not violate the syntactic constraint, namely, Condition B either, it is ruled in as well-formed. Since relative clause structures are free from the Anti-Judge Constraint, they constitute the basis in which L2 researchers can examine whether language learners are sensitive to the syntactic constraints as they identify

the possible referents of epithets.

II. Purpose of the Study

The study reported here examined whether L2 learners obey Binding Condition B when they interpret epithets. To my knowledge, there have been no studies that investigated the interpretations of epithets in the field of L2 acquisition.

III. Methodology

This study employed a written version of a truth-value judgment task. Participants were informed that there was a Japanese student studying in the US. His name was Toru, and he video-taped various situations where he interacted with his friends and wrote a memo about each situation. Because English was not his native language, some of his memos did not correctly describe the situations. They were asked to read the transcribed interactions and judge whether his memos correctly described the interactions by circling either *True* or *False*. They were further informed that his memo did not have to describe the entire scenario. The following is a sample interaction followed by a one-sentence memo written by Toru:

(11)

Nick was a wild man. He drank a lot and liked going to parties. He also liked reading conspiracy theories. Toru thought Nick was stupid. One day, when Nick and Toru were watching TV, there was a knock on the door.

Man: "Is Mr. Nick Johnson here?"

Nick: "Yeah, that's me. May I help you?"

Man: "I am a journalist working for the magazine *Unidentified Objects*. You wrote to us several weeks ago. We want to hear your story."

Nick: "Oh, I am glad you are here. Please come in."

Nick took him to the dining table.

Toru's memo: Nick greeted the man who came to see the idiot.

True / False

Note that the task is designed to identify Toru as the judge of the epithet's referent. In other words, it is Toru, the writer, who thinks Nick is stupid in (11). Because Toru is not the referent of the epithet, it does not violate the Anti-Judge Constraint. There are two types of test sentences:

(12) Type A (Local Epithets)

   *James$_i$ blamed the idiot$_i$.

   Type B (Long-Distance Epithets)

   Jackson$_i$ spoke to the man who rejected the idiot$_i$.

It was predicted that participants who identify epithets as anaphors would accept Type A sentences and reject Type B sentences; if their grammar is constrained by Binding Condition B, they will reject Type A tokens and accept Type B tokens; and if they interpreted epithets as referential expressions, both Type A and B stimuli would be rejected. There are four tokens for each sentence type. The complete set of test sentences and dialogues is listed in the appendix. The main test consisted of 8 test sentences (4 tokens for each type) and 12

fillers. They were randomized in the main task and presented to the participants.

The main task was preceded by a pretest, which was designed to determine whether participants could understand and follow the task procedures. The pretest consisted of eight stimuli. Once the participants completed the pretest, they were asked to write any questions or comments they had concerning the test and were then instructed to proceed to the main task.

L2 participants were recruited from the Department of English at Kwassui Women's University in Nagasaki. They were all L1 Japanese-speaking undergraduate students who were taking the experimenter's classes. They attended experimental sessions at their convenience and completed consent forms and demographic questionnaires prior to completion of the truth value judgment task materials. During the sessions, the experimenter was available to answer any questions regarding the task procedures and to prevent participants from communicating with each other. Although there was no specific time limit, no L2 participant required more than 50 minutes to complete all the distributed materials. They each received a 1,000-yen library card in exchange for their participation. In total, twenty-six Japanese-speakers participated in the study.

L1 English-speaking control participants were recruited from the Ohio State University by a faculty member in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures. Students who agreed to participate in the study were provided with an electronic copy of the demographic questionnaire and the truth value judgment material. They were asked to complete the materials at their convenience. Control participants were given extra points for their courses. Nine L1 English-speaking students took part in the study.

For L1 control participants, all materials were written in English, while for Japanese-speaking participants, the consent form, demographic questionnaire, and task directions and dialogues were written in Japanese, with the exception of the memos written in English by Toru. In short, both L2 and control participants read task directions and stimuli contexts in their native language, judging target sentences written in English.

IV. Results

Participants who provided three or more incorrect responses to eight pretest items were excluded from further analysis. Based on this criterion, one L2 participant was screened out. Because one participant from each of the control and L2 groups failed to mark a test item, they were also rejected. One control participant rejected most of the test stimuli indicating that Toru's sentences failed to describe the overall gist of the scenarios. She was also screened out. Twenty-four L2 participants and seven control participants were left for further analyses.

L2 participants were divided into two proficiency groups based on their best TOEIC scores obtained within the last two years.[1] Table 1 shows the mean TOEIC scores for the two L2 groups:

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[1] The demographic questionnaire for L2 participants contained the item to write down their best TOEIC scores taken within the last two years. Kwassui Women's University administers TOEIC IP several times a year, and English-majors are required to take the test at least once a year.

Table 1. L2 Participants' TOEIC Scores

L2 Group	*N*	*M*	*SD*
Low-Proficiency	12	498	120
High-Proficiency	12	717	69
Total	24	607	147

Figure 1 shows the percentage of correct responses obtained for each sentence type. Correct responses to Type A and B stimuli are *False* and *True*, respectively.

Figure 1. Percentage of correct responses by sentence type
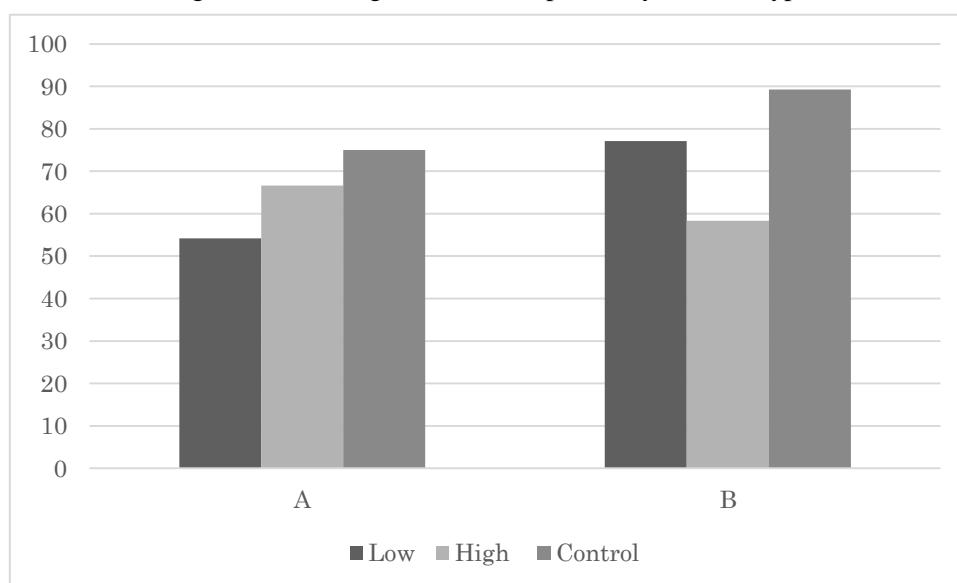
The figure shows that the low-proficiency group was just above the chance level in correctly rejecting Type A sentences, while the accuracy rate for the high-proficiency group was higher. The low-proficiency group, on the other hand, was more accurate in accepting Type B stimuli than the high-proficiency group. Unexpectedly, the control group was not very accurate in rejecting Type A stimuli. Table 2 shows the number and percentage of correct responses by sentence type. The number in the bracket shows the actual number of correct responses.

Table 2. The number and percentage of correct responses

Group	Type	Percentage
Lower	A	54% (26/48)
	B	77% (37/48)
Higher	A	67% (32/48)
	B	58% (28/48)
Control	A	75% (21/28)
	B	89% (25/28)

The table shows the control participants rejected Type A stimuli 75% of the time. They were more accurate in accepting Type B stimuli (89%) than rejecting Type A. Table 3 shows the results of two-way ANOVA.

Table 3.   ANOVA Summary Table: Sentence Type and Participant Group

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Sentence Type (ST)	1	2.154	2.154	1.554	.2178
Participant Group (SG)	2	5.857	2.928	2.112	.1305
ST* SG	2	4.900	2.450	1.767	.1820
Residual	56	77.631	1.386		
Total	61	90.542			

The results showed there was not a statistically significant interaction between the effects of sentence type and participant group ($p = .1820$). Simple main effects analyses showed that sentence type did not have a statistically significant effect on the accuracy of grammatical judgment ($p = .2178$) and that the participant group did not have a statistically significant effect on the accuracy of grammatical judgment ($p = .1305$), either.

V. Discussions

The results show that L2 participants were not very successful in accepting Type B sentences. It was assumed that the referent of epithet would be evaluated from the writer's point of view, more specifically from Toru's point of view. In retrospect, this assumption is not warranted. Although the writer's evaluation is the default, other evaluators are possible. In this task, the participants were asked to judge the truth value of the test sentences; therefore, the participants can make their own judgment to see whether the referents of the epithets are idiots. For example, in (11), repeated here as in (13), the participants can judge whether Nick's behavior depicted in the scenario is idiotic.

(13)
Nick was a wild man. He drank a lot and liked going to parties. He also liked reading conspiracy theories. Toru thought Nick was stupid. One day, when Nick and Toru were watching TV, there was a knock on the door.
Man: "Is Mr. Nick Johnson here?"
Nick: "Yeah, that's me. May I help you?"
Man: "I am a journalist working for the magazine *Unidentified Objects*. You wrote to us several weeks ago. We want to hear your story."
Nick: "Oh, I am glad you are here. Please come in."
Nick took him to the dining table.

Toru's memo: Nick greeted the man who came to see the idiot.

True / False

The context made it clear that Toru thinks Nick is an idiot. However, if a participant makes his/her own evaluation to judge whether Nick is stupid, it is in the eye of the beholder. In fact, one L2 participant left a

comment; "I am not sure whether *the idiot* should be evaluated from Toru's point of view or from the view of the person who read his memo." Thus, the perspective shift could explain the variation in acceptability for Type B sentences.

If the referent of the epithet can be evaluated from the point of view of participants, it also explains why the acceptability of Type A sentences varied. It is reported that Condition B can be overridden in certain pragmatic contexts.

(14) (You know what Mary, Sue and John have in common? Mary admires John, Sue admires him, and) <u>John</u> admires <u>him</u> too.

(Heim, 1998, p. 216)

The cases as in (14) are often called accidental coreference (e.g. Evans, 1980; Higginbotham, 1985). The proper name *John* and the pronoun *him* happens to be the same entity although *him* is not syntactically bound to *John*. Type A stimuli were designed to elicit whether participants allowed the local binding of epithets in scenarios as in (15).

(15)
Kevin and Jeremy are twins. They often played a prank and posted videos on SNS. One day, they played a ghost prank, and the woman they pranked called the police. The police came and arrested the brothers. One day Toru ran into Kevin, and they talked about the incident.
Toru: "Are you out on bail?"
Toru looked at him with disdain. He could not believe Kevin and Jeremy did such ridiculous things.
Kevin: "Yeah. This is all my fault. I pressured Jeremy to participate."

Toru's memo: Kevin criticized the idiot.

True / False

The participants may have entertained the possibility of accidental coreference, i.e. whether the local DP, *Kevin* and the person whom they considered *the idiot* could refer to the same entity scripted in the scenario. Because epithets are interpreted at the syntactic and pragmatic interface, it is difficult to tease one type of constraint from another in the experiment. Since the judge who makes the evaluation of the epithet's referent can switch, it is difficult to examine only the syntactic knowledge while keeping the pragmatic constraint under control.

VI. Conclusion
This study investigated whether Japanese-speaking L2 learners of English could recognize Binding Condition B when they interpret epithets. The results showed L2 participants failed to detect Condition B. Because epithets are interpreted at the syntax-pragmatic interface, it is argued that tapping only syntactic knowledge is difficult.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix.   Test Sentences and Dialogues

Type A (Local Epithets)

1.

Toru saw James watching TV in the living room at the college dormitory.

Toru: "What's up, James?"

James: "Not much. I went out to a bar and saw Mike. Do you still remember him? He was my best friend, but we parted."

Toru: "What happened?"

James: "Well, I owed him money, but I didn't return it to him right away. He because upset. You know, he is a nice guy. This is all my fault."

Toru always thought James was not a smart guy. He also felt Mike was not smart for lending money to James.

Toru's memo: James blamed the idiot.

<div align="right">True / False</div>

2.

Mike and Luke won a doubles match in tennis. Although they were excellent athletes, they did poorly in academics. Toru thought they were dummies. He went to talk to Mike.

Toru: "Congratulations on winning the match. You did great!"

Mike: "Yeah, I think I did very well. I hope Luke will do better next time."

Toru's memo:　Mike praised the idiot.

<div align="right">True / False</div>

3.

Kevin and Jeremy are twins. They often played a prank and posted videos on SNS. One day, they played a ghost prank, and the woman they pranked called the police. The police came and arrested the brothers. One day Toru ran into Kevin, and they talked about the incident.

Toru: "Are you out on bail?"

Toru looked at him with disdain. He could not believe Kevin and Jeremy did such ridiculous things.

Kevin: "Yeah. This is all my fault. I pressured Jeremy to participate."

Toru's memo:　Kevin criticized the idiot.

<div align="right">True / False</div>

4.

John and Aaron were in the band. One day, they invited Toru to go to their concert. He listened to their music, but it was far from something he could enjoy. The music was horrible, and the lyrics were terrible. He felt it was stupid music played by stupid people.

John: "Thanks for coming."

Toru: "Oh, you are welcome."

John: "I am the best there is in town, but Aaron still has a long way to go to catch up with me."

Toru's memo:　John admired the idiot.

<div align="right">True / False</div>

Type B (Long-Distance Epithets)

5.

Toru was involved in the community volunteer organization. In the organization, the sitting president can choose the new president. The current president chose John as the new leader. When Toru heard the news, he could not believe it. He thought John was stupid, doing all kinds of unbelievable things. One day when Toru was walking down the street with John, he spotted a man and went to talk to him.

John: "Thank you for choosing me. I will do my best for our community."

Man: "You are welcome. I wish you the best."

Toru's memo:　John talked with the man who chose the idiot.

<div align="right">True / False</div>

6.

Jackson was out of work and was looking for a job. He found a job opening at the nearby supermarket. He applied for the position only to receive a rejection notice a week later. He was unhappy, so he went to the supermarket with Toru.

Jackson: "Can you tell me why you did not give me the job? I can work long hours."

Man: "Well, we are looking for someone who can work in the accounting section. I read your resume, but I feel you are not fit for the position."

He replied to Jackson in a calm manner. Toru thought the man was right. Jackson could not do a simple math. He liked partying and doing all kinds of stupid things, which sometimes appalled Toru.

Toru's memo: Jackson spoke to the man who rejected the idiot.

<div align="right">True / False</div>

7.

Nick was a wild man. He drank a lot and liked going to parties. He also liked reading conspiracy theories. Toru thought Nick was stupid. One day, when Nick and Toru were watching TV, there was a knock on the door.

Man: "Is Mr. Nick Johnson here?"

Nick: "Yeah, that's me. May I help you?"

Man: "I am a journalist working for the magazine *Unidentified Objects*. You wrote to us several weeks ago. We want to hear your story."

Nick: "Oh, I am glad you are here. Please come in."

Nick took him to the dining table.

Toru's memo: Nick greeted the man who came to see the idiot.

<div align="right">True / False</div>

8.

Robert lived next door to Toru in the college dormitory. Robert rarely studied and stayed up late at night. He also yelled in the middle of night for no reason. Toru thought he was stupid. When Toru and Robert were attending a conference, a man addressed himself to Robert.

Man: "Did you enjoy the Christmas party last week?"

Robert: "Yeah! But did I meet you at the party?"

Man: "Yes. I was the host. I invited you to the event."

Robert: "Oh, I am sorry. Maybe I drank too much. Yes! I had a lot of fun at the party."

Toru's memo: Robert met the man who invited the idiot to the Christmas party.

<div align="right">True / False</div>