

# Japanese Speakers' Article Omission in L2 English: Evidence against the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis?

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## 1. Introduction

In recent studies by Goad & White (2004, 2006a, in press) the acquisition of articles (the/a) by second language (L2) learners of English have been investigated. They claim that L2 learners from article-less languages such as Turkish and Chinese will have difficulty in prosodically representing articles in spoken production due to first language (L1) prosodic transfer i.e. no prosodic structures available in the L1 to accommodate articles in the L2. The following study tests the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis by examining the use of articles by Japanese learners of English.

## 2. The Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (PTH)

A different approach to variability in L2 production has recently been suggested for L2 learners' omission of inflectional morphology (Lardiere 2004). The focus is not on overt bound morphology or absence of bound morphology for obligatory L1 English morphemes (e.g. past tense *-ed*, plural *-s*), but on how morphology is represented prosodically in L2 grammars. This is known as the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (Goad et al. 2003a, 2003b, Goad and White 2005, 2006b). Recently, the PTH has made predictions about free forms, such as the prosodic structure of determiners (the/a). The Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (PTH) predicts that:

“If the L1 does not permit certain kinds of prosodic representations as required by the L2, then second language speakers will have difficulties in representing such morphology in the outputs of the phonological component of the interlanguage grammar” (Goad & White, 2004: 122).

The PTH proposes that L2 learners' syntactic representations are appropriate (no representational deficit) for the target language, although L2 learners may delete functional material in production as the prosodic structure in their L1 may differ, leaving no way of building the correct prosodic structure for the L2. However, if the L1 prosodic structure can be modified to accommodate the L2, then the PTH predicts far greater accuracy in suppliance of functional morphology by L2 learners, perhaps reaching native-like levels in production. To date, predictions made by the PTH have only been applied to L2 learners of English. Goad & White (2004) re-examined data in light of a possible prosodic account of why articles in obligatory contexts were being omitted by a Turkish speaker known as SD.

In Turkish, there is no definite article, so bare NPs are ambiguous as to whether they signal definiteness, but if *bir* is used it can be indefinite when it is unstressed (see 1b) or numeral *one* if stressed (see 1c):

- (1) a. *kitáp*  
      ‘(the/a) book’  
      b. *bir kitáp*  
      ‘a book’

c. *bír kitap*  
'one book'

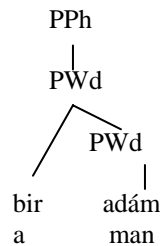
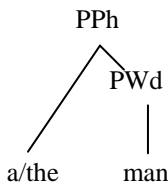
d. *bú kitap*  
'this book'

(taken from Goad & White 2004, p.123)

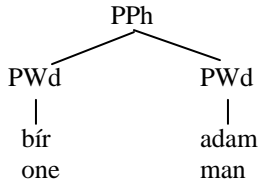
As the focus is on the prosodification of articles, which appear at the left edge of the Phonological Phrase (PPh) in English, Goad & White provide the relevant prosodic structures for English and Turkish, supplied in figure 1.

Figure 1.

(a) English articles: Free clitic      (b) Turkish indefinite (unstressed): Affixal clitic (prefix)



(c) Turkish numeral (stressed): independent PWds



(adapted from Goad & White 2004, p. 131)

The difference between English and Turkish is that in English articles are free clitics, which attach directly to the Phonological Phrase (Figure 1a), whereas in Turkish unstressed *bir* is claimed to be an affixal clitic that adjoins to the Prosodic Word (PWd), which then links higher to the Phonological Phrase (Figure 1b).<sup>1</sup> Further evidence supporting the claim that *bir* is an affixal clitic, not a free clitic, comes from adjectival constructions, as in (2):

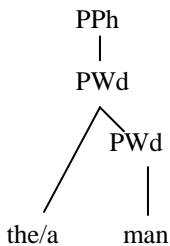
- (2) a. *iyi bir adám*  
good a man  
'a good man'
- b. \**bir iyi adám*  
a good man
- c. *bír iyi adam*  
one good man

<sup>1</sup> Goad & White (2004) give an explanation of vowel harmony as to why indefinite *bir* (unstressed) is outside the lower PWd.

(taken from Goad & White 2004, ex. 10, p. 132)

The difference between (2a) and (2b) is that indefinite *bir* cannot have an intervening adjective placed between it and the noun. Goad & White claim that the reason for (2a) being well-formed is because indefinite *bir* attaches as a prefix onto the head noun *adám*. Example (2b) separates the unstressed indefinite article and noun and as it cannot prefix onto an adjective it is not well-formed, as in figure 2b. It seems that indefinite *bir* is prosodically dependant on the head noun. However, numeral *bir* is stressed and seems to be an independent prosodic word. Therefore, as Turkish does not allow *bir* to be a free clitic and is an article-less language, Goad & White suggest a possible interlanguage prosodic representation, as illustrated in figure 2:

Figure 2. Possible interlanguage prosodic representation (L1 Turkish, L2 English)



The prosodic representation in figure 2 uses adjunction to the PWd. This allows Goad & White to predict contrasts between Art+N DPs and Art+Adj+N DPs. They predict that SD will be able to prosodically represent articles in Art+N constructions as the article can adjoin to the PWd, as in the L1, but not in Art+Adj+N constructions as articles cannot adjoin to adjectives in the L1. Therefore, they predict that there will be more omissions of articles in the latter type constructions and this is what they found in the data. More omissions were found in Art+Adj+N constructions, supporting the prediction by the PTH that SD cannot modify the L1 prosodic structure.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. The prosodic structure of Japanese nominal phrases

Japanese is an article-less language. It differs to English as it is mora-timed and a pitch-accent language. Speakers of English divide words into syllables whereas Japanese speakers divide words into moras. The difference between the two languages is shown in (3) from imported words:

(3)	syllable-based (English pronunciation)	mora-based (Japanese pronunciation of English imported words)
a.	Christ.mas	ku.ri.su.ma.su
b.	text	te.ki.su.to
c.	Lon.don	ro.n.do.n
d.	gro.tesque	gu.ro.te.su.ku

(taken from Roca and Johnson 1999, p.238)

The pitch on a word is usually predictable from the location of accent, so the pitch is crucial in order to identify the word:

<sup>2</sup> See Geçkin (2006) for a recent study supporting the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis of child Turkish L2 learners.

(4)					
	*		*		
a.	hashi 'chopsticks'	(high-low)	hashi 'bridge'	(low-high)	<sup>3</sup>
	*				
b.	ame 'rain'	(high-low)	ame 'candy'	(low-high)	no accent
	*				
c.	aki 'autumn'	(high-low)	aki 'vacancy'	(low-high)	no accent

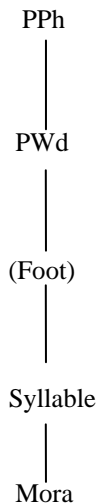
(taken from Tsujimura 1996)

The words in (4) differ in terms of their pitch pattern. If the pitch pattern changes then the meaning of the word is changed. The accent is indicated by '\*' and this marks the place where the pitch changes on the mora from high to low. The mora is a unit of timing; each of the following can count as a mora:

- (5)
- a. (C)V
  - b. the first part of a long consonant (i.e. a geminate)
  - c. syllable-final, or "moraic," nasal *n*

However, in some dialects of Japanese the syllable plays a more important role rather than the mora. The examples in (3) are divided on the basis of mora, but in the Tagajo dialect (northern Japan) *mikan* (orange) and *gakkoo* (school) are divided into two parts as *mi-kan* and *gak-koo*. Given that Japanese has morae and syllables, a representation of the prosodic structure for adult Japanese phonology is illustrated in figure 3:

Figure 3.



With an outline of the basic phonological structure of Japanese in place, I now turn to discuss the implications of Japanese L1 prosodic structure on L2 acquisition of articles in English.

The Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis as proposed by Goad & White (2004) makes predications about how L2 learners acquire prosodic structure that differs to their L1 prosodic structure. As Turkish and Chinese prosodic structures differ to English it was predicted that L2 learners would have difficulty in

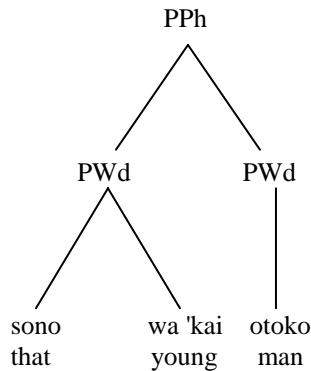
<sup>3</sup> Shaw (2005) suggests that *hashi* can also have no accent, which means 'edge'.

acquiring articles. The results show that both Turkish and Chinese L2 learners omit articles in spoken production, but in certain cases it may be possible for the L1 prosodic structure to accommodate the L2 prosodic structure (cf. Trenkic in press). In the case of Japanese, there are determiners, as in English. There are the demonstratives *ano* (that) /*sono* (that) /*kono* (this):

- (6) a. *ano/sono/kono otoko* (Dem+N)  
       that/that/this man
- b. *ano/sono/kono wakai otoko* (Dem+Adj+N)  
       that/that/this young man

It may be that certain Dem+Adj+N constructions in Japanese permit demonstratives to attach directly to the Phonological Phrase but it depends on whether there is pitch lowering of the initial syllable. An alternative analysis for demonstratives suggested by Ota (*p.c.*) is that there may be no PWd boundary between the demonstrative /*sono*/ (that) and the adjective /*wakai*/ (young), as in figure 4:<sup>4</sup>

Figure 4.



In figure 4 there is pitch accent on /*wa 'kai*/ (young) but there is no pitch accent to separate /*sono*/ (that) from /*wa 'kai*/ (young), so it adjoins directly to the Prosodic Word. This representation creates a phonology - syntax mis-match but this is known to happen. However, possible counter-evidence for proposing that demonstratives in Japanese attach directly to the Phonological Phrase comes from discussion of prefixes in Japanese by Poser (1990).<sup>5</sup> The examples in (7) to (9) show that the words *kidaigaku* (your university) and *motodaizin* (former minister) cannot have intervening adjectives between them because *ki* and *moto* are prefixes:

- (7) \**ki*            *yuumei*            *na*            *daigaku*  
       your            famous            Copula        university  
       ‘your            famous            university’
- (8) \**moto*        *yuumei*            *na*            *daizin*  
       former        famous            Copula        minister  
       ‘a formerly    famous            minister’

<sup>4</sup> I thank Mits Ota, Heather Goad and Paula Reimers for their suggestions and comments regarding the prosodic structures involving the quantifier *dono* and demonstratives *ano/sono/kono* in Japanese.

<sup>5</sup> Poser (1990) refers to the prefixes as ‘Aoyagi prefixes’ after the linguist who first discovered them, Seizoo Aoyagi.

(9)	*moto	erai	daizin
	former	distinguished	minister
	'a formerly	distinguished	minister'

It seems that no independent PWd can be placed between a prefix and the word that it attaches to as all the examples are ungrammatical. The example in (10) conversely is grammatical:

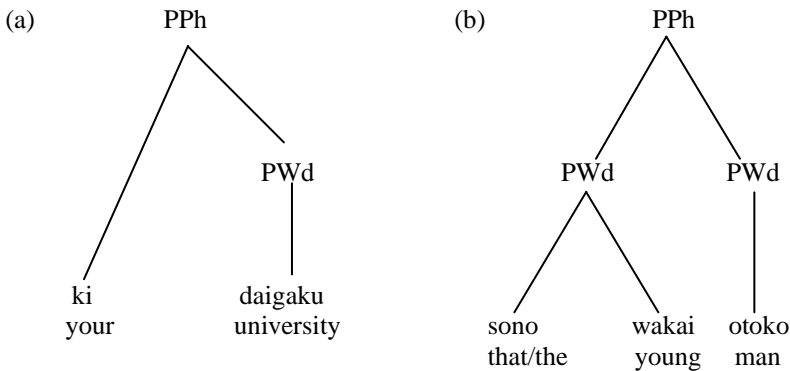
(10)	sono	yuumei	na	daigaku
	that	famous	copula	university
	'that	famous	university'	

The demonstrative /sono/ (that) does not behave as a prefix but rather it is an independent PWd. The example in (11) demonstrates that /sono/ (that) as an independent PWd can enter into a narrow scope or wide scope reading, but the prefix /moto/ (former) in (12) only has a narrow scope reading as it cannot modify the whole NP:

(11)	sono	uma	no	kubiwa		
	that	horse	Gen	collar		
	'the	collar	of that	horse'	(narrow scope)	
	'that	horse	collar'		(wide scope)	
(12)	moto	daizin	no	komon		
	former	minister	Gen	adviser		
	'adviser	to	the	former	minister'	(narrow scope)
	'*former	adviser	to	the	minister'	(wide scope)

Demonstratives and prefixes are represented differently in the prosodic structure as prefixes cannot be separated by an adjective and they cannot enter into semantic wide scope readings. As prefixes appear to create a prosodic phrase boundary inside a lexical word it is possible for Japanese L2 learners of English to adapt their L1 prosodic structure to accommodate articles in Art+N constructions in English (see figure 5a). For Art+Adj+N constructions there are two options 1.) representing articles as independent PWds 2.) adjunction to a PWd (see figure 5b). However, it is impossible to tell which representation is being adopted by Japanese L2 learners.

Figure 5. Possible interlanguage representations (L1 Japanese, L2 English)



I propose that for Art+N constructions (e.g. *a/the man*) the L1 can be adapted as it is a well-formed structure in Japanese. As adjunction to the adjective is a well-formed structure in Japanese it is possible for Japanese L2 learners to accommodate articles in Art+Adj+N constructions. As a result, it is predicted that overall omission of articles in spoken production should be minimal as Japanese L2 learners of English may use non-target like structures from the L1 to accommodate the L2 in Art+Adj+N constructions. On the basis that there are prosodic structures available in Japanese, hypothesis (1) was formulated:

H<sup>1</sup> There will be no difference in suppliance of articles in Art+N contexts and Art+Adj+N contexts if Japanese L2 learners can prosodically represent articles in their ILGs.

Hypothesis (1) is the null hypothesis of the PTH as there should be no difference in suppliance of articles in Art+N and Art+Adj+N contexts as there are prosodic structures available in Japanese L2 learners ILGs.

## 4. Study

### 4.1 Participants

All participants were postgraduate students at the University of Essex. Even though all the participants have taken TOEFL and have scores equivalent of 575 or above, they were asked to take the Oxford Quick Placement Test (2001) in order to obtain their current proficiency level. All participants were then placed into levels according to their scores on the test. Fifteen native speaker controls also participated.

Table 1. Japanese participants in the story re-call task

	L1 Japanese	L1 Japanese
Proficiency level	Intermediate	Advanced
Number of participants	15	15
Age range (years)	21 – 37	22 – 42
Age range of first exposure (years)	6 – 13	3 – 13
Length of stay in English speaking countries (months)	6 – 60	4 – 96

#### 4.2 Experiment

The task was an oral production task which consisted of a total of 113 items. Generics were used as distracter items. The task was designed by Hawkins et al. (in progress) to test Japanese and Greek L2 learners of English. All participants in my study completed the task successfully. The task required the participants to listen to thirteen short stories. Each story was presented twice and prompts were given to the participants via Microsoft PowerPoint slides to assist them in the re-call of the story. Once they had listened twice to one story they were then asked to re-call the story immediately, using the prompts in the order they appeared on the slide. They were instructed to re-call the story as if it was the first time they had heard it and to ignore the researcher present in the room. The idea was to avoid any overuse of definites as the participant may overuse definites if they believe that the speaker and hearer have shared knowledge of a particular subject or situation. If the participant was not confident in recalling a particular story the researcher moved onto the next story and came back to the skipped story at the end. Each story re-call was recorded digitally using PolderbitS Sound Recorder. The task was not timed. An example of a story used in the task is in (13):

- (13) At Colchester North station, an elderly woman's daughter watched a young man run quickly down platform three to catch the next train to London. The daughter of the elderly woman caught the same train, but took her time, strolling down the platform. 'I thought the train was leaving' the young man said. 'They can't find a driver,' the elderly woman's daughter replied.

Prompts: station, elderly woman, daughter, young man, train to London, driver

#### 4.3 Coding procedure

Coding the results of each story is as follows. Once each story had been transcribed using Express Scribe software, I compared the original stories to the transcribed versions and scored them on their correct and incorrect usage of articles. As a native speaker of English, I firstly coded the results with my own intuitions of correct and incorrect uses of articles. The data were then organised into a set: a set of transcriptions of the stories told by the Japanese L2 learners with the articles removed, leaving a blank space before each NP. A sample of these versions without articles (5 intermediate Japanese, 5 advanced Japanese) was given to a group of 12 native speakers of English who were asked to add the appropriate articles (hereafter referred to as story *editors*). The editors were not informed of the L2 learners' nationality or level of English. Each editor was given five participants' transcriptions to code.



The same five participants' transcriptions were given to two other editors to insure inter-editor reliability. In other words, there were four groups of editors with three editors in each group. Each group corrected the same set of data, though it was randomized for each editor. The five participants for each editor group were a mix of proficiency levels. The editors were told that they were looking at transcriptions of stories re-called by non-native speakers of English and were asked to insert an article which they thought was most appropriate within the context of each story. They were asked to choose from four possible options for article insertion: the possible options were *the/a/an/∅* ( $\emptyset$  = no article).<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.4 Overall results

The results are divided into two tables. Table 2 shows the results of the total number of definites supplied and omitted in all contexts. Table 3 shows the total number of indefinites supplied and omitted in all contexts. Substitution errors are likely to be the result of semantic rather than prosodic difficulties with articles.<sup>7</sup>

Table 2. Results of the oral task: total number of singular definites

	Art + N			Art + Adj + N		
	the	*a/an	*∅	the	*a/an	*∅
Intermediate ( <i>n</i> =15)	135/175 (77%)	5/175 (3%)	<b>35/175</b> <b>(20%)</b>	24/32 (75%)	2/32 (6%)	<b>6/32</b> <b>(19%)</b>
Advanced ( <i>n</i> =15)	175/215 (81%)	10/215 (5%)	<b>30/215</b> <b>(14%)</b>	28/33 (85%)	0/33 (0%)	<b>5/33</b> <b>(15%)</b>
Native controls ( <i>n</i> =15)	246/247 (100%)	1/247 (0%)	0/247 (0%)	45/46 (98%)	1/46 (2%)	0/46 (0%)

Table 3. Results of the oral task: total number of singular indefinites

	Art + N			Art + Adj + N		
	*the	a/an	*∅	*the	a/an	*∅
Intermediate ( <i>n</i> =15)	21/214 (10%)	147/214 (69%)	<b>46/214</b> <b>(21%)</b>	11/89 (12%)	36/89 (41%)	<b>42/89</b> <b>(47%)</b>
Advanced ( <i>n</i> =15)	19/237 (8%)	199/237 (84%)	<b>19/237</b> <b>(8%)</b>	10/100 (10%)	71/100 (71%)	<b>19/100</b> <b>(19%)</b>
Native controls ( <i>n</i> =15)	2/210 (1%)	208/210 (99%)	0/210 (0%)	0/131 (0%)	131/131 (100%)	0/131 (0%)

A comparison between Japanese groups and native controls revealed that there were significant differences. The results are given in tables 4 and 5 below.

<sup>6</sup> The native speakers known as *editors* did not receive any phonetic training and as a result it is not possible to determine whether some of the articles produced by the L2 learners may be non-target like, as discovered in Goad & White's (2006a, in press) study, i.e. stressed articles, a pause between the article and noun or a filler produced in place of an article. Further analysis of the data is currently underway using a phonetic program called PRAAT (2006).

<sup>7</sup> See Ionin et al. (2004) for a discussion on fluctuation between definiteness and specificity in L2 English.

Table 4. Oral task: results of intermediate Japanese L2 learners' suppliance of articles

	suppliance of definites		suppliance of indefinites	
Art+N	U = 16	z = -4.345***	U = 2	z = -4.782***
Art+Adj+N	U = 63	z = -2.116*	U = 0.0	z = -4.990***

\*p < .05      \*\*p < .01      \*\*\*p < .001

Table 5. Oral task: results of advanced Japanese L2 learners' suppliance of articles

	suppliance of definites		suppliance of indefinites	
Art+N	U = 24	z = -4.058***	U = 21	z = -4.057***
Art+Adj+N	U = 78	z = -1.378	U = 7.5	z = -4.729***

\*p < .05      \*\*p < .01      \*\*\*p < .001

The results from Mann-Whitney tests reveal that the Japanese L2 learners from both proficiency groups perform significantly differently to the native controls in Art+N and Art+Adj+N contexts. The intermediate Japanese group continued to omit indefinites in Art+Adj+N contexts, but the advanced Japanese group did not. The advanced Japanese group were better at supplying definites in Art+Adj+N contexts. A within-Japanese groups' comparison using the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test revealed that there were differences within the intermediate group between suppliance of definites and indefinites in Art+N and Art+Adj+N contexts. The results are provided in tables 6 and 7 below.

Table 6. Oral task: results of intermediate Japanese L2 learners within-group comparisons

	suppliance of definites	suppliance of indefinites
Art+N x Art+Adj+N	z = -1.274	z = -3.010**
	Art+N	Art+Adj+N
definite x indefinite	z = -1.022	z = -2.433*

\*p < .05      \*\*p < .01      \*\*\*p < .001

Table 7. Oral task: results of advanced Japanese L2 learners within-group comparisons

	suppliance of definites	suppliance of indefinites
Art+N x Art+Adj+N	z = -1.726	z = -1.915
	Art+N	Art+Adj+N
definite x indefinite	z = -1.875	z = -1.728

\*p < .05      \*\*p < .01      \*\*\*p < .001

## 5. Discussion

In sum, Japanese is an article-less language, but unlike Turkish it was argued that Japanese has prosodic structures available to accommodate articles in L2 English Art+N and Art+Adj+N contexts. However, hypothesis (1) was not supported as omission errors were found. Furthermore, an asymmetry occurs between indefinites in Art+N and Art+Adj+N contexts. Suppliance of indefinites is higher in the Art+N contexts for each proficiency group. These results are unexpected. It may be the case that only some of the participants are omitting articles rather than all participants in each proficiency group. One reason for more omission by an individual participant may be age of acquisition. Moyer (1999) argues that one of the factors of L2 phonological acquisition is the age learners start to acquire the second language. The older the learner starts the less likely it is that they will sound native-like in their pronunciation. Some participants in my study are older than others and may have started acquiring spoken English at a later age if they had resided in Japan most of their lives.<sup>8</sup>

To conclude, though it is only speculation, it is possible that omission is more frequent amongst learners who acquired spoken English at a later age because they are unable to prosodically represent articles in their interlanguage grammars. Even though there are prosodic structures available for Art+N constructions in Japanese i.e. prefixes, the learners may not be able to adapt non-target like structures to represent articles in the L2 due to partial rather than full access to UG (see Brown 1998). The reason for partial access to phonology in L2 may be due to the age of acquisition i.e. a critical period (see Singleton 2001). Further analysis of individual participants is required.

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<sup>8</sup> A study by Mochizuki & Kaneko (2005) found differences between Japanese learners of English living in Japan and in the U.S. The learners living in the U.S spoke English faster and were more proficient overall on a spoken production task.

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edited by Alyona Belikova,  
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