

The Acquisition of Nominal Compounding in Japanese: A Parametric Approach

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1. Introduction

The Principles-and-Parameters approach (Chomsky 1981) postulates that UG consists of the set of universal principles that are satisfied by any language, and parameters that define the points and the range of possible human languages. Under this approach, the process of language acquisition is a process of fixing the values of such parameters, and thus the elucidation of genetically endowed parameters is one important goal of linguistic investigation.

Recently, on the basis of overwhelming cross-linguistic and acquisitional data, Snyder (1995, 2001) claims that the availability of novel nominal compounding in a given language is constrained by the Compounding Parameter, which also restricts the possibility of various complex predicate constructions. Many other studies have provided arguments for the existence of this parameter, demonstrating that children who speak languages such as English and Japanese acquire these two properties at the same time, around three years of age at the latest (e.g., Isobe & Sugisaki 2000, Snyder & Stromswold 1997, Sugisaki & Isobe 2000). In contrast, an intriguing experimental result is reported by Choi & Mazuka (2003) and Choi (2003) that 6-year-olds who speak Korean, which permits both nominal compounding and complex predicates, did not reliably disambiguate structurally ambiguous sentences containing either Subject-Object sequence or a novel nominal compound. The key to resolving such ambiguous sentences is the prosody, the role of which has attracted more attention in the fields of both syntax and acquisition these days (e.g., Kitagawa 2005, Gualmini et al. 2002).

In light of this situation, this paper investigates experimentally whether young Japanese-speaking children can resolve the structural ambiguity between a Topic-Object sequence and a nominal compound, by using prosodic information. I argue that this finding not only provides a new piece of evidence that they have adult-like knowledge with respect to nominal compounding, but lends further support to the theory of the Compounding Parameter.

2. Acquisition of Nominal Compounding

2.1 *The Compounding Parameter*

One of the interesting syntactic similarities between languages such as English and Japanese is that both languages allow productive nominal compounding. As illustrated in (1), we can create novel nominal compounds by combining two single nouns.

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- (1) a. English: banana box, worm can
 b. Japanese: banana-bako (a box where bananas are stored or a banana-shaped box)
 banana box
 koori-panda (a panda made of ice)
 ice panda

In addition to nominal compounding, there is another intriguing similarity that these two languages share, which is the availability of complex predicate constructions such as resultatives. In these constructions, the main verb combines with a secondary predicate and thus semantically resembles a simple verb. The sentences in (2) are examples of resultatives in English and Japanese, in which the main verb combines with the adjective.

- (2) a. English: John painted the house red.
 b. Japanese: John-wa ie-o aka-ku nutta.
 John-Top house-Acc red painted
 “John painted the house red.”

A detailed cross-linguistic study of these syntactic properties by Snyder (1995, 2001) has demonstrated that the availability of nominal compounding in a given language correlates with the availability of complex predicate constructions. Table 1 below from Snyder (2001) presents the correlation between the possibility of novel N(oun)-N(oun) compounding and the possibility of resultatives. Given this strong cross-linguistic correlation, Snyder (1995, 2001) claims that these two properties are constrained by part of innate knowledge, which is called the Compounding Parameter.

- (3) Compounding Parameter (Snyder 2001:329):

The grammar {disallows*, allows} formation of endocentric compounds during the syntactic derivation. [*unmarked value]

Languages such as English and Japanese exhibit the positive setting of this parameter, allowing both properties. If this parameter is really part of innate linguistic knowledge, it is expected that there should be an acquisitional correlation between the availability of nominal compounding and the availability of complex predicate constructions. In order to test this prediction, Snyder (1995, 2001) analyzed English-speaking children’s speech data, and found that the ages of the first clear use of a novel N-N compound have shown a strong correlation with the ages of acquisition for complex predicate constructions. Furthermore, Isobe & Sugisaki (2000) and Sugisaki & Isobe (2000) demonstrated experimentally that young Japanese-speaking children could produce novel N-N compounds and comprehend resultative constructions. We also have revealed that the emergence of resultative constructions strongly correlates with the emergence of the knowledge of N-N compounding. Thus, acquisitional data from children speaking English and Japanese have also strongly supported the theory of the Compounding Parameter.

2.2. Research Question

On the contrary, Choi & Mazuka (2003) (and also Choi 2003) report an intriguing acquisitional finding that relates to Korean-speaking children’s knowledge of nominal compounding, which would not be expected according to the theory of the Compounding Parameter. As demonstrated in Table 1 above, Korean also allows novel N-N compounding, and by making use of this property, Choi & Mazuka (2003) create interesting ambiguous sentences in Korean such as (4).

	RESULTATIVES	PRODUCTIVE N-N COMPOUNDING
American Sign Language	yes	yes
Austroasiatic (Khmer)	yes	yes
Finno-Ugric (Hungarian)	yes	yes
Germanic (English, German)	yes	yes
Japanese-Korean (Japanese, Korean)	yes	yes
Sino-Tibetan (Mandarin)	yes	yes
Tai (Thai)	yes	yes
Basque	no	yes
Afroasiatic (Egyptian Arabic, Hebrew)	no	no
Austronesian (Javanese)	no	no
Bantu (Lingala)	no	no
Romance (French, Spanish)	no	no
Slavic (Russian, Serbo-Croatian)	no	no

Table 1: Results of cross-linguistic survey (Snyder 2001:329)

(4) *kirin kwaja mægəyo*a. Subject-Object interpretation:

kirin	kwaja	mægəyo
giraffe	cookie	eat-PRE-DEC

“(A) giraffe eats cookie.”

b. N-N compound interpretation:

<i>pro</i>	kirin kwaja	mægəyo
	giraffe-shaped cookie	eat-PRE-DEC

“(Somebody) eats giraffe-shaped cookie.”

(Choi & Mazuka 2003:202)

The sentence in (4) “*kirin kwaja mægəyo*” is ambiguous between (4a) and (4b). In the structure (4a), the first noun (N₁) *kirin* is the subject, and the second noun (N₂) *kwaja* is the object of the sentence, and the whole meaning is that “(A) giraffe eats the cookie.” On the other hand, in the structure (4b), N₁ and N₂ combine into a single phrase, meaning “giraffe-shaped cookie”, and this structure has *pro* in the subject position. As a result, it means that “(Somebody) eats the giraffe-shaped cookie.” What plays a crucial role in order to disambiguate the two readings in (4a) and (4b) is the prosodic information. In (4), when the prosody signals a phrasal boundary between N₁ and N₂, N₁ is analyzed as the subject of the sentence and N₂ as the object. By contrast, when there is no prosodic boundary, they are parsed into an N-N compound, with *pro* at the subject position.

Choi and Mazuka (2003) examined whether Korean-speaking children aged 3 to 6 could disambiguate structurally ambiguous sentences such as (4) using prosodic cues. The results of their experiment, summarized in (5), are that the performance of 3- and 4-year-olds is below chance level, and even 5- to 6-year-olds were unable to reliably disambiguate syntactic ambiguities like (4) by using prosodic information.

(5) *Results of the experiment by Choi & Mazuka (2003):*

	% of correct answers	
	<u>Subject-Object</u>	<u>N-N compound</u>
3- to 4-year-olds	44.0 %	50.0 %
5- to 6-year-olds	47.6 %	71.4 %

(Choi & Mazuka 2003: 211)

Choi & Mazuka (2003) suggest the following two possibilities for these impoverished results: One is that children have difficulty particularly with ambiguities like (4), and the other is that they have difficulty in relating syntax and prosody. Yet, in light of Snyder’s (1995, 2001) claim and related acquisitional literature, there should be a third possibility for the poor results of Choi & Mazuka

(2003) and Choi (2003): namely that the results are an experimental artifact.^{1,2} One of their methodological problems is that every test sentence was presented with only two pictures without any context. It is well known that discourse contexts are quite helpful for children to correctly interpret elements such as *pro*.

Since Japanese also has ambiguous sentences similar to (4), we might wonder whether Japanese-speaking children can resolve ambiguous sentences like (4) in Japanese when appropriate discourse contexts and prosody are provided. It is reported in the literature that Japanese-speaking children acquire the information they need to resolve the ambiguity very early. First, it is claimed that the pro-drop parameter is set very early (Nakayama 1996, Wexler 1998). Second, as for basic word order, previous studies such as Otsu (1994) and Sugisaki (2005) revealed that young children know that Japanese basic word order is SOV. In addition, with respect to N-N compounding, studies such as Isobe & Sugisaki (2000) and Sugisaki & Isobe (2000) reported that children as young as three correctly produced novel N-N compounds. Furthermore, Shirose & Kiritani (2001) reported their experimental results that 3-year-olds acquiring Tokyo Japanese could assign the appropriate accent to a certain kind of nominal compounds. It is important to note that the tasks used by these studies on the acquisition of N-N compounding were production tasks, therefore it has not been revealed whether Japanese-speaking children can detect an N-N compound in an ambiguous sentence like (4) with the help of prosodic information. Yet, all these previous studies tell us that three-year-old children acquiring Japanese have the knowledge to correctly comprehend ambiguous sentences like (4) very early. Then we can reasonably set up the following question in (6).

(6) *Research Question:*

Are Japanese-speaking children who already have the knowledge of N-N compounding unable to resolve ambiguities even when they are given appropriate discourse contexts?

To tackle this question, I conducted an experiment with children as young as age 3, the results of which I report in the next section.³

3. Experiment

3.1. Participants and Methods

The participants in my experiment were 13 monolingual Japanese-speaking children living in the Tokyo area, ranging in age from 2;10 to 4;2 (mean age 3;7). They were interviewed individually.

The task was a version of the Truth-Value Judgment Task (Crain & Thornton 1998). First, the child was told stories with small stuffed animals, and at the end of the each story, the Mickey Mouse puppet described verbally what he thought had happened in the story. All of Mickey's utterances had already been recorded by the author (a female native speaker of Japanese) in a soundproof room, and small speakers were placed behind Mickey in order to make it seem as if he were speaking. The task for the child was to judge whether what Mickey said was true or false. A sample story is presented in (7).

(7) *Sample story (translated from Japanese to English):*

Experimenter: Here are a rabbit and an elephant. In front of them, you see a rabbit-shaped cookie, an elephant-shaped cookie, and a coke (cf. Figure 1). The rabbit and the elephant are very thirsty, but there is only one coke. As the elephant decides to eat

¹ Choi (2003) conducted an experiment similar to the one by Choi & Mazuka (2003) with some methodological modifications. Yet, the results of 3-to 4-year-olds were almost unchanged (i.e., 63.1 % accurate) (cf. Choi 2003:61).

² For useful methodological changes in order to elicit children's linguistic knowledge correctly, see for example Meroni & Crain (2003) and Otsu (1994).

³ A pilot experiment with 15 children aged 3;11 to 5;2 (mean age 4;4) was carried out before the experiment reported in this paper. The methods and test sentences used in the pilot experiment were almost the same, and the results demonstrated that the children were quite successful in resolving ambiguity.

a cookie, the rabbit decides to drink a coke. The elephant hesitates over which cookie to choose. At first he wants the elephant-shaped cookie, but as the rabbit-shaped cookie is very cute, he finally chooses the rabbit-shaped cookie, and he eats it (cf. Figure 2).

Experimenter: Mickey, can you tell us what they did?

Mickey: *usagisan-ga koora-o nonda-yo* Filler sentence
 rabbit-NOM coke-ACC drink-PAST-EXCL
 “The rabbit drank a coke.”

Experimenter: OK, then, how about the elephant?

Mickey: *zosan kukki-o tabeta-yo* Test sentence
 elephant cookie-ACC eat-PAST-EXCL
 “Speaking of the elephant, he ate a cookie.” or
 “*pro* ate the elephant-shaped cookie.”



Figure 1



Figure 2

(8) *Sample test sentence:*

zosan kukki-o tabeta-yo

a. Topic- Object interpretation:

zo-san(-wa) / kukki-o tabeta-yo TRUE
 elephant cookie-ACC eat-PAST-EXCL
 “Speaking of the elephant, he ate a cookie.”

b. N-N compound interpretation:

pro zo-san kukki-o tabeta-yo FALSE
 elephant-shaped cookie-ACC eat-PAST-EXCL
 “(Someone) ate the elephant-shaped cookie.”

Mickey’s last sentence in (8) has two possible interpretations. One interpretation, like (8a), corresponds to the structure that N_1 is the Topic and N_2 is the object of the verb *tabeta* (ate), which means “Speaking of the elephant, he ate the cookie.” In this structure, the topic marker *wa* which should be attached to *zosan* is dropped. The *wa* drop is always permitted (Kuno 1973), and it is frequently observed especially when adults talk to children (Clancy 1985). The other structure is (8b) where N_1 and N_2 combine into a single noun, and the null pronoun is contained in the subject / topic position.

The main key to resolving the ambiguity between (8a) and (8b) is detecting the proper accent for nominal compounds. According to Kubozono (1996, 2006), the compound accent is determined as in (9).

(9) *Compound accent rule* (cf. Kubozono 1996, 2006):

- a. The accent of N_1 is deleted, and the accent of N_2 is parsed in resulting compounds.
- b. If N_2 is lexically unaccented or accented on its final syllable, the compound accent falls on the rightmost nonfinal foot.

In this experiment, since the test sentence (8) was actually read as (8b), with the compound accent rule in (9a) provided, the answer should be false because what the elephant ate was the rabbit-shaped cookie, not the elephant-shaped one. Hence, it is predicted that if the child has the ability to interpret this kind of sentence using prosodic cues, then she will judge the description is false if she hears the compound accent. On the other hand, if the child does not have the ability to use prosodic cues to resolve the ambiguity, she will wrongly answer true by interpreting *elephant* as the subject even though the accent indicates a nominal compound.

The task contained four potentially ambiguous sentences, two practice items, and seven fillers. All test sentences are provided in Appendix 1. Every noun used in the test sentences is four mora long, but its original accentuation varies. Since the test sentences were provided both with the prosody for Topic-Object interpretation and with the prosody for nominal compound interpretation, each child judged a total of 17 sentences. Prior to the experiment, I tested five adult native speakers of Japanese using the same materials, and their interpretation for each test sentence was completely consistent with what was expected.

3.2. Results

The individual results of the experiment are summarized in Appendix 2. Overall, children correctly disambiguated the test sentences about 92.3% of the time. Specifically, when the test sentences were given with the prosody consistent with Topic-Object sequence, children correctly interpreted them 94.2 % of the time, and when they were read with a compound accent, children could correctly judge these sentences as nominal compound 90.4% of the time. These results demonstrated that 3-year-olds have no difficulty in resolving ambiguous sentences like (8).

4. Discussion

The results of my experiment have shown that given the appropriate discourse contexts, young Japanese-speaking children could use prosodic information to disambiguate syntactically ambiguous sentences.⁴ This finding suggests that children might know the difference in prosody between a Topic-Object sequence and a nominal compound just as adults do, much earlier than their third year. These findings suggest that some innate linguistic knowledge should be relevant to the early mastery of nominal compounding, and hence support the theory of the Compounding Parameter.

According to Snyder et al. (1999), children make use of the availability of recursive compounds such as “baby doll napkin” in order to judge the productivity of nominal compounding in a given language. Although Snyder et al. (1999) have demonstrated that recursive compounds are observed in the early adult input in English, we revealed in Isobe & Sugisaki (2000) that recursive compounds are extremely rare in the parental input of a Japanese corpus. Hence, the experimental results presented

⁴ Despite an experiment with a variant of the Truth Value Judgment Task, Halbert (1997) has shown that English-speaking children aged 3 to 5 had difficulties in resolving ambiguities between a Direct Object- Indirect Object sequence and an N-N compound (e.g., He gave her cat food). Specifically, children preferred the nominal compound interpretation even though the test sentence was not read with compound intonation. Further investigations are necessary to determine what factors make it difficult for children speaking English and Korean to deal with the ambiguity of two nouns.

above attest that young Japanese-speaking children know the availability of nominal compounding despite of the absence of direct experience, suggesting that the Compounding Parameter is part of the innate linguistic mechanism.

5. Conclusion

In this study, it was investigated experimentally whether young Japanese-speaking children can reliably resolve structural ambiguities between a Topic-Object sequence and an N-N compound with prosody. The results of my experiment indicated that 3-year-olds have no difficulty in determining the appropriate structure on the basis of prosodic cues. These findings constitute a new piece of evidence that children have adult-like knowledge with respect to nominal compounding, and also lend further support to the theory that the Compounding Parameter is biologically endowed as part of innate knowledge.

Appendix 1: Test sentences and their expected answers

(1) <i>Topic-Obj interpretation</i>	<i>expected answer</i>
a. zo'osan(-wa) kuk'kii-o tabeta-yo elephant(-TOP) cookie-ACC eat-PAST-EXCL "Speaking of the elephant, he ate a cookie."	FALSE
b. butasan(-wa) teeburu-o hakonda-yo pig(-TOP) table-ACC carry-PAST-EXCL "Speaking of the pig, he carried a table."	FALSE
c. ne'kosan(-wa) hiko'oki-o katta-yo cat(-TOP) plane-ACC buy-PAST-EXCL "Speaking of the cat, she bought a plane."	FALSE
d. ku'masan(-wa) sekken-o tsukatta-yo bear(-TOP) soap-ACC use-PAST-EXCL "Speaking of the bear, he used a soap."	TRUE
 (2) <i>N-N compound interpretation</i>	
e. <i>pro</i> zoosan-kuk'kii-o tabeta-yo elephant-cookie-ACC eat-PAST-EXCL "(Someone) ate the elephant-shaped cookie."	FALSE
f. <i>pro</i> butasan-te'eburu-o hakonda-yo pig-table-ACC carry-PAST-EXCL "(Someone) carried the pig-shaped table."	FALSE
g. <i>pro</i> nekosan-hiko'oki-o katta-yo cat-plane-ACC buy-PAST-EXCL "(Someone) bought the cat-shaped plane."	FALSE
h. <i>pro</i> kumasan-sek'ken-o tsukatta-yo bear-soap-ACC use-PAST-EXCL "(Someone) used the bear-shaped soap."	TRUE

Appendix 2: Individual results

	<i>Participants</i>		<i>Test sentences</i>							
			<u><i>Top-Obj interpretation</i></u>				<u><i>N-N compound interpretation</i></u>			
	<i>Age</i>	<i>M/F</i>	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)
1	2;10	F	C	C	C	C	C	W	C	U
2	3;2	M	C	C	C	C	C	W	C	C
3	3;3	F	C	C	U	C	C	C	C	C
4	3;3	F	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
5	3;3	F	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
6	3;6	M	C	C	C	C	C	W	C	C
7	3;8	M	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
8	3;9	M	C	C	C	W	C	C	W	C
9	3;9	F	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
10	3;10	F	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
11	4;1	F	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
12	4;1	M	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
13	4;2	M	W	C	C	C	C	C	C	C

C: Correct answer

W: Wrong answer

U: Unable to answer (due to lack of attention)

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