Definite generic vs. definite specific: Can Japanese L2 learners distinguish between them?

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Our study adds to the growing L2 acquisition literature on article semantics. 18 L1 Japanese L2 English upper intermediate learners and 12 native English speaker controls were recruited. Using a Picture Matching Task with 30 items we instructed participants to firstly read a sentence, look at a set of four pictures, then match the sentence with a picture or pictures. The sentence ‘the snow monkey is indigenous to mountainous areas of Japan’ features the definite singular and kind predicate ‘indigenous’ and can refer to a picture of a single snow monkey and to a picture where there is more than one snow monkey under a generic interpretation. Conversely, the sentence ‘the snow monkey is small and cute’ can only refer to one picture as the definite singular without a kind predicate has a specific interpretation.

We predicted participants would not be able to distinguish between the definite generic and definite specific as they have difficulty determining the subtle meaning difference between them (e.g., Ionin and Montrul, 2010). As a result, it is unlikely L2 learners would select two pictures for definite generic, only one, which shows a single snow monkey.

A chi-square test shows that for the definite generic there is no significant difference between the native speaker controls and the L2 learners (Yates = 3.62, p= 0.057). For the definite specific, there is no significant difference between the native speaker controls and the L2 learners (Yates = 0.54, p= 0.462)

Our findings indicate despite some difficulties with certain kind predicates (e.g., cultivate), the L2 learners performed better than predicted. We discuss our findings and what they mean for article-less L1 speakers of L2 English.

References


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