A baby sleeping but not a chimney smoking: Semantic features in the placement of adjectival participles in L2 English

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This study investigates second language learners’ sensitivity to semantic features associated with pre- vs. post-nominal adjectivals, focusing on English present participles. When a noun has a [-animate] semantic feature, pre-nominal adjectives are preferred (e.g., a smoking chimney), but when a noun is [+animate/+volitional], a post-nominal present participle is preferred (e.g., a man smoking). Moreover, volitionality is involved in the adjective placement since pre-nominal adjectives are preferred when a noun is [+animate/-volitional] (e.g., a sleeping baby). Generally, attributive adjectives are placed pre-nominally and interpreted as dispositional/permanent, whereas predicative adjectives are placed post-nominally and interpreted as temporal (e.g., Duffield 2005). Thus, there are cases where both pre- and post-nominal adjectivals are possible (e.g., a barking dog/a dog barking). Based on those observations, we predict both pre- and post-nominal adjectivals should be allowed in [+animate] conditions, post-nominal in [+animate/+volitional] conditions, and pre-nominal in [-animate/-volitional] conditions.

The present study examines which location is preferred in each of these three conditions using a forced-choice selection task with audio and visual stimuli. Thirteen native English speakers (NSs) and 12 intermediate Japanese learners of English (JLE) were presented with two sentences auditorily and asked to identify the preferred description of the picture given. Our results showed that more than 64 percent of both JLEs and NSs chose post-nominal adjectivals in the [+animate] condition, and about 75 percent in the [+animate/+volitional] condition. In the [-animate/-volitional] condition, 73 percent of NSs favored pre-nominal adjectives; in contrast, 67 percent of JLEs preferred post-nominal adjectivals. Thus, while both NSs and JLEs favored post-nominal adjectivals in the [+animate/+volitional] condition, a difference between the two groups emerged in the [-animate/-volitional] condition: JLEs selected post-nominal participles where NSs favored pre-nominal adjectives. We conclude that JLEs have difficulty in detecting the semantic features associated with pre- vs. post-nominal locations for English present participles.

Keywords: Japanese learners of English, semantic feature, adjective placement, English present participles.