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Transfer from the First Language: Wrong Inference Rules

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grammar inference language learning pragmatics transfer error

One type of error frequently made by Japanese undergraduate students in their essays involves intransitive verbs such as *occur* and *happen*:

- (1) *The earthquake was occurred in Hokkaido.
- (2) *The accident was happened last Sunday.

At first, it was thought that the reason for this type of error was transfer from their native tongue: intransitive as well as transitive verbs can be passivized in Japanese.

Not all the intransitive verbs are passivized by the students, however. For instance, the verbs such as *sleep* and *walk* are never passivized:

- (3) *John was slept.
- (4) *Mary was walked to the library.

Closer inspection suggests that the students tend to passivize intransitive verbs when the sentences that contain them imply affectedness or adversity. In the above examples, both (1) and (2) connote (in their Japanese equivalents or the active counterparts in English, which are what the students "meant") adversity. They do differ from the so-called adversity passive in Japanese: in (1) and (2) above, the affected party is not expressed, whereas the subject must be the affected entity in the adversity passive.

This might be because the students associate adversity with the passive construction and use passives whenever adversity is implied. The Japanese perfective may also imply adversity, but perhaps the link is weaker and the

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students do not use them to express that connotation. This may be because the students have been taught and remember that the English perfective functions as a means to express the temporal aspect of eventuality.

Another thing related to this is that the students are not familiar with the phrase *on someone*, which appears to be more or less equivalent to the Japanese adversity passive as the following pair illustrate:

- (5) Kare-wa tsuma-ni sin-are-ta.
he-TOP wife-by die-PASS-PAST
"He was adversely affected by his wife's death."
- (6) His wife died on him.

(5) and (6) nevertheless show some differences, which in turn indicate different ways in which languages convey adversity.

This paper explores the different ways in which adversity is expressed in English and Japanese and argues that pragmatic factors as well as the information concerning verbs' valency and selectional restrictions need to be considered to prevent Japanese students making wrong inferences about the relationship between meaning and form.

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Data — Students' Errors

- (1) Passive *occur*
Actually some arguments have **been occurred** between countries.
- (2) Passive *happen*
However, after the accident many problems **are happened**.
- (3) "Strange" transitive *happen*
Though their own nations **happened** no accidents, they have crisis.
- (4) Passive *take place*
Two large political effects **are taken place**.
- (5) Passive *suffer*
Her mother **was suffered** from Alzheimer's disease.
- (6) "Strange" transitive *suffer*
That accident **suffered** many lives terribly...
- (7) Other "adversity" passives
 - (a) But after the accident, people **were** physically and politically **noticed** that the issues is an international one.
 - (b) Europe... **was experienced** the high level of radioactive fallout by the accident.
 - (c) ...the safety of nuclear began to **be concerned** more seriously among nations.
- (8) Another case of "strange" transitive
People **didn't concern** about nuclear power plants outside their nation.
- (9) Quasi-passive
 - (a) **There should be admitted** that every person has the right to die as well as to live.
 - (b) ...because people really know the fear of nuclear explosion, they **became to pay** attention to other nearby countries' plan of building nuclear plants.

Table 1. The Chernobyl accident essays

		<i>occur</i>	<i>happen</i>	<i>take place</i>	<i>suffer</i>	other verbs
Correct use	# of tokens	22	29	1	22	--
	%	91.7	76.3	33.3	64.7	--
Passive	# of tokens	2	8	2	7	16
	%	8.3	21.1	66.7	20.6	--
"Strange" transitive	# of tokens	--	1	2	5	2
	%	--	2.6	--	14.7	--
Total	# of tokens	24	38	3	34	--

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Table 2. The dying with dignity essays

		<i>suffer</i>	other verbs	quasi-impersonal
Correct use	# of tokens	164	--	--
	%	79.6	--	--
Passive	# of tokens	40	7	2
	%	19.4	--	--
"Strange" transitive	# of tokens	2	--	--
	%	1.0	--	--
Total	# of tokens	206	--	--

Table 3. Comparison of test scores

		Full	Lowest	Highest	Mean
Chernobyl	All students	26	0	24	15
	Students with errors	26	6	22	15
Dying	All students	26	0	25	13
	Students with errors	26	6	21	14

Students' Inference Rule

DEFAULT:

SUBJECT = AGENT

AFFECTOR = SUBJECT of the active

AFFECTED = SUBJECT of the passive

Adversity Passive Lexical Template

CAT	[HEAD [VFORM <i>pas</i>]	
	[SUBCAT <② (,PP[<i>by</i>]①)>]	
CONTENT	[REALATION <i>verb</i>]	
	[VERB - ER ①]	
CONTEXT	[RELATION <i>adversity</i>]	
	AFFECTOR ①	
	AFFECTED ②	

The *happen*-type VPs (*happen*, *occur* and *take place*):

CAT	[HEAD [VFORM <i>pas</i>]	
	[SUBCAT <①>]	
CONTENT	[RELATION <i>verb phrase</i>]	
	[VERB - ER ①]	
CONTEXT	[RELATION <i>adversity</i>]	
	AFFECTOR ①	
	AFFECTED [unexpressed]	