

TRANSLATING SINGULAR THIRD PERSONAL PRONOUNS: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE INDONESIAN AND JAPANESE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRAK

Pertimbangan status bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa global membuat bahasa tersebut dihargai di seluruh dunia, serta banyak orang yang ingin mempelajarinya sampai pada tingkat kemahiran tertentu. Namun, sama halnya belajar bahasa lain bahwa belajar bahasa Inggris bukan hal yang mudah, seperti yang saya buktikan dari pengalaman mengajar ketika di Indonesia dan Jepang. Berdasarkan pengamatan sebagai bukti anekdot, ada beberapa pertimbangan topik yang sangat spesifik yaitu *kata ganti orang ketiga tunggal* dan menganalisis tantangan yang muncul pada saat saya mengajar topik tersebut bagi siswa-siswa asing ketika berada di Indonesia dan Jepang.

ABSTRACT

With English's status as a global language, learning the language has become increasingly important with language fluency highly valued and prized around the world. However, as is the case with learning any other language, learning English is not an easy task, as can be attested to based on my teaching experiences in Indonesia and Japan. Drawing upon observations as anecdotal evidence, I consider a very specific topic - namely, singular third personal pronouns - and analyze the specific set of unique challenges that my Indonesian and Japanese students face with this part of speech.

INTRODUCTION

More than 7,000 languages are spoken among the 7.6 billion people inhabiting Earth (Worldometers, 2018). At the same time that about a third of languages are classified as endangered with less than 1,000 speakers, more than half of the world's population speak 23 languages, according to Ethnologue, with Chinese, in all of its forms and dialects taking the lead at 1.28 billion native speakers.

With so many languages, there is a need for a *lingua franca* or a common tongue for ease in communication among people across borders, sometimes even within borders. For a multitude of reasons, English has evolved into a global language.

Based on data from Ethnologue, English is spoken by 1,121,806,280 people around the world. It is spoken by more than half the population in 45 countries (Smith 2017). That is not to say that everyone is a native English speaker. As many as 378,250,540 are classified as L1 speakers and 743,555,720 as L2 speakers, meaning they speak English as a first or second language, respectively. Due to its portability and accessibility, English has evolved into the modern language of diplomacy and the preferred one for global business, further cementing its global status. It is no wonder then that English fluency is emphasized in many countries around the world.

Learning English, or any other language is not easy, but for some people, it is more challenging than for others. Deutscher (2011) argues that the "difficulty of learning a foreign language crucially depends on the learner's mother tongue"

(108). For example, it is comparably easier to learn a language that is related to one's native tongue, such as the case of Swedish for Norwegians, or Spanish for Italians. When languages stem from different families though, it becomes more challenging because of the linguistic differences.

In this paper, I would like to draw upon my teaching experiences in Indonesia and Japan as an English teacher and discuss a particular difficulty that my students face. In the past four years, I have observed many challenges that students encounter that I previously had not considered as a native English speaker. As well, I could empathize with my students' educational experience as I simultaneously engaged in learning the local languages through formal and informal methods. Identifying the difficulties and challenges in my personal language studies allows me to anticipate what my students might struggle with and empathize with them.

From 2014 to 2016, I taught at a public university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. At this particular school, I instructed a variety of classes in the English Program including Speaking, Reading, Writing, Cross-Cultural Understanding, and Performing Arts. In addition, I spent some time volunteering at a local elementary school and assisting with their English program.

Since 2016, I have been teaching predominantly at a public high school in Isahaya, Japan. I also work with elementary and junior high school students with special needs twice a month. Aside from that, I

often involve myself in English-language activities in the community geared towards young children or older adults.

Through my experiences working with a broad range of students who are diverse in many ways, I have developed a good, though far from complete understanding of what different groups of students encounter when learning English.

OBSERVED CHALLENGES TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In both countries, my students have been studying English for several years. Many are frustrated by their inability to master the language. Based on my observations, the process is hampered or slowed down by several factors including environmental considerations in addition to linguistic differences and mother tongue interference.

Environmental Considerations

Language is a social phenomenon. At its very essence, it is a tool for communication that requires active usage in order to maintain it. The environment for English acquisition differs in terms of opportunities for exposure and application for my students in Indonesia and Japan.

My Indonesian students benefited from self-selected enrollment in a program where their classmates were driven to employ English consistently. They also lived in a city often frequented by foreigners, and thus, had opportunities to apply and practice their English skills. Given that the Indonesian writing system employs the same Roman alphabets as English does, it

also meant that my students benefited from a comfortable familiarity with this foreign language. Because the academic program I taught in focused on practical English capabilities, students often engaged in hands-on projects that required them to actively apply their skills. Their studies culminated in an internship in which they draw upon observations from the workplace to write an extensive culminating research project.

For my Japanese students, the environment is different. For them, English is a compulsory school subject. They have no choice but to take the classes. And so, personal motivation varies among the students. From my observations, many students are driven to study English more so to perform well on exams rather than because there is a pressing need for it. As my school is located in the suburbs of Nagasaki City, there is neither a need nor ample opportunities to actively practice English outside of the classroom. For many, their most consistent opportunity to apply the language will be in the classroom with their English teachers of Japanese or non-Japanese descent.

Linguistic Differences and Mother Tongue Interference

The three languages discussed in this paper - English, Indonesian, and Japanese - are very different from one another. Stemming from different language families, they contain unique elements that may not be found in the other language. These linguistic differences can relate to alphabet, phonology, vocabulary, and more.

For example, the English language demands the conjugation of verbs to express different tenses. This concept exists in the Japanese language, and verbs are conjugated accordingly. However, verb conjugation based on tense does not exist in Indonesian. Rather, tense is

marked by words indicating time such as “yesterday”, “tomorrow”, “later”, etc. Further complicating my Indonesian students’ ability to master this grammar point stems from the presence of irregular verbs in English that do not neatly follow rules for conjugation.

	Future	Past
English	I will <u>eat</u> sushi.	I <u>ate</u> sushi.
Indonesian	Saya akan <u>makan</u> sushi.	Saya <u>makan</u> sushi <i>kemarin</i> .
Japanese	私は寿司を <u>食べます</u> 。 Watashiwa sushi <u>wotabemasu</u> .	私は寿司を <u>食べました</u> 。 Watashiwasushi <u>wotabemashita</u> .

At its core, the Indonesian sentences are the same. The only difference expressed in past tense is the addition of a time marker, in this case “kemarin” which can refer to “yesterday” or “any time before today”.

To take another example, the typological system could be different. In comparing Indonesian and English, it is

clear that there are some differences in word order and sentence construction, but fundamentally, the two subscribe to the “subject-verb-object” or SVO pattern. In contrast, Japanese follows a different system, namely “subject-object-verb” or SOV.

English	I <u>eat</u> sushi. S V O
Indonesian	Saya <u>makan</u> sushi. S V O
Japanese	私は寿司を <u>食べます</u> 。 S O V

These differences in language means that there are implications for learners. Learning English or any other language is not simply a matter of translating words for meaning. It also requires comprehending ideas that may not have a corresponding

reference in a student’s native tongue.

One well-known framework for analyzing second language acquisition is the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). The underlying concept is that the errors students make in learning a second

language stem from interferences from the mother tongue. After all, a student’s native tongue serves as the foundation upon which the student bases his or her understanding of the new language. As a result, “individuals tend to transfer the forms and meaning and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture” (Lado 1957:2). This means the knowledge and habits from the first language could be transferred when learning another language. Even with ongoing questioning about the validity of the hypothesis, I have found that there is some merit to it, as will be evident in the discussion in this paper.

TRANSLATING PRONOUNS

While there are many challenges to

language acquisition, I would like to focus on a comparative analysis of a specific challenge that I have noticed among my students in both Indonesia and Japan. In particular, I will discuss the singular third personal pronoun and the unique challenges of translating such pronouns to and from English.

What is a pronoun?

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a pronoun is “any of a small set of words in a language that are used as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases and whose referents are named or understood in the context.” As shown in the chart below, there are different types of pronouns in the English language.

Type	Examples
personal	<i>I, we, you, he, she, it, they, me, us, him, her, them</i>
possessive	<i>mine, yours, his, hers, ours, theirs</i>
reflexive	<i>myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, oneself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves</i>
reciprocal	<i>each other, one another</i>
relative	<i>that, which, who, whose, whom, where, when</i>
demonstrative	<i>this, that, these, those</i>
interrogative	<i>who, what, why, where, when, whatever</i>
indefinite	<i>anything, anybody, anyone, something, somebody, someone, nothing, nobody, none, no one</i>

Source: Internet Grammar of English, University College of London

Personal Pronoun

One type of pronoun is the personal pronoun. This distinct class of pronouns generally replaces the people that it refers

to. A unique characteristic of this class is that it can be further subdivided into types, namely:

- quantity, whether the noun is singular or plural.
- case, how the noun is being used in relation to other words (subjective, objective, possessive)
- perspective, whether a sentence is expressed in first-, second-, or third-person point of view
- gender, whether the noun being replaced refers to the masculine or feminine gender

SUBJECTIVE	Singular	Plural
1st person	I	we
2nd person	you	you
3rd person	he/she/it	they

OBJECTIVE	Singular	Plural
1st person	me	us
2nd person	you	you
3rd person	him/her/it	them

POSSESSIVE	Singular	Plural
1st person	my	our
2nd person	your	your
3rd person	his/her/its	their

Personal pronouns serve a unique function in English grammar. According to Chafe (1994: 94), they minimize the need to verbalize the shared referent; in other words, referring to a noun that has already been named or inferred from the context reduces repetition. Consider the following example:

My friend is from India. My friend works in Nagasaki.

Choice 1 - My friend is from India. He works in Nagasaki.

Choice 2 - My friend is from India. She works in Nagasaki.

In lieu of repeating “my friend”, a personal pronoun can be used to replace it. As the subject being discussed (“my friend”) is a singular noun written in the third-person point-of-view, an appropriate pronoun must be employed. As drawn from the chart above, the given choices are “he”, “she”, or “it”. However, “it” is typically used to refer to nouns other than humans, and since the subject is a person, it would be more appropriate to use “he” or “she”. Given further information, it might be possible to select the appropriate pronoun. Consider the following:

My friend, Arun is from India. My friend works in Nagasaki.

My friend, Arun is from India. He works in Nagasaki.

In this example, the subject (“my friend”) is further defined by “Arun” which is a name given to a boy. As such, it would be best to utilize the pronoun “he” to replace “my friend”. Of course, this could have required cultural knowledge to make this assessment; otherwise, a reader could have just as easily used the pronoun “she”.

This particular ambiguity, in relation to gender and specifically for singular third personal pronouns and the translation

challenges in the Indonesian and Japanese contexts is the key focus of analysis.

TRANSLATING THE SINGULAR THIRD PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Drawing from my observations and anecdotal evidence, I have found that my students in both Indonesia and Japan struggle with translating the singular third personal pronoun. However, their challenges are different. My Indonesian students struggled with the idea as a whole whereas my Japanese students struggled primarily with the possessive and objective forms. In order to understand why, it is necessary to first start with an overview of such pronouns in the respective languages.

ENGLISH	Subjective	Possessive	Objective
Masculine	he	his	him
Feminine	she	her	her

Singular Third Personal Pronouns in Indonesian

	Subjective*	Possessive	Objective
Masculine	dia	(object)-nya	dia
Feminine	dia	(object)-nya	dia

*In Indonesian, “ia” is another pronoun that is sometimes used instead of “dia”.

Unlike in English, the third personal pronoun in Bahasa Indonesia does not differentiate between sexes. The widely used pronoun “dia” encompasses both the masculine and feminine genders. To illustrate this point, take a look at the following examples, as separated by case.

Subjective

Temankuberasaldari India.Dibekerja di

Nagasaki.

My friend is from India. He/she works in Nagasaki.

The pronoun is used to avoid repetition of the word “friend” (“teman”), but it remains unclear whether the friend is a man or a woman.

Objective

Saya akan bertemu dengan dia.

I will meet with him/her.

The same holds true for the singular third personal objective pronoun that utilizes the same “dia” as seen in the subjective case.

Possessive

The singular third personal possessive pronoun is formed by affixing a “-nya” to the end of the possessed object.

Saya sudah bertemu dengan keluarganya.

I already met his/her family.

In the example above, the object is “family” (“keluarga”), and the family belongs to someone. Who the family belongs to though is unclear as whether it is to a man or a woman.

Challenges

1) *Insufficient information provided*

If the sentences in the examples given above stood alone and not as a part of a larger unit, the translation of the singular third personal pronouns into English as “he” or “she” for the subjective case, “him” or “her” for the objective case, and “his” or “her” for the possessive case would be acceptable. After all, given the lack of context in the Indonesian sentence, it would not be possible for the reader to clearly ascertain whether the person being

discussed is a man or a woman. As a result, the Indonesian reader has to navigate through ambiguity and make a judgement call on whether to translate the singular third personal pronoun into a masculine or feminine gender. This holds true for all three cases - subjective, objective, possessive. Furthermore, upon differentiating the gender, the student must remember that each case employs a different form, unlike the consistent “dia” in Indonesian for the subjective and possessive cases.

In regards to the reverse from English to Indonesian, both “he” and “she” would be translated into “dia”, which makes the work easy for a learner like me; however, the gender component gets lost in translation. It is no longer possible to identify whether the noun being discussed is masculine or feminine, unless there were some other markers in context provided. For me personally, I felt unsettled by this as I was so used to gendered pronouns in English.

Thus, there are some challenges in translating singular third personal pronouns to and from Indonesian and English. From the former to the latter, my Indonesian students found it difficult to translate “dia” when not given sufficient context. From the latter to the former, it is difficult to maintain the integrity of the sentence when the gender meaning gets lost in a direct translation.

Singular Third Personal Pronouns in Japanese

	Subjective*	Possessive	Objective*
Masculine	かれは (karewa)	かれの (kareno)	かれを/に (karewo/ni)
Feminine	かのじよは (kanojowa)	かのじよの (kanojono)	かのじよを/に (kanojowo/ni)

* The Japanese language uses particles that serve as topic markers. The particle は indicates subject, and the particles を and に indicate object.

The Japanese language contains many different ways of expressing singular third personal pronouns, but I will focus on the main forms, namely “kare” and “kanojo” for “he” and “she”, respectively. It is important to note that there are many nuances and constraints in using these words, as discussed at length by Obana (2003). Such constraints include whether the referent person is indicated, the relationship between the speaker and listener, the relationship between the speaker and referent, and more. Keeping this in mind, I proceed with the use of “kare” and “kanojo” as the discussion in this paper will focus more on the nuances of direct translations between Japanese and English.

At the basic level, the Japanese language resembles English when it comes to singular third personal pronouns. Gender is explicit as using “kare” or “kanojo” makes it very clear whether the referent is a man or a woman.

The Japanese pattern also resembles that of Indonesian. The subjective and objective forms use the same base word (“kare” and “kanojo” in Japanese, “dia” in Indonesian). One difference in Japanese though is the use of particles. There are

many nuances to the usage of particles, but for the purpose of this paper, I will use the most basic understanding. A “は” (wa) would specify that the preceding word is the subject, whereas a “を” (wo) or “に” (ni) would indicate an object.

Subjective

私の友だちはインド出身です。かれは長崎で働いています。

Watshinotomodachiwa Indo shushindesu. Karewa Nagasaki de haiteimasu.

My friend is from India. He works in Nagasaki.

私の友だちはインド出身です。かのじよは長崎で働いています。

Watshinotomodachiwa Indo shushindesu. Kanojowa Nagasaki de haiteimasu.

My friend is from India. She works in Nagasaki.

In the first sentence of the two examples, it has yet to be defined whether the “friend” is a man or a woman. By the second sentence, the use of the word “kare” or “kanojo” makes clear the gender of the referent being discussed.

Objective

私はかれに会います。

Watashiwakareniaimasu.

I meet him.

私はかのじょに会います。

Watashiwakanojoniaimasu.

I meet her.

Likewise, the singular third personal objective pronouns make the gender of the object very clear.

Possessive

私はすでにかれの家族に会いました。

Watashiwasudenikareno

kazukoniaimashita.

I already met his family.

私はすでにかのじょの家族に会いました。

Watashiwasudenikanojono

kazukoniaimashita.

I already met her family.

The possessive form is created by adding “の” (no) to “kare” or “kanojo”. Again, the gender here is clearly expressed.

Challenges

1) Using “he” or “she” for all cases

For the subjective case, my Japanese students rarely have difficulties understanding and translating pronouns into “he” and “she” correctly as the concept of a gender component is already familiar to them. The trouble arises when they are tasked with translating the objective and

possessive cases. Consider the following example:

I will meet with he. -> I will meet with him.

I already met he family. -> I already met his family.

Given that in Japanese, the basic “kare” or “kanojo” (in addition to particles) is consistently used throughout all cases, I find that my students are likely to apply that idea when making English translations. And so, students may incorrectly use “he” or “she” in the objective and possessive cases.

2) Omitting referent subjects in Japanese

As mentioned earlier, the English language makes use of pronouns to avoid repetition. In Japanese though, it is common to drop the subject rather than replace it with a pronoun.

私の友だちはインド出身です。長崎で働いています。

Watshinotomodachiwa Indo shushindesu. Nagasaki de haiteimasu.

My friend is from India. (He/she) works in Nagasaki.

In the example above, there is no explicit “he” or “she” in the Japanese sentence as it assumes the subject of the previous sentence. Thus, given no explicit subject and no other context, there can be a problem with translating this sentence from Japanese into English.

3) Connotations of “kanojo” and “kare”

As mentioned at the beginning

of this section on Japanese personal pronouns, the usage of “kanojo” and “kare” depends on the context by which it is spoken or written. In some contexts, the terms “kare” and “kanojo” could also be defined as something other than a pronoun. They could also be interpreted to mean “boyfriend” or “girlfriend”.

かれはかのじよに会います。

Karewakanojoniaimasu.

He meets her. ->He meets (his) girlfriend.

かのじよはかれに会います。

Kanojowakareniaimasu.

She meets her. ->She meets (her) boyfriend.

On a different note, one will notice that the possessive forms of “kareno” and “kanojono” were not expressed in the Japanese sentences. This is due to the tendency to drop nouns when it can be assumed what is being referred to, as discussed in the previous challenge.

In these two examples, the pronoun used in the objective case is clearly masculine or feminine, but the meaning itself could be misunderstood.

4) Preference for repetition of referent

I have also noticed that my Japanese students often neglect to use pronouns. Instead, they prefer to repeat the referent noun. This could be due to the nuanced usage of “kanojo” and “kare”, as discussed previously. Consider the following sentence:

Arun meets Angela. Then he gives sushi to her.

In the first sentence, the subject is “Arun”, and the subjective pronoun is “he”. The objective person is “Angela” or “her.” When translated directly into Japanese, it would be written as:

アRUNはアンジェラに会います。あつて かれはかのじよに寿司あげます。

ArunwaAngelaniaimasu.

Attekarewakanojoni sushi woagemasu.

Now, if a Japanese person read this translation, he or she would be likely to imply a “boyfriend-girlfriend” dynamic between the two individuals. If it were the case that the two are not in a relationship, then it should be written as:

アRUNはアンジェラに会います。あつて かれはアンジェラに寿司あげます。

ArunwaAngelaniaimasu.

AttekarewaAngelani sushi woagemasu.

Or, in the case of a dropped subject:

アRUNはアンジェラに会います。あつて アンジェラに寿司あげます。

ArunwaAngelaniaimasu. AtteAngelani sushi woagemasu.

Both sentences here do not specify or suggest any special relationship between the subject and object. What should be noticed is that instead of being replaced by a pronoun, the object “Angela” is repeated. The Japanese language favors repetition for clarity over the usage of personal pronouns, and so, there is a preference to reuse a person’s name or to describe the object’s

relationship to the subject instead.

The result is that when my students write sentences, they are inclined to repeat the subject or object again instead of replacing it with the appropriate pronouns. In English, this would defeat the purpose of the existence of pronouns.

CONCLUSION

Translation is not merely a process of transferring form; rather, it should transmit meaning as well. Languages though, may not be mirrors of other languages. The three languages discussed in this paper - English, Indonesian, and Japanese - come from different language families and subsequently embrace distinct elements. The linguistic differences make the task of translating from the source language into the receptor language tricky as the translator must draw from linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge to be successful.

Drawing upon observations and anecdotal evidence, I found that my students in Indonesia and Japan faced different challenges in dealing with the singular third personal pronouns. I believe these challenges stem primarily from linguistic differences and mother tongue interference. By basing their understanding of the receptor language based on the source language, there are errors that are expected to be made.

In this paper, I analyzed translations of the singular third personal pronouns primarily from Indonesian and Japanese into English. I mainly focused on how gender is treated in such translations. Based on linguistic differences and understanding, it

is clear that these specific pronouns can be a challenge for students to overcome when learning English.

In the English language, the gender of the singular third personal pronoun is clear in all cases - subjective, objective, and possessive. In stark contrast, there is no gender differentiation in Indonesian; a gender-neutral term "dia" is used for the subjective and objective cases, and a "-nya" is affixed to the object of possession in the possessive case. Such pronouns fall in the middle of the spectrum for the Japanese language in that while there is an acknowledged distinction in gender, the base form is similar for the subjective and objective cases.

It is also important to consider how the native tongue affects learners' understanding of English. Looking at the issue from the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, it is clear that students, especially my Japanese students have transferred form and knowledge from their first language in the process of understanding English. This can be found in the inclination to use "he" or "she" for all subjective, objective, and possessive cases as well as the preference for repetition of the referent.

What exactly are the implications of the difficulties in translating gender between Indonesian or Japanese into English? Language and culture are intrinsically linked to each other, and the challenges faced bring into light the role of gender and sex in language. In particular, it poses a question on what gets emphasized and whether terminology can impact how

people view the world. These past few years, there have been movements calling for more gender-neutral terminology in the attempt to be more inclusive of all people. Such calls have been met with open arms and controversy alike. Those advocating for gender-neutrality argue that the current gendered pronouns and vocabulary promote sexism whereas others are horrified by the desire to modify the status quo. At the same time, languages that are more gender-neutral also face ongoing discussions as to whether there is a need for the existence of gendered pronouns for clarity sake.

The challenge of understanding gendered pronouns when making translations reflects the linguistic differences between languages. Beyond that, it could also be the case that they function as a reflection of societal or cultural values. These two are not necessarily exclusive of one another; cultural differences can influence linguistic differences, and vice versa.

The beauty of learning different languages is that languages can “fill each other’s gap for perfection and practicality” (Surjaman 1968:95). In learning languages, the learner is challenged to explore new ideas and ways of thinking. More importantly, being equipped with a foreign language gives the learner greater linguistic capabilities to better express him or herself as sometimes, one language fails to encapsulate the full range of human experiences, experience, and more.

English may be difficult for my students to learn, but in the process

of learning, they have gained valuable experiences. My Indonesian students have familiarized themselves with the concept of gender, and my Japanese students are beginning to understand how using pronouns will make their writing less bulky. These two incidents stemmed from one specific linguistic difference, namely the singular third personal pronoun. Given analysis of other linguistic differences between these observed languages, it could be realized that such differences reflect societal values more. If this were true, then it would call into question the nature by which English is taught to foreign language learners and whether the methods are inclusive and sensitive to the the greater society.

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