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The Acquisition of the Constructional Possibilities of "Get" by Japanese Learners

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Abstract: The present study investigated Japanese learners' acquisition of the constructional possibilities of the basic verb *get* based on the RS (Resulting State)-Experiencer matrix. RS refers to a state that results from the act of getting: HAVE-state, BE-state and DO-state. Experiencer refers to the agent that undergoes a change into one of the three RSs—that is, the subject and the object of a sentence. A Sentence Completion Test was administered to 138 Japanese university students grouped into three proficiency levels. The results showed that, for basic level learners, HAVE-state construction was significantly easier to acquire than BE- and DO-state constructions. On the other hand, there were no statistically significant differences among the three RSs for intermediate- and advanced-level learners. As for Experiencer, constructions in which the object of the sentence undergoes a change were significantly more difficult for basic- and intermediate-level learners to acquire than for those whose Experiencer was the subject of the sentence. No statistically significant difference was identified between the two for advanced-level learners. Based on the results, it can be argued that the concept of constructional possibilities plays an important role in understanding how second language learners go about acquiring basic verbs.

Keywords: basic verb, constructional possibilities, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged in the field of second language (L2) learning and teaching that the ability to make full use of what is called basic words such as basic verbs (e.g., *take*, *give*, *get*, *make*) and prepositions (e.g., *in*, *on*, *at*, *over*) plays a pivotal role in achieving functional communicative competence (Adolphs & Schmitt, 2003; Lennon, 1996; Nation, 2006; Viberg, 2002). Despite their importance, however, it has been argued that acquiring a grasp of basic words is often a challenging task for many L2 learners (Karlsson, 2013; Schmitt, 1998).

One of the major factors that make the acquisition of basic words difficult is their polysemous nature. Fenk-Oczlon, Fenk, and Faber (2010) argued that the more frequently a given word is used, the more polysemous it tends to be. Since basic words are used with high frequency across a wide range of discourse types (Nation, 2001), they typically have multiple semantically related senses (Schmitt, 1998), which in turn puts L2 learners up to the daunting task of learning each sense in a cumulative manner, imposing a heavy learning burden.

In the field of L2 lexical acquisition, it has been argued that learners often resort to what Tanaka and Abe (1985) called the "search-translation-equivalent (STE) strategy," in which they seek to understand the meaning of a given L2 word through its translation equivalent. Imai (1993), for example, reported that Japanese learners' understanding of the meaning of the verb *wear* was strongly constrained by its Japanese translation equivalent *kiru*, which predominantly takes clothing as its object. Her study demonstrated that Japanese learners, employing a "*wear* = *kiru*" strategy, showed a tendency to reject uses of *wear* as in *wear moustache*, *wear a ring* and *wear patience*, all of which cannot be translated into Japanese by using the verb *kiru*. Similarly, Morimoto (2017) investigated Japanese learners' acquisition of the basic verb *break* and found that regardless of the level of proficiency, their understanding of the meaning of *break* was heavily influenced by its translation equivalent *kowasu*, resulting in both over- and under-generalizations.

As has been seen above, previous research has sought to investigate the nature of L2 lexical acquisition by mainly focusing on the semantic aspect of the target L2 words. While this line of research does shed light on how L2 learners go about acquiring the L2 lexicon, there has been a growing awareness in the field of cognitive linguistics whose basic tenets state that there is an interface between

lexicon and grammar (Brugman, 1988; Dixon, 2005; Goldberg, 1995). Based on this premise, it can be said that in investigating L2 learners' acquisition of L2 basic words, their lexical properties as well as grammatical properties need to be taken into account (Kim & Rah, 2016). In this paper, the argument structures a given verb takes will be referred to as "constructional possibilities."

The verb *get* is one of the most frequently used and important basic verbs that allow a wide range of constructional possibilities (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002; Swan, 2005). It can thus be said that *get*-construction is one of the paradigm cases for understanding second learners' lexico-grammatical acquisition.

1.1 Lexico-Grammatical Analysis of Get-Constructions

As with other basic verbs, *get* is a polysemous word that has a number of semantically related senses. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Stevenson, 2010), for example, lists the following eight basic senses of *get*.

1. [with obj.] come to have (something); receive
2. [with obj.] succeed in attaining, achieving, or experiencing; obtain
3. reach or cause to reach a specified state or condition
4. [no obj., with adverbial of direction] come, go, or make progresses eventually or with some difficulty
5. (have got) see *have*.
6. [with obj.] catch or apprehend (someone)
7. [with obj.] *informal* understand (an argument or the person making it)
8. [with obj.] *archaic* acquire (knowledge) by study; learn

In addition to its semantic properties, *get* allows a wide range of constructional possibilities such as *get* + Noun, *get* + *doing*, and *get* + Noun + Adverb, as shown in Table 1. Elaborating on this list, the present paper will argue that these constructional possibilities can systematically be organized in terms of what Bolinger (1977) called the "common thread," or the core meaning, that is, "a change of the state," which can further be categorized into three Resulting States (RS): HAVE-state, BE-state, and DO-state. For example, (1) shows that the state of the subject *I* has changed from "I did not have a letter from her" to "I HAVE a letter from her." Similarly, (2) represents the state of *John* changing from "John was not angry" to "John IS angry." Finally, (3) illustrates the situation in which the state of the subject *you* changes from "You do not know each other" to "You KNOW each other." Since the verb after *to* can be any verb other than *have* and *be*, this is considered to be an instance of a DO-state change.

(1) I *got* a letter from her.
(2) John *got* angry.
(3) You'll soon *get* to know each other.

In order to fully account for the constructional possibilities of the verb *get*, the concept of Experiencer also has to be introduced. It can be defined as the agent who undergoes the change of the state. From a grammatical point of view, it can be either the subject or the object of a sentence. For example, the Experiencer of (4) is the subject *I*, and it undergoes the change into a HAVE-sate. On the other hand, it is the object *you* that experiences the change into a HAVE-state (i.e., you HAVE some coffee) in (5). Similarly, while the Experiencer of (6) is the subject *He*, that of (7) is the object *the door* whose state changes into a BE-state (i.e., the door IS open). Lastly, whereas the Experiencer of (8) is the subject *You*, it is the object *him* in (9) that will undergo the change into a DO-state (i.e., he COOKS). The use of *get* in (9) is generally described as a causative verb.

(4) I *got* some money.
(5) I'll *get* you some coffee.
(6) He *got* angry at me.
(7) I *got* the door open.
(8) You will soon *get* to like this town.
(9) I'll *get* him to cook.

Table 1: List of *get*-constructions.

Construction	Example	Experiencer	Resulting State
1. get + Noun	I got the wrong train.	[+Subject]	[+HAVE]
2. get + Noun + Noun	I'll get you some coffee.	[+Object]	[+HAVE]
3. get + Adjective	He got angry at me.	[+Subject]	[+BE]
4. get + *doing*	I have to get going.	[+Subject]	[+BE]
5. get + *done*	My father got drunk.	[+Subject]	[+BE]
6. get + Adverb	I got home at six.	[+Subject]	[+BE]
7. get + Preposition + Noun	She got into the car.	[+Subject]	[+BE]
8. get + Noun + Adjective	I got the door open.	[+Object]	[+BE]
9. get + Noun + *doing*	You have to get the project going.	[+Object]	[+BE]
10. get + Noun + *done*	I got my bicycle stolen.	[+Object]	[+BE]
11. get + Noun + Adverb	I have to get the book back.	[+Object]	[+BE]
12. get + Noun + Preposition + Noun	Get your elbows off the table.	[+Object]	[+BE]
13. get + to *do*	You will soon get to like this town.	[+Subject]	[+DO]
14. get + Noun + to *do*	I'll get him to cook.	[+Object]	[+DO]

Based on the above analysis, the lexico-grammatical properties of the verb *get* can be systematically understood in terms of (1) the Resulting State (HAVE, BE, DO) and (2) the Experiencer (subject or object), as illustrated in Table 2. When it comes to learning, learners are required to pay attention to "who (or what) undergoes what type of change" in order to realize the lexico-grammatical possibilities of the verb *get*.

Table 2: The RS-Experiencer matrix of *get*-constructions.

		Resulting State (RS)		
		HAVE-state	BE-state	DO-state
Experiencer	Subject	I *got* some money.	He *got* angry at me.	You will soon *get* to like this town.
	Object	I'll *get* you some coffee.	I *got* the door open.	I'll *get* him to cook.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, the present study addresses the following research questions:

(1) Given the RS-Experiencer matrix of the verb *get*, to what extent can second language learners realize its constructional possibilities?
(2) Is there a relationship between the learners' use of the verb *get* and their level of English proficiency?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 138 Japanese university students (116 females; 87 males) at two different universities. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years old with an average of 19.0. According to

their TOEFL-iBT scores (mean = 45.6, *SD* = 22.0) and their prior experience of living in English-speaking countries, the participants were grouped into three groups. The first group consisted of 64 students (46 females; 18 males) whose average TOEFL-iBT score was 34.5. The second group was made up of 54 students (24 females; 30 males), with their average TOEFL-iBT score being 59.6. The third group comprised 20 students (11 females; 9 males) who had lived in an English-speaking country for more than two years. Their average length of stay was 7.3 years, and their average TOEFL-iBT score was 87.4. One-way ANOVA performed on the TOEFL-iBT scores of the three groups showed that there were statistically significant differences in the average scores of the three groups ($p < .01$).

2.2 Materials

In order to measure the extent to which Japanese learners were able to use the verb *get* in various grammatical constructions, a test called the Sentence Completion Test was devised. It consisted of 28 items, two for each of the fourteen constructions shown in Table 1. For each item, participants were asked to read the Japanese sentence and fill in the blanks in the corresponding English sentence. Participants were instructed to use the verb *get* to complete the sentence. The following are examples of the test items.

(1) *Sukoshi zutsu kareno koto-wo rikai dekiru youni narimasuyo*.
Little by little you'll ( ) ( ) ( ) him. [Ans. get to know]
(2) *Onamae-ga kikitore masen deshita*.
Sorry, I didn't ( ) ( ) ( ). [Ans. get your name]

Two versions of the test with a varying order in the presentation of test items were developed, and each participant was given one of the two versions on a random basis. All the test items were checked by two native English speakers in advance.

2.3 Procedures

The participants were first given a short questionnaire on their biographical data and language learning background. After the instructor of the class read the directions aloud, the participants took the Sentence Completion Test, which took about 20 minutes to complete. One point was given for each correct answer. As the focus of the present study is to investigate learners' knowledge of the constructional possibilities of *get*, no points were subtracted for any spelling mistakes. The data management and analysis was done using Excel (Microsoft, Redmond, WA) and SPSS (IBM, Armonk, NY). The ability to complete the sentence correctly was the dependent variable, and the RS, Experiencer, and level of proficiency were the independent variables.

3. Results

Table 3 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the Sentence Completion Test, and Table 4 reports the results of three-way ANOVA. The main effects for Level ($F(2, 810) = 62.65$, $p < .01$), Resulting State ($F(2, 810) = 8.76$, $p < .01$), and Experiencer were statistically significant ($F(1, 810) = 65.27$, $p < .01$). There was a significant interaction effect between Level and Experiencer ($F(2, 810) = 3.84$, $p < .05$), Resulting State and Experiencer ($F(2, 810) = 19.98$, $p < .01$), and Level, Resulting State, and Experiencer ($F(4, 810)$, $p < .01$).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the sentence completion test scores.

	SUBJECT						OBJECT					
	Group 1 (*n*= 64)		Group 2 (*n*= 54)		Group 3 (*n*= 20)		Group 1 (*n*= 64)		Group 2 (*n*= 54)		Group 3 (*n*= 20)	
	Mean (%)	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*
HAVE	71.87	33.18	87.04	24.16	92.50	24.47	26.56	35.60	27.78	37.20	80.00	34.03
BE	44.53	18.08	68.15	18.74	81.50	14.96	16.72	19.11	41.11	23.36	65.00	27.05
DO	44.53	41.90	43.52	41.26	70.00	41.04	32.03	38.18	57.41	43.88	70.00	44.13

Table 4: ANOVA: Tests of between-subjects effects.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	*F*-value	*Sig.*	Partial η^2
LEVEL	133000.44	2	66500.22	62.65	.00	.13
RS	18590.85	2	9295.42	8.76	.00	.02
EXP	69288.60	1	69288.60	65.27	.00	.08
LEVEL*RS	8881.15	4	2220.29	2.09	.08	.01
LEVEL*EXP	8143.60	2	4071.80	3.84	.02	.01
RS*EXP	42416.27	2	21208.14	19.98	.00	.05
LEVEL*RS*EXP	19075.59	4	4768.90	4.49	.02	.02

Note: RS = Resulting State; EXP = Experiencer

Table 5 reports the descriptive statistics for the Sentence Completion Test in terms of Level and Resulting State. For all groups, the scores for HAVE-state were higher than those for BE- and HAVE-state (49.22% for Group 1, 57.41% for Group 2, and 86.25% for Group 3). For Group 1, DO-state turned out to be more challenging (38.28%) than BE-state (30.62%), while the reverse was the case for Groups 2 and 3.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of Level*Resulting State.

	Group 1 (n = 64)		Group 2 (n = 54)		Group 3 (n = 20)	
	Mean (%)	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*
HAVE	49.22	41.14	57.41	43.13	86.25	29.93
BE	30.62	23.20	54.63	25.08	73.25	23.14
DO	38.28	40.41	50.46	42.96	70.00	42.06

Post hoc pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni's method revealed that for Group 1, the accuracy percentage for HAVE-state was significantly higher than that for BE- and DO-state ($p < .01$

and $p < .05$, respectively). There was no significant difference between BE- and DO-state ($p = .18$). As for Groups 2 and 3, no statistically significant differences were identified among the three Resulting States (HAVE vs. BE, $p = 1.00$ for Group 2, $p = .22$ for Group 3; HAVE vs. DO, $p = .35$ for Group 2, $p = .08$ for Group 3; BE vs. DO, $p = 1.00$ for Groups 2 and 3).

Table 6 reports the descriptive statistics for the Sentence Completion Test in terms of Level and Experiencer. As can be seen, all groups scored higher on items whose Experiencer was the subject. While there was a wide gap between the subject and the object for both Groups 1 and 2, that for Group 3 turned out be fairly small. Post hoc pairwise comparisons revealed that there were statistically significant differences between the subject and the object for Group 1 and 2 ($p < .01$, respectively). No significant difference was identified for Group 3 ($p = .11$, *n.s.*).

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of Level*Experiencer.

	Group 1 ($n = 64$)		Group 2 ($n = 54$)		Group 3 ($n = 20$)	
	Mean (%)	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*	*Mean (%)*	*SD*
SUBJECT	53.65	34.89	66.23	34.46	81.33	29.89
OBJECT	25.10	32.55	42.10	37.64	71.67	35.71

4. Discussion and Implications

The results of the present study have shown that for basic-level learners, the order of difficulty in terms of Resulting State was BE > DO > HAVE. There are several possible reasons why this was the case. First, as Tanaka and Abe (1985) argued, second language learners often resort to what they called the search-translation-equivalent (STE) strategy, in which they seek to understand the meaning of a given L2 word through its translation equivalent. For Japanese learners, *teni ireru* or *eru* are the verbs that are predominantly equated with the verb *get*. These verbs are typically used to describe a situation where one obtains something, as in *Watashi-wa sono chiketto-wo teni ireta* (I got the ticket). It can therefore be argued that basic-level learners, who can be considered to have relied more heavily on the STE strategy than intermediate- and advanced-level learners, were able to process HAVE-state constructions in a more straightforward manner than BE- and DO-state constructions. The fact that there were no statistically significant differences among the three Resulting States for intermediate and advanced learners suggests that the extent to which learners utilize the STE strategy might decrease as they become more proficient. In other words, it can be said that learners gradually realize that the meaning of a given L2 word cannot be captured through a single translation-equivalent, and start understanding its L2-specific properties.

There could be a number of factors that account for the relative differences in the scores between BE- and DO-state constructions. One of the major factors could be the sheer number of BE-state constructions *get* allows. As shown in Table 1, the number of BE-state constructions was ten, while that of DO-state constructions was two. It is thus conceivable that if certain constructions had been especially difficult for learners, that could have lowered the overall performance of BE-state constructions. More fine-graded analysis would be called for in order to elaborate on this point. In terms of DO-state constructions, learners probably had been given explicit instructions on *get* + Noun + to *do* when they learned causative verbs (along with the verbs *make*, *let*, and *have*) in high school, which might have resulted in their better performance on DO-state constructions.

With regard to Experiencer, constructions that involved the change of the object of a sentence turned out to be more challenging than those with the change of the subject for basic- and intermediate -level learners. One of the factors that account for this result could be the relative frequency of the two constructions. It might have been the case that learners had been exposed to constructions that involve the change of the subject more frequently than to those involving the change of the object, making the former more familiar for them. However, this point needs to be confirmed through corpus-based studies. Another factor could be a difference in the amount of cognitive load necessary for processing. In case of constructions without an object, learners are able to instantly identify that it is the subject of the sentence that undergoes the change of the state. On the

other hand, when they process constructions that contain an object, they are required to identify an Experiencer from two options, which imposes a heavier cognitive load on them. Frequency, as well as the amount of cognitive load could, therefore be responsible for the relative difficulty in using constructions that involve a change to the object.

5. Conclusion

Based on the RS-Experiencer matrix, the present study investigated the extent to which Japanese learners were able to realize the constructional possibilities of the verb *get*. The results of the Sentence Completion Test first suggested that advanced-level learners were able to realize the constructional possibilities of *get* to a high degree, regardless of the Resulting State and Experiencer. As for intermediate-level learners, while there were no significant differences among the three RSs, constructions involving change of the object turned out to be more challenging than those involving the change of the subject. In the case of basic learners, the order of difficulty in terms of the RS was BE > DO > HAVE, and it was argued that their reliance on the STE strategy as well as the sheer number of BE-state constructions could be responsible for this result. In terms of Experiencer, constructions involving change of the object were more difficult for them to acquire, which could be accounted for in terms of their lower frequency and the amount of cognitive load necessary for processing them.

As for pedagogical implications, the RS-Experiencer matrix can be a useful framework for teachers to identify where learners are facing difficulty and design effective instructions. Teachers should encourage learners to understand that various constructional possibilities of *get* can systematically be understood in terms of its core meaning, "a change of the state," and through the matrix of Resulting State and Experiencer. In other words, constructional possibilities of *get* should be presented as a network, rather than in a separate manner. Although the advanced-level learners in the present study were able to realize the constructional possibilities of *get* to a high degree, they can still benefit from the above approach in that it will lead to a systematic cognitive readjustment of their knowledge of *get*.

As this study investigated second language learners' use of the *get*-constructions from a productive point of view, further research investigating their receptive knowledge is called for so that one can draw a clearer picture of how they go about acquiring the constructional possibilities of *get*. In addition, the data should be viewed in light of the frequency of each construction, which can be obtained through corpus-based studies. This line of research will shed light on how second language learners go about developing constructional knowledge of basic verbs.

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Appendix

Sentences in the Sentence Completion Test

1. [+HAVE]
1.1 *get* + Noun [+Subject]
To my pleasant surprise, I got a letter from an old friend of mine.
Sorry, I didn't get your name.
1.2 *get* + Noun + Noun [+Object]
I'll get you a new bike for your birthday.
I asked him to get me a dictionary.
2. [+BE]
2.1 *get* + Adjective [+Subject]
I don't know why, but he got angry and yelled at me.
I hope you will get well [better] soon.
2.2 *get* + *doing* [+Subject]
They got talking about global warming.
I'd love to stay and chat a little more but I have to get going.
2.3 *get* + *done* [+Subject]
The window got broken when the ball hit it.
Don't get lost on the mountains.
2.4 *get* + Adverb [+Subject]
I left my office at five and got home at six.
I just got back from Singapore two hours ago.
2.5 *get* +Preposition + Noun [+Subject]
They got into the car and drove away.
He rushed to the station and got on the train just in time.
2.6 *get* + Noun + Adjective [+Object]
I have tried everything to get him happy.
My mother went into the kitchen and got breakfast ready.
2.7 *get* + Noun + doing [+Object]
I got the engine running and turned the car round.
He got the machine working without problems.
2.8 *get* + Noun + done [+Object]
I got my bicycle stolen while I was shopping.
I have to get my homework done [finished] by tomorrow.
2.9 *get* + Noun + Adverb [+Object]
Please get me up at six tomorrow.
Can you get him out now?
2.10 *get* + Noun + Preposition + Noun [+Object]
You always get me in trouble.

Try to get your shoulders under the water.

3. [+DO]

3.1 *get* + to *do* [+Subject]

The purpose of this activity is to get to know each other better.

Little by little you'll get to understand him.

3.2 *get* + Noun + to *do* [+Object]

I'll get him to cook.

I got her to do her homework.