Dimensions of context-dependent linguistic knowledge: The case of Japanese recipe register

The relationship between linguistic forms and situations of use is an important area of inquiry in linguistic investigations that take as their focus the communicative repertoire of language users. This study explores the register-specific linguistic knowledge of native speakers by examining how they apply (or do not apply) characteristics of Japanese cookbook recipes to their own recipe writing. Recipes are often regarded as a representative example of register (e.g., Ferguson 1982, Fischer 2013), defined as the use of language in a particular social situation for a specific purpose (Ferguson 1994). While some technical registers are confined to a small group of professionals, recipes are accessible to a large community (Kittredge 1982). Indeed, in our survey of 90 adult native speakers, most (93.3%) said that they frequently or occasionally read recipes. In addition, since the rise of the internet, more and more publicly available recipes are written by non-professionals. Based on these backgrounds, we can expect that lay native speakers have at least some knowledge of register-specific features of recipes.

In our previous study (Authors 2018), we identified textual and linguistic characteristics of traditional cookbook recipes, and found that user-generated online recipes (from Cookpad and Rakuten sites) both conformed to and diverged from these characteristics. Common properties were the bipartite text structure (list of ingredients and numbered steps) and vocabulary (cooking terminology and specialized words). In contrast, the amateur recipes showed deviation and inter-writer variability in the grammatical aspects, particularly verb morphology and particle use. Two situational factors, namely, editorial control and interactivity afforded by the medium, underlay these differences. Due to the nature of written language, however, two questions remained: 1) whether the amateur writers, especially those whose grammatical features were more congruent with those of the cookbooks, consulted other recipes, including professionally edited ones; and, if so, 2) how the practice of self-editing affected their language use.

To address these questions, and to gain some insights into writers’ perspectives, in the present study, we collected and analyzed 30 recipes written by adult native speakers and their answers to a post-task questionnaire. The participants were asked to write a recipe of curry rice or an unnamed soup (accompanied by a photo) on a blank piece of paper without access to any outside resources. Besides the common use of specialized vocabulary, their texts showed an even higher degree of divergence and individual variation than the online user-generated texts. Only 20% had the bipartite text structure and 10% exhibited grammatical conformity to the cookbook. Our analysis demonstrates that the observed differences are driven by multiple factors. Text organization, as well as the use of interpersonal elements, were likely motivated by the participants’ understanding of what the writing task entailed. Those who viewed the task as one of teaching or describing a process, for example, used a narrative style with sentence-initial adverbials such as mazu ‘first’ and sono ato ‘after that’ (Ex.1). Grammatical elements, on the other hand, seemed to depend more on the participants’ awareness and control of register-based language differences. For instance, two writers with systematic use of te vs. i/e medial verb forms, based on the degree of discontinuity of events (Ono 1990) (Ex.2), and of the particle wa for preparation steps (Ex.3), commented that they were conscious of unique features of recipe language. Regardless of organizational/grammatical differences, many participants (83.3%) wrote dekiagari or kansei ‘complete’ at the end (Ex.4). These words were not observed in the cookbook recipes we examined. In the mind of the participants, these concluding remarks were strongly associated with the topic of cooking and how-to instructions; we speculate that they had acquired such association from socio-cultural experiences rather than reading recipes alone.

The findings suggest that native speakers differ widely in their awareness and competence in the recipe register, and that editorial processes have a significant role in shaping the text.
Examples

(1) Narrative-like recipe segments

\textit{mazu Hajimeni, mizu o futtoos-ase, ...}

‘First, at the beginning, boil the water, ...’

\textit{sono ato, omizu to roorie o ire-te...}

‘After that, put in water and bay leaf ...’

(2) Systematic use of \textit{i/e} (higher discontinuity) and \textit{te} (lower discontinuity)

\textit{futtooshi-tara hi o tom-e, kareeko o wake-te ire-te tokasu.}

‘When the water comes to a boil, turn off heat, break the curry mix, put in, and dissolve.’

(3) Use of \textit{wa} for preparation steps (with major ingredients requiring preparation)

\textit{tamanegi wa kawa o mui-te 2-toobun ni shi, kushi-giri ni suru.}

‘As for onion, peel skin, cut into equal halves, and cut into wedges.’

(4) Concluding remarks

\textit{suupu-zara ni yasai ・ uinnaa o kintooni mot-te dekiagari.}

‘Serve vegetables and sausages evenly in a soup bowl and (it’s) complete.’

\textit{sara ni takiagatta kome o mori, karee o kake-te kansei.}

‘Serve cooked rice on a plate, pour curry sauce and (it’s) complete.’

References

Authors (2018). --


