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► **To cite this version:**

Daniele Allard, Riichiro Mizoguchi, Jacqueline Bourdeau. Can Language and Culture Go Hand in Hand? Cross-Linguistic Influence in the L2 Acquisition Process. Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), 2005, Tokyo, Japan. 11 p. hal-00197419

HAL Id: hal-00197419

<https://telearn.hal.science/hal-00197419>

Submitted on 14 Dec 2007

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Can Language and Culture Go Hand in Hand? Cross- Linguistic Influence in the L2 Acquisition Process

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Abstract:

Can Language and Culture go Hand in Hand? Using examples of Japanese as L1 and English as L2, we seek to demonstrate how transfer and interference from one's native language can impact expression in a language being acquired. We make some suggestions as to how to tackle transfer and interference, and briefly discuss the potential of further research to this effect in CALL.

言葉と文化は手と手を取り合うことができるか？この発表では日本語を母語とする人が第二言語として英語を習得するケースを例にその習得過程においてどのように日本語のバックグラウンドが英語表現に影響を及ぼしているかを検証し、その問題への取り組み方を提案します。またコンピュータ支援言語学習の分野におけるこの研究課題の可能性にも言及します。

Introduction:

Especially in the earlier stages of acquiring another language (L2), the transfer of patterns from one's native language (L1) can be a major source of errors in learner language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999).¹ Such errors reflect the fact that there are multiple ways of viewing the world and talking about it; they also show that language, considered as a social practice, is imbued with culture. People communicate in relation to each other, and in relation to their prior experience. Their voice is not only individual, but collective: they regularly express the knowledge and social patterns accepted within their native community (Kramsch 1993). Whereas ways of speaking may be predictable between native speakers, such is not always the case when communication involves non-native speakers. The former often don't share with the latter a common pool of knowledge, memory, culture and linguistic patterns. This certainly does not prevent communication, but it may sometimes lead to misunderstandings.

This paper builds on examples chosen within the context of Japanese students learning English. It seeks to demonstrate ways in which L2 can bear traces of L1. It also addresses the question of how language teachers might begin to tackle the difficulties and interferences stemming from such influence. Finally, it proposes the use of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) as a potentially useful tool to this effect.

Cross-linguistic Influence:

Cross-linguistic influence, which is also referred to as transfer, is the process by which L1 can impact L2 in its process of acquisition. That is to say: “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired” (Odlin, 1989, p.27). This influence can have two facets: “Transfer is both a facilitating and limiting factor which provides one basis for the learner to form and test hypotheses about the second language he or she is learning” (Ringbom, 1985, abstract). In other words, transfer can be viewed as positive or negative. Positive transfer is the transfer of a skill inspired from L1 (or any other previously acquired language) that facilitates the learning of a skill in L2, given similarities between the two skills at hand. Negative transfer is the transfer of a skill that is different from that used in L2, and as such may actually impede learning (Noor, 1994). Interferences, which are related to negative transfer, are “errors in the learner’s use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue” (Lott 1983, p. 256).²

Learner errors can of course be traced to various different sources, as second language learning involves more than a process of making use of L2 words to be placed in L1 sentence structures. Yet, interferences do account for many errors learners make (Ellis, 1997, Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Concepts of interference and transfer are related to research in contrastive analysis, which has roots in behaviorism, and was especially popular in the last half of the previous century. Given eventual shifts of paradigms in language acquisition research, namely away from behaviorist views, this type of research came to meet with resistance. In the words of Gregg: “contrastive analysis, error analysis, etc. are not simply unrelated to linguistic theory in particular, they are dead meat in general.” (qtd. in Swan, 1997). And yet, recent research has shown that overall patterns of error do tend to be language specific, which explains why English might sometimes be called “Thai English” or “Greek English.” “There is less disagreement than there used to be about how far interlanguages are influenced by learners’ native languages, and most linguists would probably now agree that the mother tongue can affect learners’ English in several ways.” (Swan and Smith, 2001, p. xi)

Learners actually bring a tremendous amount of knowledge to the task of tackling L2 acquisition, among which is knowledge of L1. In the early stages of the acquisition process, especially, it is expected they draw on L1 knowledge (Ellis, 1997). In fact, “the learner tends to assume that the system of L2 is more or less the same as in his L1 until he has discovered that it is not” (Ringbom, 1987, p. 135). Concurrently, if L1 and L2 are related, it will be easier for the student to acquire proficiency, but if they are unrelated, the process, especially in the earlier stages of acquisition, will prove more difficult and time-consuming (Ringbom, 1987).

Our study focuses on “Japanese English.” Based on observation and teaching experience in Japan, we, like others before us, have noticed that Japanese students tend to make certain types/patterns of errors on a regular basis, and several among these can be traced to influence from L1. We have found that identifying the source of an error, then providing explanations along with practice drills that are based on a comparison of the L2 problem area with corresponding L1 patterns seems to be of benefit in such cases. This is

not to say that we always compare English to Japanese in explanations given to students, nor that such explanations need to be made in Japanese. Rather, we are proposing that an analysis of the cause of interference may reveal aspects explaining L2 usage that are otherwise left implicit in generic explanations. Making these aspects explicit, and using them to target usage explanations in such a way that the student might more readily understand, seems to bear fruit. In the process, we thus try, when possible, to promote positive transfer, encouraging students to make use of knowledge they already have, albeit with some necessary adjustments.

We will provide two examples to this effect: usage of *come* and *go*, and usage of *had better*. Our examples will not be expanded into extensive comparisons between both languages, which are beyond the scope of this paper, but rather aim at highlighting some illustrative key points in terms of L1 transfer and its potential impact. We will assume the position of an English teacher who has little knowledge of Japanese and little experience in teaching to Japanese students. The reason for these assumptions is to illustrate how explanations of a language point may potentially gain from adding elements linked to knowledge of corresponding L1 patterns.

Appropriate Usage of *Come* and *Go*:

In a conversation between a native English speaker and a native Japanese speaker, it is not uncommon, in response for example to (1) “Will you come to my home on Saturday?” to get a response from the Japanese speaker such as “Yes, I’ll go” or “Yes, I’ll go in the afternoon” (inappropriate usage) as opposed to “Yes, I will” (*come* is implied) or “Yes, I’ll come in the afternoon.”

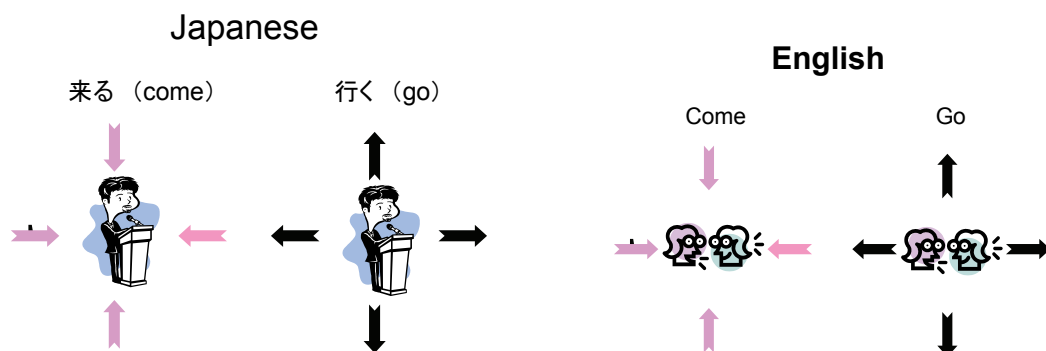
In explaining generic rules of usage for *come* and *go*, a language teacher might consider the following: *come* is used for movements to the place where the speaker or hearer is, and *go* for movement to other places (Swan, *Practical English Usage*, 2005). In example (1) above, movement flows in the direction of the speaker, and the answer thus follows accordingly. The teacher might provide the following examples to further illustrate (Swan, 2005):

- (2) When did you come to live here?
- (3) Can I come see you?
- (4) I want to go and live in Greece.
- (5) In 1577, he went to study in Rome.
- (6) Let’s go and see Peter and Diane.

Analysis of usage in Japanese, on the other hand, shows that *come* and *go* varies essentially according to speaker (not speaker and hearer), which explains the mistake Japanese students might make in example (1), in fact a direct translation from Japanese. In Japanese, *come* indicates a movement in the direction towards the speaker or the speaker’s viewpoint, and *go* expresses movement away from the speaker or the speaker’s viewpoint (Makino and Tsutsui, 1986). Consequently examples (2), (4), (5), and (6) would essentially call for the same verbs as in the English examples, but (1) would imply a different answer, and (3) would require *go* instead of *come*.³ Given both similarities

and differences in usage, English usage of *come* and *go* is often quite confusing for Japanese students.

In view of this situation, can anything be supplemented to generic explanations to help facilitate student understanding and awareness of appropriate usage? In addition to English usage explanations, raising awareness of what one does in L1 as a comparison appears to be useful in this particular case. To begin with, the following graphic illustration can be considered: whereas Japanese is speaker-oriented, English is both hearer and speaker oriented.



This difference in perspective leads to usage differences, especially with respect to *come*. More specifically, we have observed that Japanese students often make L1-related mistakes when answering questions, in reply to a prompt, or when making statements using the first person (“I”). Other situations calling for *come* and *go* show that inappropriate usage does not usually occur, though there may be underlying nuances in intended meaning.⁴

The above diagram can therefore be shown to students, followed by an explanation of how usage differs in English, firstly when answering questions or replying to prompts. Simply put, in English, if the direction of the movement is the same in both question and answer, the same verb will be used. For example, if someone asks: “What time are you *coming* on Friday?” the answer could be “I’m *coming* at noon.” (not, as in Japanese, I’m *going* at noon). We extrapolate to third person situations: “When will your brother *come* see me? He will *come* after lunch (not: he will *go* after lunch).⁵ “When are you *going* to Italy? I am *going* in July.” (here, usage is the same in both languages). Inappropriate usage can also be seen in reply to a prompt: if A and B who live together have decided to go shopping, but A, tired of waiting for B, states “I’m *going*!” on the doorstep, then B, who wants to accompany A, would reply “I’m *coming*!” (not: I’m *going*!).

Using the diagram once again, explanations of the above paragraph can be summarized using the following approximation: *go* is used in statements or questions when the goal of the movement is not towards either the hearer and/or speaker. If it is, the statement or question calls for *come*.⁶ Besides answers to questions or reply to prompts, Japanese students must also pay attention to usage of *come* in terms of “I.” For example, in

English, appropriate usage would call for: “May I *come* see you this afternoon?” (not: May I *go* see you?). Wrapping up, an example of a situation in which movement is different between the question and the answer can be provided. This implies that the choice of the verbs will vary: Did you *come* to the university on Tuesday after all? No, I didn’t. I *went* to City Hall. Usage is similar to Japanese, but this example is used to reinforce understanding of the above approximation.⁷

Carefully going over such an explanation, which in some respects parallels and contrasts usage in Japanese, along with targeting examples and practice so that students become more keenly aware of the mechanics of English usage in relation to what they know, in our experience, facilitates the acquisition process. Though generic explanations of rules of usage and generic exercises may certainly bring students to the same end result, if targeted explanations and practice takes them there faster, we believe the latter will then have been of benefit.

“Linguistic differences between L1 and L2 may not automatically mean learning problems, but if the learner is able to perceive structural lexical similarities between L1 and L2 there will be an absolutely essential absence of some important learning problems at the early stages, especially as far as comprehension and vocabulary learning are concerned” (Ringbom, 1987, p.60). That is to say, if the learner is able to root his (her) understanding of L2 in the understanding he has of L1, learning can be facilitated. Though this will be easier to do in cases of obvious similarities between L1 and L2, it can also apply to cases of dissimilarities provided the student develops a sense of what is similar to L1 and what is not.

Appropriate Usage of *Had better*:

Our second example centers on the English modal *had better*. Consider the following statements: (1) “You had better take your umbrella.” (2) “You had better go to Osaka Castle to see the beautiful cherry blossoms.” (3) “You had better read this book.” Though these are not uncommon in English used by Japanese native speakers, they have sometimes struck English native hearers to whom they were addressed as somewhat odd, if not inappropriate. The Japanese speaker who reported example (1) was eventually told by his foreign visitor that this type of advice was not completely appropriate: the visitor was able to decide for himself whether or not he needed to bring an umbrella – to the surprise of the Japanese speaker. Similarly, though comments were not voiced, (2) and (3) elicited reactions from native English speakers to the effect of: “What if I don’t go to the castle – or read this book? Do I need to worry about something?” Of course, depending on the context, usage of *had better* may not necessarily bring about such reactions, but the fact that it can, we believe, needs to be addressed.

In questioning Japanese speakers/students, it appears that *had better* is essentially seen as an equivalent for the Japanese expression ほ う が ざ い い . It is offered as a possible translation in various Japanese-English dictionaries, and is translated as such by Makino and Tsutsui (1986) in their dictionary of Japanese grammar. These linguists explain ほ う が ざ い い it in the following way: “it is strongly suggested that someone do something.” In *Practical English Usage*, Swan (2005) explains *had better* in terms of strong advice, or

telling people what to do (including ourselves) (Swan, 2005). *ほうがいい* and *had better* therefore appear, at first glance, to be equivalent expressions.

Other English grammar books add to Swan's explanation that usage of *had better* can also imply that if the advice given is not followed, there is the possibility of a problem or a danger (Murphy 2004, Azar 2002). Bearing this in mind, it might then be explained to students that in example (2) for instance, usage of "had better" is not the best choice since there is not any particular problem or danger in view of not seeing cherry blossoms at Osaka Castle. Barker (2003) stresses this point using a similar example in *英語と仲直りできる本* (Coming to Terms with English: A Reference Book).⁸

When examining the issue more closely, however, it seems that there are deeper issues at stake, which stem from cultural differences. Informal discussions with Japanese speakers have revealed that *ほうがい* also carries the implication of negative consequences. This is actually the reason for giving the advice, and demonstrates concern for the hearer's welfare, or at least for the possibility of missed opportunities. Should the severity of the consequence then be considered in terms of usage of *had better*? Makino, Tsutsui, and Swan all refer to the idea of "strong" advice in their respective explanations of the Japanese and the English expression. How strong, then, is *strong*? Cultural perspectives, it appears, vary in this respect.

The relative strength of *ほうがいい* and *had better* appears to gravitate at opposite ends of a spectrum when compared to other advice expressions in each respective language. In English, *had better* is stronger than *might/could*, but weaker than *have to/have got to/need to*; the negative form *had better not* is ranked as the strongest possible modal of negative advice (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In comparison, *ほうがいい* is ranked as the weakest Japanese expression of advice (Makino and Tsutsui, 1986).⁹ This seems to confirm that "strong advice" is indeed culturally dependent.

The English hearer who reacted to the suggestions of bringing an umbrella highlights another important issue: sensitivity to advice. Japanese people are generally receptive to advice, even viewing it as normal, if not desirable. This is probably linked to the Japanese proclivity towards maintaining group harmony which rests upon a series of socially accepted rules. These serve as guidance towards maintaining harmony, and as such, are necessary and useful. They in turn contribute to generating a strong sense of duty, as well as, generally speaking, a sense of ease with respecting and following rules, as well as an openness towards various forms of advice from other group members with a similar concern for harmony. Westerners, on the other hand, tend to value individualism and the capacity to decide for oneself, and as such, may react negatively to advice, especially if it is perceived as unsolicited. In other words, whereas "strong" advice using *ほうがいい* would likely not ruffle a Japanese hearer, "strong" advice using *had better* may not always be well received by an English-speaking hearer. We acknowledge that the preceding explanation is a series of generalizations. We further acknowledge that "cultural generalizations are necessarily statements of likelihood and potential, not of certainty" (Storti, 3). Yet, it is not possible to talk about culture, about groups of people, without making generalizations. As these do contain a kernel of truth, used wisely, along

with discrimination, generalizations can at least set a way towards clearer mutual understanding. (Storti, 1999)

The context, tone of voice and relationship of speaker and hearer when expressing / receiving advice need of course to be taken into consideration. Depending on these, *had better* can take on different connotations. To this effect, a Japanese speaker may consciously articulate *had + better* when uttering a statement, rather than use the (pronoun) 'd *better* abbreviation more common to everyday English. Furthermore, the rhythm of the sentence may end up making the advice sound stronger/more threatening than it is actually intended to be because it is stated by a non-native speaker not used to English rhythm / inflection / pronunciation.

How does an English teacher then deal with explaining *had better* to Japanese students? To begin with, one might emphasize that the English modal is not a translation for ほうがいい, while explaining issues of sensitivity to advice in view of comparative cultural considerations -- at least in terms of impact on a Western hearer. In the process, the teacher can provide relevant examples of use, and situate *had better* in relation to other advice modals in terms of relative strength -- the point might also be made that *had better* and ほうがいい tend to be at opposite ends of a strength spectrum in each respective language. The teacher might also show how the examples given at the beginning of this section can be toned down, for instance by expressing them using *might*, *could* or *should*. In fact, a good review of modals and advice expressions, along with targeted exercises and drills in view of potential L1 interference, accompanied by discussion of impact on a potential hearer should prove useful.

The study of modals can further lead to practice in the usage of imperatives, which Japanese students find difficult to apply in English. "Bring your umbrella!" said in a casual tone is not a forceful statement, but in Japanese, it is comparatively much stronger, regardless of the tone of voice, which likely explains reluctance on the part of Japanese speakers to use English imperatives. We shall not enter here into a comparative discussion of imperatives, but we raise the issue to show how attention to cross-linguistic influence and the difficulties they may cause can suggest instructional sequences that may facilitate acquisition and understanding while following an order that might not otherwise be taken in generic teaching methodologies. That is to say, linking the study of imperatives to that of modals may facilitate understanding of their usage for Japanese students.

Towards Tackling L1 Interference in L2:

One of the first steps in dealing with L1 interferences is to begin identifying them. Personal experience in the classroom and with students can certainly be a valuable source of information, as are exchanges with seasoned teachers on the subject. Published literature on the topic may also be helpful. To this effect, we recommend two works of reference. The first is *Learner English – A teacher's guide to interference and other problems*, edited by Michael Swan and Bernard Smith. This is a collection of essays, each covering relevant features of a given language in relation to English, including

Japanese. It lists various typical mistakes that learners are apt to make, while providing cultural notes. It does not provide teaching strategies or targeted exercises.

The second work is David Barker's 英語と仲直りできる本 (Coming to Terms with English: A Reference Book). The book is written in Japanese but it features indexes both in Japanese and English. The work is an extensive collection of problem areas that Barker has encountered in the course of over ten years teaching English to Japanese students. Though it may not be accessible to teachers of English unfamiliar with Japanese, it nevertheless remains a valuable tool: Japanese students may consult the work as they see fit, or be advised to read about specific problem areas. Not only does Barker explain appropriate English usage, he also makes several comparisons with Japanese, which help clarify some of the points he makes. A few useful practice exercises are interspersed within the book.

In a different article, Barker (2003) stresses the importance for English teachers who are in Japan for an extended period of time to learn Japanese. Among various points, he emphasizes that "a teacher with a detailed knowledge of the differences between the L1 and the target language will be better equipped to anticipate and overcome problems [...] the students are likely to face." In this sense, a working knowledge of Japanese on the part of the English teacher can indeed be useful. This is however not always possible.

Japanese teachers of English familiar with Japanese, for their part, have not necessarily examined the phenomena of cross-linguistic influence closely, and may not have ready access to concise information concerning the sources of difficulties they create, in addition to possible strategies to overcome them. Our research is therefore concerned not only with highlighting cross-linguistic difficulties, but with making such information available to both teachers and students. More specifically, we are working towards the design of a CALL system that helps identify difficulties related to cross-linguistic influence, while providing relevant instructional strategies and activities to overcome them. That is to say, a teacher working with such a system could access information on such difficulties, for example when preparing a course or a given lesson, in addition to teaching suggestions, targeted exercises and drills. The student working on an activity might be prompted by the system concerning an area of difficulty, and directed to specific explanations and activities for further practice.

We have been especially concerned with drawing out categories that have roots in cultural differences. For instance, we have shown that the use of *come* and *go* is guided by speaker/hearer perspective. We can therefore begin to deal with a concept called "speaker/hearer perspective," and examine whether other interferences might follow a similar pattern and establish significant links. Usage of *had better*, as we have seen, can also be linked to "speaker/hearer perspective," as can the use of the imperative.

The mapping of cross-linguistic difficulties in our CALL system then does not follow grammatical or linguistic categories, but considerations related to culture. Languages, as we mentioned in our introduction, are imbued with culture. Cultural understandings, as our examples have shown, are embedded within language use, and differences to this

effect can not only lead to errors in L2, but to potential misunderstandings, as the example of *had better* has demonstrated. We therefore seek to not only reduce the impact of cross-linguistic influence, but also to raise awareness in view of cultural similarities and differences in the course of an L2 acquisition process. Furthermore, we hope the concepts we identify will enable eventual comparison of different sets of L1 and L2 in terms of cross-linguistic difficulties using similar parameters. We hope to elaborate on the progress of our research in the near future.

Concluding remarks:

There is a Japanese pub on the outskirts of Kyoto with a most interesting name – at least to an English speaker. It is called: Bar -- Sushi and Men. Is that to say – with a touch of humour – that the Japanese like their men raw? As most foreigners living in Japan are well-aware, roman characters and English words are commonly used in advertising, store signs, stationary, fashion items, etc. In this particular case, the owner(s) of the bar linked two Japanese words with an English conjunction, words which were written in roman characters instead of characters used in Japanese. The result? L1 interference with an interesting twist. To begin with, a bar generally does not serve meals, so to call the place a “bar” was not completely appropriate. And for those not familiar with Japanese, “men” in Japanese stands for “noodles.” Thus, what we had seen was a place to eat sushi and noodles, while having a drink.

The process of acquiring L2, especially in the early stages, is not without challenges, many of these stemming from L1 influence. In this presentation, we have given examples of cross-linguistic influence and interference, illustrating potential difficulties in bridging Japanese and English. We have also made some suggestions towards tackling L1 interference in L2, while briefly examining the possibility of using CALL applications to overcome some of the problems they create, with a focus on cultural considerations. We hope to further elaborate on the results of our research in future presentations.

Acknowledgements:

This paper was one of three presentations within the Teacher Education SIG Forum: Can Language and Culture Go Hand in Hand? It is dedicated to co-presenters, Anthony Robins Brian Cullen. We are also indebted to Nicolas Gromik, Tohoku University for valuable comments, Michael Swan, for kindly answering linguistic questions, especially in terms of usage of *come* and *go*, and to students at Osaka University and Doshisha Women’s College of Liberal Arts for relevant feedback when approaching the topics of *come* and *go* and that of expressing advice.

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¹ We concur with the definition of L2 as explained by Ellis. In the context of second language acquisition, 'second' can refer to any language that is learned subsequent to the mother tongue. Thus, it can refer to the learning of a third or fourth language. Also, 'second' is not intended to contrast with 'foreign.' Whether you are learning a language naturally as a result of living in a country where it is spoken, or learning it in a classroom through instruction, it is customary to speak generically of 'second' language acquisition [or ...] 'L2 acquisition.' (Ellis, 1997)

² We are aware that students may have learned other L2 which may be influential in the process of acquiring the language at hand. This being said, we shall assume in the course of this paper that L2 is

English and L1 is Japanese, as Japanese native students acquiring English as L2 are the focus of our study. This is also a population which, especially at the high school level, has generally not yet been exposed to another L2.

³ We indicate “essentially,” because in Japanese, some of these examples would not need to be expressed using *come* or *go*. For example (4) might be expressed as ギリシャへ移住したい (I want to emigrate/settle in Greece), in order to convey the English idea of “go and live.” Otherwise, the movement of going to Greece would be expressed using *go* in Japanese as well. Similarly, (5) might be translated as 1577年にローマへ留学しました (In 1577 he went to study in Rome) ; in Japanese there is a specific expression for the idea of “go to study,” and as such *go* is not required.

⁴ Let us consider an example: B and C are discussing A’s upcoming party (A is not present). In English, if B asks C: “Are you coming to the party?” it generally implies that B is attending the party, without necessarily being a comment on the relationship between B and A. In Japanese, if B uses the verb *come* in the same question, it not only implies that B is going to the party, it also shows some kind of a positive feeling towards A, more so than it would in English. If B felt little connection to A, then B would likely say in Japanese: “Are you going to the party?” This being said, both *come* and *go* can be used in either English or Japanese in this situation. There are some nuances in underlying meaning, but as they do not lead to usage mistakes, we do not usually bring these issues up with students.

⁵ Objects that are related to speaker and / or hearer (in this case the hearer’s brother) can be considered, both in English and in Japanese, to be an extension of either of them, so to speak. In other words, though the brother is not physically present in this exchange, he is considered as if he were.

⁶ We are grateful to Michael Swan for corroborating that this is a valid approximation.

⁷ The same explanations also help in explaining usage of bring and take, another problematic area for Japanese students.

⁸ The example of misuse that Barker gives is: If you go to London, you had better go to the British Museum. He explains that if this is friendly advice, usage of *had better* is not appropriate. *Had better* should be thought not only in relation to した方がいい, but also した方がいい、そうしないと嫌なことがある (had better otherwise something undesirable might/will happen). (p. 111)

There are many possible English translations for the title of Barker’s book. The one suggested is one among several possibilities.

⁹ ほうがいい is ranked below すべきだ which is weaker than しなければならない.