

Semantic Network Structures among Japanese Non-Native Speakers

- A Comparison with Japanese Native Speakers -

KOMORI Kazuko

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This study investigates differences in semantic network structure, generally regarded as one aspect of lexical knowledge, between non-native speakers (NNSs) and native speakers (NSs) of Japanese. A written word association task (3 responses for each stimulus word) was conducted in order to investigate how the semantic networks of NNSs are different from those of NSs. The data elicited by the word association task were analyzed not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively. For the quantitative analysis, an “association proportion score”, namely the scoring method proposed by Schmitt (1998) to measure native-like word association, was introduced. The qualitative examination analyzed (a) the degree of difficulty for responses, and (b) the relation between the stimulus words and the responses.

The major findings obtained in these examinations are summarized as follows:

1. Association proportion scores by NSs were higher than those of NNSs to a statistically significant degree.
2. Advanced level of NNSs tended to score higher in association proportion compared to novice level NNSs.
3. In terms of the degree of difficulty, the responses produced by NSs were mostly at the intermediate or advanced level, while approximately half of the responses by NNSs were at the beginner level.
4. Responses by NSs collocate with stimulus words, many of which are metaphorical expressions. On the other hand, few metaphorical collocations were produced by NNSs.
5. Some of the responses by NSs represent things and events specific to Japanese socio-cultural aspects, current events and topical news, which was not the case for NNSs responses.

(Graduate School, University of Tokyo)