

Question acquisition in a Japanese child*

—An analysis of KII(1;4-3;0) data using CHILDES—

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Asking questions in Japanese is simple, compared to other languages, and should be an easy task for Japanese children. However, they start to ask rather late, and the acquisition order is comparable to English or German children (Miyata 1993). Because the acquisition is not hindered by any syntactical or morphological difficulties, Japanese question acquisition is an interesting case of comparison with other languages.

Japanese questions can be marked by rising intonation, or a high nucleus (cf. Geluykens 1988) within the sentence. Further there is morphological marking in two ways. The first possibility is the use of question words, similar to the so-called *wh*-words in English. Typically they belong to the *do*-row of demonstrative nouns and have their counterparts (e.g. *doko*[where], *koko*[here], *soko*[there], *asoko*[over there]). Note that question words are mostly nouns (except the adverb *doo*[how], and the adjectives *dome*[which], and *donna*[what kind of]). The second way of marking questions morphologically are final particles, especially *ka*. Also *no* has to be mentioned here, although it is more ambiguous than *ka*, and can lose its asking quality when combined with other final particles. Final particles belong to the first acquisition of children learning Japanese. The typical early 2-word sentence consists of a verb with a final particle (*atta yo*. [there it is.]), in most cases earlier than case or other particles. There is no syntactical marking in any way, e.g. no inversion as in Indo-European languages. Also the question word is not placed at the beginning of the sentence, but stays in its original place. That is the syntactic structure of questions is—at least on the surface level—the same as the structure of plain sentences. Together with the morphological simpleness, this characteristic should allow a very early acquisition of questions (for a more detailed analysis of the Japanese question system cf. Miyata 1993).

Nevertheless the children we analysed before (Miyata 1993), all show the same pattern: they start to use questions not earlier than the time when 2-word-sentences are firmly established (first question for SUM 3.5 months, NAO 3 months, RYO and AKI 1 month after the first 2 word sentence. (table 1).

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Table 1. Comparison of the first appearance of final particles, 2-word-sentences, and questions for four children (adapted from Miyata 1993)

	final particle <i>ne</i>	2-word- sentences	questions
SUM	1;5.19	1;4.4	1;7.23
RYO	1;11.9	1;11.9	2;0.8
NAO	2;0.28	[1; 11]	2;2.7
AKI	1;11.30	2;0.1	2;1.4

If we consider that for a question in Japanese it is sufficient to raise the voice (intonational marking) or affix a final particle (morphological marking), this is a remarkable delay. It might mean that the syntactical structure of questions is basically different (and somehow more complex) from the structure of plain sentences—even if identical on the surface. Of course this idea is not new. Already Fillmore (1968) described questions as operations which affect the whole sentence. More concretely Radford (1994, 1994) located the question at the complementizer phrase (CP), be it a *wh*-word (which would appear in C) or not. This would mean that questions (also YN-questions) would only appear after CP has been build up: a thesis that might be confirmed by Japanese data. The present data are unfortunately still insufficient for this purpose, so we have to postpone discussion of this interesting topic.

The development of the four children could be divided into a basic and an intermediate stage. The first questions appeared between an age of 1;8 (SUM) and 2;2 (NAO). Most important themes appeared in the basic stage where name and place; other themes like possession and permission also appeared in this stage. These question types appeared rather rapidly one after another, in a span between 17 days (SUM) and nearly 3 months (NAO). The entire basic stage lasted between 3.5 months (SUM) and 8 months (NAO).

As question forms *doko* [where] and *nani* [what], as well as topical questions with *wa* appeared, either in local or naming function (e.g. “*banana wa?*” [= where], “*kore wa?*” [= what]), depending on the child (concerning the problem of these topical questions cf. Miyata 1992, 1993). They also used YN-questions in the same function (f.e. “*koko?*” [here?], “*wanwan?*” [It is| a doggie?]). YN-questions also covered the themes of possession and permission (e.g. “*Papa no?*” [It is| Papa’s], “*ii?*” [is it| alright?]). The questions in this stage did rarely varied. Each child preferred certain questioning expressions, which he often repeated several times in a row.

In the intermediate stage which started between 2;2 (SUM) and 2;10 (NAO), the structures became more flexible, and the four children also began to acquire new question words (f.e. *doo* [how], *dotchi* [which], *donna* [what kind of]), although not all of them became productive at once. Around the third birthday *nande* resp. *dooshite* [why] became productive, as an effective means to press their mothers to more and more explanations. In this time also *dare* [who] and counting expressions like *ikutsu* [how many], *nannin* [how many persons], *ikura* [how much |money|] became more or less productive.

The same tendencies could be seen in English (Klima / Bellugi 1973, Brown 1978, Cairns / Hsu 1978, Bloom / Merkin / Wootten 1982, Tyack / Ingram 1977), and German data (Stern / Stern 1923, Wode 1975, 1978, Labov / Labov 1976 Clahsen 1982), with one exception: the late acquisition of *dare*[who] in the Japanese children. *Wer, who* are generally reported to appear very early, together with *what* and *where*. Miyata (1991, 1993) speculates about the reasons which might cause such a delay: a small and diverse input (not only *dare* but also *dore, doko no hito, donata, or dochirasama* in the overheard input), and cultural factors (a reluctance to ask too directly, and a tendency to identify people by their membership rather than by their name).

The purpose of the present study is to verify the existence of a 3 months or longer basic stage with rather rigid structures restricted to the themes of naming, location, possession, and permission, and a more flexible stage with a greater variety concerning contents and structure. We are especially interested in the acquisition of *dare*.

Method

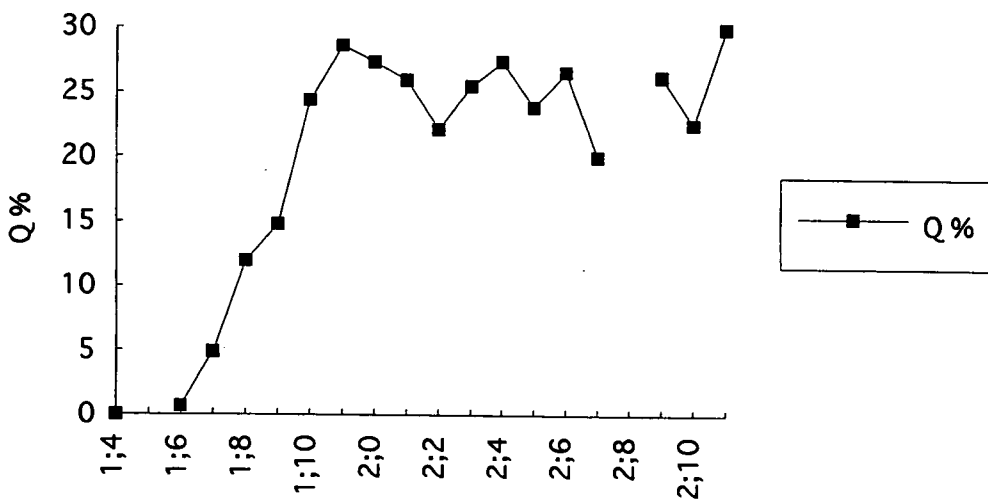
For the present study we analysed the diary records of KII (1;4 - 3;0; Yokoyama 1989). The data, consisting of KII's utterance, adjacent utterances, and an extensive explanation of the situation, were computerized in JCHAT format (Oshima-Takane / MacWhinney 1995) following Wakachi98 (Miyata / Naka, in prep.). The analysis was performed with CLAN (MacWhinney 1995). MLU has been computed following Ogura / Naka / Yamashita / Murase / Mahieu's (1997) 'Jiritsugo Fuzokugo MLU', a computation method similar to MLUw (cf. Miyata 1998).

Table 2. KII's age, number of utterances and number of questions (v. 98 / 3)

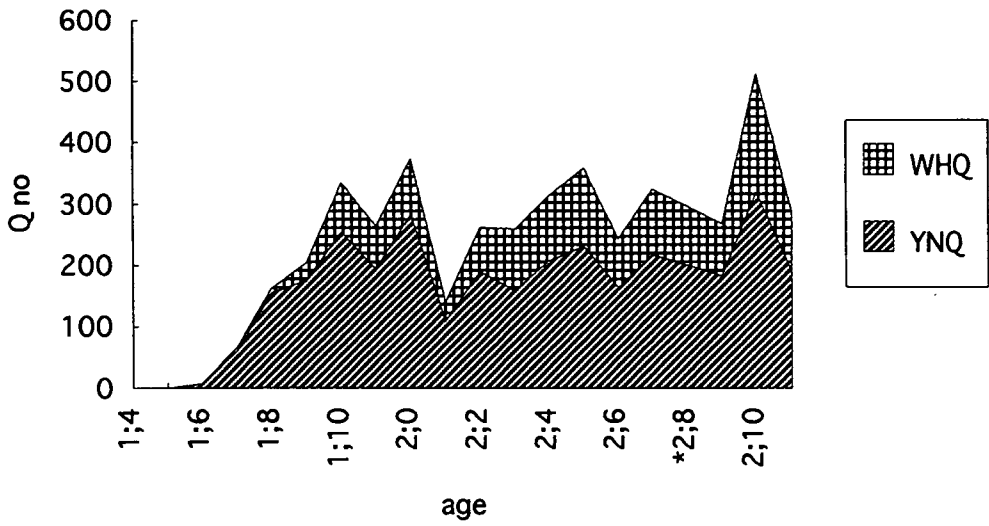
age	MLU	utt	q
1;4	1.046	130	0
1;5		*	
1;6	1.605	1262	8
1;7	1.909	1371	67
1;8	2.225	1362	163
1;9	2.529	1381	205
1;10	2.777	1370	334
1;11	3.171	920	263
2;0	3.054	1362	372
2;1	3.246	536	139
2;2	3.326	1181	261
2;3	3.305	1017	259
2;4	3.386	1147	314
2;5	3.719	1497	357
2;6	3.592	912	242
2;7	3.913	1625	324
2;8		*	
2;9	3.957	1020	267
2;10	4.178	2269	511
2;11	4.496	959	287
		21321	4373

Results

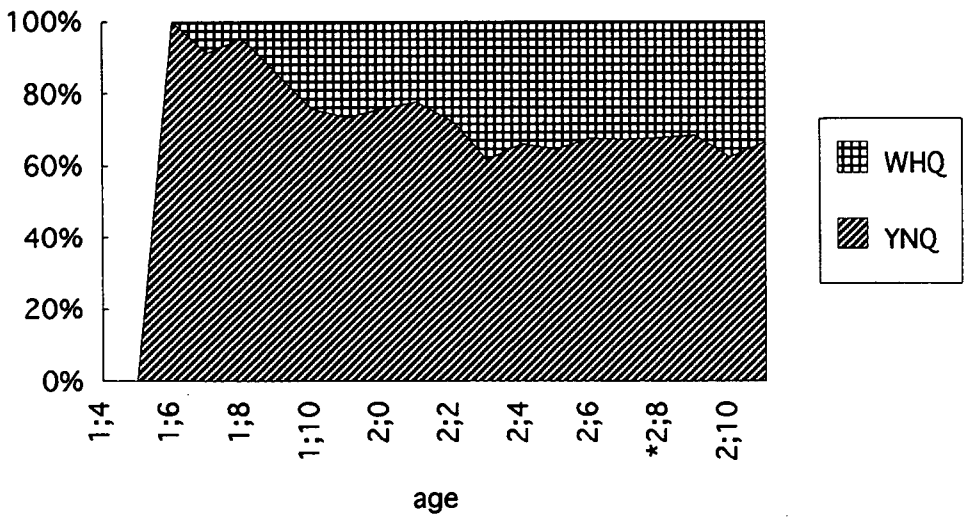
- 1) At 1;4 KII produces first 2-word sentences (*pantsu nainai* [trousers all gone]), but no question.
- 2) KII starts to ask at 1;6 and her rate of questions rises continuously until 1;10 up to 25% percent of her utterances; this rate is maintained until her third birthday (graph 1).
- 3) KII starts out with YN-questions, wh-questions continuously increase until they reach 35% of the question number around 2;2 (graph 2, 3).
- 4) The eight questions at 1;6 include 2-word-sentences, which have become quite common, and consist only of YN-questions. The themes are not restricted to place or name, possession, permission, as with the four children studied before (e.g. *Niichan nenne? kamisan taberu? gyuunyuu aru?*).
- 5) In 1;7, the first wh-questions appear, *nani* [what] and *doko* [where], and also one item of *doo shita* [what has happened, lit.: how have you done] and one item of *dotchi* [which one]. In 1;8 and 1;9 *nani* and *doko* continue to be used, while *doo shita* only appears again 2 times in 1;9.
- 6) In 1;9 *dare* starts to be used. From 1;10 to 2;7 it is the most popular question word, in the first months still concurring with *doko*, but outnumbering it from 2; 2.
- 7) From 1;10 on other question appear (1;10: *dore* [which one] and *dooshite* [why]; 1;11: *nande* [why]), *doo* [how]. The percentages of wh-questions show a rather balanced use of different types between 1; 10 and 2;7 (graph 4 and 5).
- 8) From 2;9 on, this balance is disturbed by a increased use of *dooshite* [why] and *doo* [how].



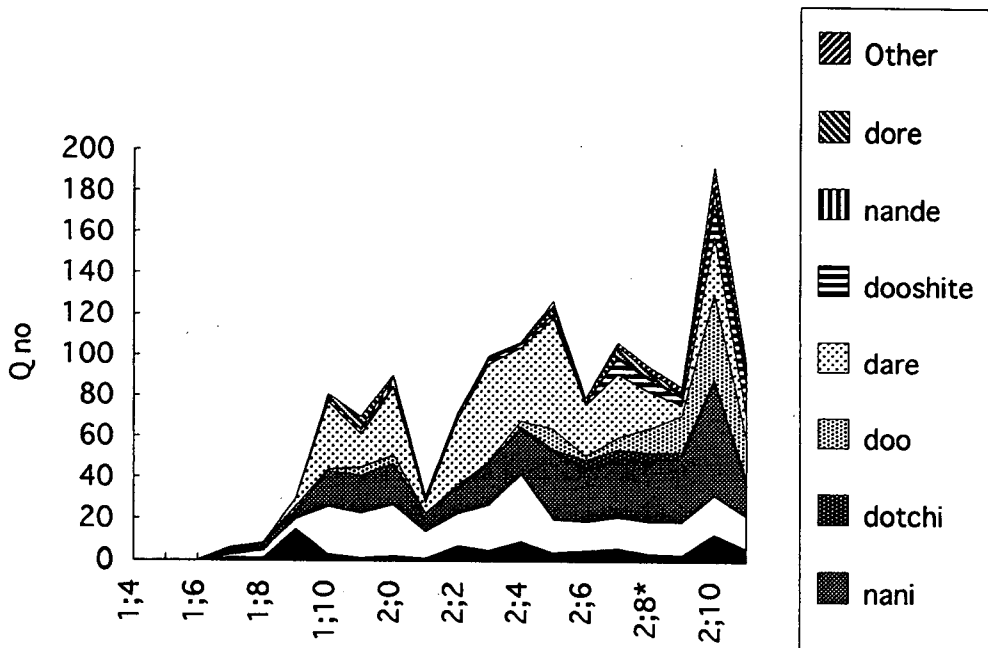
graph 1 KII's rate of questions



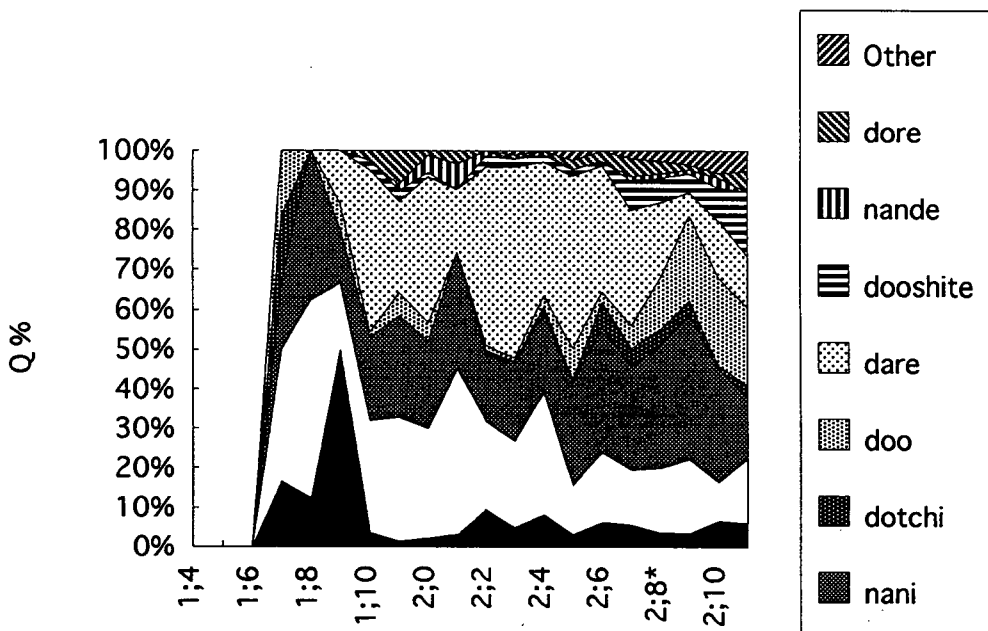
graph 2 KII's number of YN-questions WH-questions



graph 3 KII's rate of YN-questions and WH-questions



graph 4 Kil's WH-questions (absolute numbers)



graph 5 Kil's WH-questions (percentages)

Discussion

KII proves to be an early developing child, which can be seen also in the high MLU values (table 1; cf. Miyata 1998 for comparable data). The use of MLU values for diary data is not unproblematic, because diary notes tend to record mostly "interesting", and that means "developed" utterances using new patterns rather than already acquired "old" forms. So presumably KII's MLU value is over-estimated, and nevertheless she would reach lower values in a continuous speech sample. As long as her recorded speech samples are not analyzed, the actual difference can only be estimated, but she may well be about half a year ahead of RYO and AKI of the previous studies. KII's first 2-word utterance appears in 1;4, while RYO and AKI start with 2-word utterances around their 2nd birthday. In 1;6 she reaches MLU 1.6 (AKI and RYO reach this value around 2;3), and 1;9 her MLU is as high as 2.5 (this value is reached by AKI and RYO around their third birthday; cf. Miyata 1998).

Despite the early onset of her language acquisition, KII's basic stage is as long as that of the other four children, namely around 3 months (1;6-1;9). It is also possible to identify an intermediate stage from 1;10 to 2;7, which is followed by an advanced stage from 2;9 on (this stage presumably started around the third birthday of AKI and RYO, but could not be definitely identified in Miyata 1993).

In the basic stage from 1;6-1;9 most questions are YN-questions. The few question words used are mainly *doko* and *nani*, and from 1;9 on *dare*, although a few other forms appear too. This early appearance of *dare* is remarkable, and cannot be mainly reduced to the sampling method (diary records vs observational sessions), because also SUM (also diary data) used very few *dare* questions (1.24% of all his questions until 4;5 were *dare*-questions). His first *dare* question appeared at the end of 2;2 at the begin of his intermediate stage. Interestingly, Clancy (1989) reports a late onset of *mwukwu*-[who]-questions in Korean children, corresponded by a low rate in their mothers' speech.

The more interesting is the extremely high rate for KII. Similarly to SUM, her first *dare*-questions appear at the turning point between the basic and intermediate stages. But different to him, KII's *dare*-questions become the main theme throughout her second year. Thinking of the reasons for this fact, two related factors can be mentioned: language input and family structure. Because of the nature of the data, only the adjacent utterances of KII's utterances are available for analysis, but even this limited sample allows the conclusion that KII got a high input of *dare*-questions. In 1;4, there is only one question recorded, but in 1;6 there are as much as 30 *dare*-questions, mainly of her father, but also of her mother. This corresponds to 16% of all questions. The questions are mainly of two types: one prompting her to say her own name (e.g. "*kore dare no anyo?*" [whose foot is this?]), the other one asking for the person who had done something for her or had given her something (e.g. *dare ga kisetekureta?* [who did put on you your clothes?] *sha* [=sakana] *dare*

ga kureta? [who gave you the fish?]). In 1;7 even 30% of the input questions are *dare* questions.

This input situation is very different from the four children studied before. This high percentage of *dare*-questions may be partly caused by the family structure: KII was born as third child, and there was always a need for her (and her parents) to identify who had done what, and whose things were. The four children studied before were, except RYO, first-born children, and naturally, in this situation, it was mostly clear who had been the agent or the possessor. So the need to distinguish between several family members was stronger for KII than for the other four children. It would be interesting to examine data of other second or third born children concerning this point.

But there were also a number of *dare* questions prompting KII to tell her name, a game often reported in the German and English literature for mothers and very young children. The mothers of AKI, RYO, and NAO did apparently not perform this kind of game (and presumably the Korean mothers did not, either). Both facts together (the high input and an increased need) caused a high percentage of *dare* questions for KII.

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