

A Study of the Semantic Structure of the Verb  
*Remember* in English:  
Why is This Verb Misused by Japanese L2 Learners of English?

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**Abstract**

The present paper explores the semantic structure of the verb *remember* in English. This verb is a stative verb that describes neither actions nor activities but states that last for some time, but Japanese L2 learners of English often have trouble with it. That is, they are easily confused by the difference in usage between *remember* and *memorize*. There are several possible reasons why they experience difficulty learning *remember*, as enumerated below. The third is a finding of this study.

- (1) There are a variety of memory-evoking verbs in addition to *remember* in English, such as *recall*, *recollect*, *remind*, and *memorize*. Thus, L2 learners of English must use these properly, depending on context.
- (2) The traditional classifications of verbs based on the dichotomy of transitive and intransitive, or on a semantic and syntactic approach based on action verbs, thinking verbs, and linking verbs, for example, is not helpful enough for L2 learners of English to fully understand the usage of *remember*.
- (3) The verb *remember* uniquely involves either state or achievement in terms of the aspectual classification of Vendler (1967) depending on context, and always functions as a non-volitional verb, i. e., the mental activity denoted by this verb is uncontrollable by the animate subject. On the other hand, the other memory-evoking verbs besides *remind* are all volitional.

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(for example, “I memorized/ \*remembered  $5 \times 8 = 40$  as a child.”

N. B. The asterisk indicates ungrammaticality in this paper.)

In conclusion, when teaching L2 students of English how to use *remember* correctly, it is highly advisable to refer to the dichotomy of volition vs. non-volition that characterizes verbs as well as the distinction of transitive vs. intransitive. For example, the major difference between *remember* and *recall*, another pair L2 learners of English are likely to misuse, lies in this difference. In general, the former is non-volitional, whereas the latter is volitional. In the case of the mental activity denoted by *recall*, some intentional effort is necessarily required for the subject to retrieve a memory, as opposed to *remember*. Therefore, this linguistic knowledge on the difference between volition and non-volition can be useful for L2 learners of English to master the usage of *remember*.

## I. Introduction

There is a well-known saying, “Remember Pearl Harbor,” in the US. What is linguistically interesting about this sentence is its translation into Japanese, i.e., ‘*Paaru Haabaa-o Wasureru-na*’ which literally means ‘Don’t forget Pearl Harbor.’ The Japanese translation, as we see, involves negation, although its original English counterpart does not contain a negative marker. What is the reason for this? More accurately, the English saying is sometimes translated into Japanese without resorting to negation in the form “*Paaru Haabaa-o omoidase*” (‘Recall Pearl Harbor’). *Omoidase* is the command form of the compound verb *omoi.dasu* (‘recall’), consisting of the verbal root *omoi* (‘think’) and an aspectual verb *dasu* (‘begin/start’). The second morpheme *dasu* is used to make the verbal compounds have inchoative aspect in Japanese. Which translation of the two above is grammatically closer to the meaning of the original English saying?

Regarding the usage of *remember* in English, this verb grammatically functions as a stative (or non-continuous) verb. This type of verb, such as *like*, *love*, *believe*, and *have*, often describes states that last for some time or forever; thus, they are not used in continuous tenses like the present progressive or the future progressive (see ex. 1-c), as opposed to dynamic verbs (or action verbs) such as *walk*, *eat*, and *get*.

Ex. 1-a: I still vividly remember the day my son was born.

-b: I remember coming here with my parents when I was a child.

-c: \*I am remembering what my father said to me before he died.

Thus, it can be argued that the Japanese translation “*Paaru Haabaa-o Wasureru-na*” (‘Don’t forget Pearl Harbor’) is closer to (or more accurate than) the original English than its counterpart because *not forget* is equal to *retain* or *keep in mind* in

meaning. That is, *forget* is also a stative verb, like *remember*.

What about the grammatical accuracy of using *omoidase* in translating the English verb *remember*? This Japanese verbal compound, as mentioned above, involves both the aspects of inchoative and achievement, while the English *remember* sometimes functions as an achievement verb, as illustrated below (ex. 2-a, 2-b). Achievement is a type of aspect some verbs like *die* and *arrive* take, in which the action denoted by the verb is completed in a momentary fashion. (This will be important in Section III.)

Ex. 2-a: He suddenly remembered (recalled) that his keys were in the other bag.

-b: Wait a minute. I'm now trying to remember (= recall) what he said to me yesterday.

The presence of achievement in both the verbs is the reason why *omoidasu* ('recall') is chosen in translating *remember* into Japanese. However, neither inchoative nor achievement is grammatically equal to volition. That is, the command form of *omoidasu* cannot convey a sense of non-volition. In other words, a Japanese translator who uses the command form of *omoidasu* presumes unconsciously and mistakenly that *remember* is a volitional verb. Therefore, it can be said that strictly speaking, "*Paaru Haabaa-o Omoidase*" ('Recall Pearl Harbor') is not a grammatically correct translation.

As seen from the analyses made above, it can be argued that *remember* in English does not seem to be simple in meaning. It is no wonder that Japanese L2 learners are likely to misuse it in both writing and speaking. For example, the following are sentences quoted from the writings of some of my students.

Ex. 4-a: \*When I first heard his lengthy and complicated name, I couldn't memorize it.

-b: \*I remembered five lines of Shakespeare yesterday for the upcoming exam.

Likewise, they make mistakes also when translating *remember* into Japanese, possibly due to confusion between *remember* and *memorize*, as exemplified below.

Ex. 5-a: His name is not an easy one to remember.

⇒ Kare-no namae-wa \*oboeru-no-ga muzukashii. (*eboeru* 'memorize').

-b: Dogs remember.

⇒ Inu-wa \*kiokudekiru. (*kiokudekiru* 'can memorize')

As will be shown in Section III, the meaning of the verb *remember* varies depending on the context. This is because this verb has characteristics of both stative and inchoative in terms of aspect, as illustrated above (ex. 1 and 2). Therefore, it can be said that mastery of this verb is not an easy task for L2 learners. Moreover, the presence of other verbs similar in meaning such as *recall*

and *remind* in addition to *memorize* may aggravate their confusion on this matter. Indeed, all the major meanings of *remember* listed in Section III are now stipulated in most English-Japanese dictionaries published in Japan, but the useful linguistic concept of volition vs. non-volition is not. Lack of this knowledge can sometimes cause even Japanese grammarians to misuse *remember* in usage.<sup>1)</sup>

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the semantic structure of *remember* in English and to advocate the necessity in L2 instruction of introducing the grammatical concept of volition when teaching verbs.

## II. Classification of verb types in English

In this section, we present an overview of how verbs are currently classified in grammar books. This may help us understand the usage of *remember* in English correctly.

Verbs are classified in different ways. In Quirk et al. (1972), for example, verbs are grouped into three categories based mainly on their syntactic characteristics as follows:

1. **Main verbs** (e.g., *walk, play, have, resemble*)
2. **Auxiliary verbs** subdivided into Primary Auxiliary and Modal Auxiliary
  - Primary Auxiliary** (e.g., *be, have, do*)
  - Modal Auxiliary** (e.g., *can, may, must, will*)
3. **Semi-auxiliary** (e.g., *have to, be to, be going to*)

The main verbs in the list above can be further classified into the following six categories based on sentence patterns (Leech, 1985). The sixth type of verb is also called intransitive, as opposed to transitive verbs that require at least one object to follow in a given sentence.

1. **Verbs for SVC** (e.g., *He is a doctor.*)
2. **Verbs for SVO** (e.g., *She wants my help.*)
3. **Verbs for SVOV** (e.g., *He wants you to come.*)
4. **Verbs for SVOO** (e.g., *They gave my sister some money.*)
5. **Verbs for SVOC** (e.g., *I found the work boring.*)
6. **Verbs for SV** (e.g., *The door opened.*)

Moreover, verbs can be classified differently based on their meanings, as

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1) For example, in *Kenkyusha's English-Japanese Dictionary for the General Reader* (1999), *remember* in the fixed phrase “remember something by heart” is interpreted as *ankisuru* in its translation to Japanese, meaning ‘to memorize’ or ‘to learn something by heart.’ Moreover, in Sugai, Ohta and Ohkouchi (2017), it is assumed that one of the meanings of *remember* is *oboeru* (‘memorize’) in addition to *omoidasu* (‘recall’) and *oboeteiru* (‘retain something in memory’).

exemplified below (Derewianka 2011). This is the grammar developed by the Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) designed for English education in elementary schools. In this system, the verb *remember* is possibly regarded as one of the thinking verbs in English.

1. **Action verbs** (e.g., *catch, kick, run*)
2. **Saying verbs** (e.g., *plead, respond, sigh*)
3. **Sensing verbs**, which are subdivided into the following three subcategories
  - Thinking verbs:** e.g., *know, reflect, believe*
  - Feeling and Wanting verbs:** e.g., *like, want, need*
  - Perceiving verbs:** e.g., *see, taste, hear*
4. **Relating verbs** (e.g., *be, have*, and variations of these)
5. **Existing verbs** (e.g., *be* preceded by *there*)

However, these types of classification not based on strict semantic analyses seem not to be very helpful for L2 learners to fully understand the usage of *remember*. Instead, a classification that seems useful is that developed by Vendler (1967), who classified verbs from the viewpoint of lexical aspect. Aspect is a grammatical category indicating whether the verb expresses a state, ongoing action, completed action, or the end of an ongoing action. That is, the lexical aspect of verbs is part of the way in which verbs are structured in relation to the passage of time. The lexical aspect is different from grammatical aspect in that the former is a semantic property of an eventuality, whereas the latter is a syntactic property of a realization. Vendler's classification of verbs based on lexical aspect has been popular among linguists. He divided English verbs into four categories as shown below. The verbs in the fourth category for achievements like *die, touch*, and *start* are also called punctual verbs, because the activities denoted by these verbs are not continuous over time, but refer to point-like events completed in a momentary fashion. Verbs for achievements are different from those for accomplishments in that it takes some time to complete the actions denoted by the latter. In the case of ex. 8-a and -b, for example, it takes some time to finish painting the wall with ink, as opposed to the case of ex. 9-a and -b.

1. **States**
  - Ex. 6-a: He was bedridden for a whole week.
  - b: They believe in something supernatural.
2. **Activities** (unbounded processes)
  - Ex. 7-a: She walked in the park for one hour.
  - b: We speak Spanish together over a cup of coffee every weekend.
3. **Accomplishments** (bounded processes)
  - Ex. 8-a: I ainted the wall red in two hours.
  - b: He made a little statue out of clay.

#### 4. Achievements (point events)

Ex. 9-a: We arrived at Osaka Station on schedule.

-b: A rumor will reach your ears that he is a thief soon.

### III. The type of *remember* in Vendler's classification

Based on Vendler's classification, which type does *remember* belong to? Through the analyses on the usage of *remember* conducted in Section I, it can be said that this verb may belong to either state or achievement depending on context. In this section, we first confirm whether this assumption is correct.

According to the English grammar provided by *Dictionary.com*, *remember* is the antonym of *forget*, both of which must be classified in the same class. Based on the dictionary above, *remember* as a transitive verb is defined as follows: It has 10 different usages in total. Of these, the specific meanings numbered 4 to 8 in the list can be regarded as marginal because they seem to have derived from the core meanings of the verbs numbered 1, 2, and 3.

#### Meanings of *remember* used with object:

1. To recall to the mind by an act or effort of memory (think of again)  
Ex. 10: I'll try to remember the exact date.
2. To retain in the memory (keep in mind, remain aware of)  
Ex. 11: You'd better remember your appointment with the dentist.
3. To have (something) come to the mind again  
Ex. 12: I just remembered that it's your birthday today.
4. To bear (a person) in mind as deserving a gift, reward, or fee  
Ex. 13: The Company always remembers us at Christmas.
5. To give a tip, donation, or gift to  
Ex. 14: It is commendable to remember the needy.
6. To mention (a person) to another as sending kindly greetings  
Ex. 15: Remember me to your family.
7. To perform (a programmed activity) at a later time or according to a preset schedule  
Ex. 16: The coffeepot remembers to start the coffee at 7 a.m. every day.
8. Archaic form meaning "to remind"

#### Meanings of *remember* used without object:

9. To possess or exercise the faculty of memory  
Ex.17. Dogs remember.
10. To have recollection (sometimes followed by *of*)  
Ex. 18: The old man remembers of his youth.

Through an analysis of the example sentences above, it can be argued that *remember* has aspectual characteristics of both states (ex. 1-a and -b, 10, 11, 17) and achievement (ex. 12, 18), but not the accomplishment denoted by such a verb as *memorize*. However, as a matter of fact, *remember* in the progressive form can be sometimes used as an accomplishment verb as illustrated below.

Ex. 19: Wait a minute! I'm still remembering it now. (Accomplishment)

Going back to the Japanese translation of “Remember Pearl Harbor,” we can now understand why it is interpreted freely using negation: This is because “forget” is the antonym of *remember* and in lexical aspect has the characteristics of both state and achievement; thus the negated form of “forget” can match *remember* in meaning. Moreover, a command in the negative form may sound even stronger than its affirmative counterpart as an epigram.

Ex. 20-a: I forget his telephone number. (State)

-b: What people forget is that he was a world champion. (State)

Ex. 21-a: She forgot to mail the letter. (Achievement)

-b: You never forget your own trade. (Achievement)

-c: She forgot mailing the letter. (State or Achievement)

Like *remembering* in ex. 19, *forget* in the progressive form can also be used as an accomplishment verb as exemplified below.

Ex. 22: I'm forgetting this umbrella. (Accomplishment = I almost forgot this umbrella here.)

The next question we need to answer is whether it is possible for a verb to have more than two aspectual characteristics under Vendler's classification. We should note that some verbs like *come*, *have*, and *see* can be used to indicate both states and activities but with different meanings, as exemplified below. These verbs are usually used in a simple form in the case of a state, but in either a simple or a continuous (progressive) form in the case of activity.

Ex. 23-a: She comes from China. (State)

-b: She is coming from China tomorrow. (Activity)

-c: She came from China yesterday. (Activity)

Ex. 24-a: We have two cats. (State)

-b: We're having a meeting tomorrow. (Activity<sup>2)</sup>)

-c: We had some wine and a steak for dinner. (Activity)

Ex. 25-a: I see what you mean. (State)

-b: She is seeing her boss today. (Activity)

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2) The verb *have* could also function as punctual depending on the context; e.g. “I'm having a baby soon.” The event of giving birth can be described more properly as an achievement rather than just an activity occurring anytime.

-c: I don't see Sarah at school any more. (Activity)

Moreover, as pointed out in the *Cambridge Dictionary*,<sup>3)</sup> stative verbs such as *like* and *love* are sometimes used as action verbs in informal speech when the subject refers to some action over a short period. Note in example sentences 26-a and 27-a that both *like* and *love* are used as stative verbs describing a permanent fact about the subjects, whereas their counterparts (ex. 26-b and 27-b) in the progressive form with *liking* and *loving* are being used as a kind of action verbs. Thus, the progressive form can be used with stative verbs to indicate the temporality of the actions. These uses are not stipulated in detail in most traditional grammar books.

Ex. 26-a: I like listening to music. (State)

-b: I'm not liking this CD. (Action)

Ex. 27-a: She loves piano music. (State)

-b: She is loving the CD I gave her as a birthday present. (Action)

In addition to the grammatical concepts above, there is one more thing that L2 learners must know to master the correct usage of *remember*. That is the concept of the linguistic dichotomy between volitional and non-volitional verbs. Crystal (1980: 496) defines volition as “a term used in the semantic analysis of grammatical categories referring to a kind of relationship between an agent and a verb.” Volitional verbs have the construction in which the action takes place as a consequence of the agent's choice. In other words, volition is a concept that distinguishes whether the action denoted by the verb in a given sentence is performed intentionally or not (Nicolas 1991). Thus, volitional verbs are almost always associated with an animate subject and an agentive verb (Coates 1983).

The strategy to encode the presence or absence of volition varies depending on the language. Some languages use specific affixes on syntactic categories to denote whether the agent intends an action. Others, like English, do not have an explicit method of marking lexical categories for volition or non-volition (Lotte, Hoop, and Malchukov 2009). Thus, it can be difficult to indicate which category the verb denotes in a given English sentence, because many verbs function in a dual way. In the case of the verb *drop*, for example, its transitive form is mostly used to indicate the subject's intention to do so (volition: ex. 28-a), while the intransitive form is used in cases of non-volition (ex. 28-b). However, this is not always the case, as observed in the example sentences of ex. 28-c and 28-d, in which the verbs are both transitive but function as non-volitional.

Ex. 28-a: **They** dropped the supplies by parachute. (Volitional)

-b: **Bill** dropped from the roof of his house. (Volitional or Non-volitional)

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3 ) <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ja/grammar/british-grammar/verbs-types>



-c: Madam, **you** dropped your handkerchief! (Non-volitional)

-d: **She** unconsciously dropped a smile. (Non-volitional)

In the case of *remember* as an intransitive verb, it is always stative and functions as non-volitional (ex. 17, 18).

Regarding *remember* as a transitive verb, as we may see from the sentences in ex. 29 and 30, this verb does not indicate the subject's volition because no one can control memory so as to retain it in mind. Our memories are likely to fall into oblivion without our control. Therefore, ex. 29-b can be rephrased as "You'd better not forget your appointment with the dentist." The verb *forget* has nothing to do with the subject's power to control memory. In the case of ex. 30-b, one might sense some volition from the subject in this sentence because of the presence of the preceding verbal phrase *trying to*, but *remember* in this sentence cannot be replaced by a volitional verb *recall* without changing the original meaning of the sentence. Thus, *remember* used in ex.30-b can be regarded as a non-volitional verb.

Ex 29-a (same as ex.1-a): I still vividly remember the day my son was born.

N.B. remember = State + Non-volition

-b (same as ex.11): You'd better remember your appointment with the dentist.

N.B. remember = State + Non-volition

Ex. 30-a (same as ex.2-a): He suddenly remembered (that) his keys were in the other bag.

N.B. remember = Achievement + Non-volition

-b (same as ex.2-b): I'm now trying to remember what he said to me yesterday.

N.B. remember = Achievement + Non-volition

Therefore, it can be concluded by saying that *remember* is intrinsically a non-volitional verb.

#### IV. Differences between *remember* and other memory-evoking verbs

Another possible cause of confusion that L2 learners may experience is the variety of verbs similar to *remember* in meaning, like *remind*, *recall*, *recollect*, and *memorize*. The major difference between *remember* and the rest is that only the former is a verb of non-volition. However, *remind* may exceptionally be used as a non-volitional verb as well (see ex. 31-b). Moreover, these verbs other than *remember* always function as transitive verbs.

Ex. 31-a: May I remind you that she is arriving here at 4 o'clock today.  
(Volitional)

-b: She reminds me of her mother who died many years ago. (Non-

volitional)

Ex. 32: I don't recall the title of the movie I watched last night. (Volitional)

Ex. 33: I can still recollect meeting him 30 years ago. (Volitional)

Ex. 34: You need to memorize your address and phone number in case you get lost. (Volitional)

The verb *remind* is used when a subject (animate or inanimate) makes someone think of something (ex.31-a and -b). Therefore, it can be said that three kinds of arguments, CAUSER (subject), CAUSEE (direct object), and THEME (other thing or 3<sup>rd</sup> entity), are involved in a sentence with *remind*. This is a point that English teachers should refer to in class so that the students may learn to distinguish *remember* from *remind* in usage. Next is the verb “recall,” which is semantically similar to *remember*, being used as an achievement verb (ex. 32). However, it has been claimed that “recall” is always used as a volitional verb requiring some effort by the subject to bring it into mind, whereas *remember* is non-volitional by nature. This is a point that English teachers also need to mention in class. As for *recollect*, this verb is also volitional, thus requiring some effort of the subject to bring a memory back and talk about it. In addition, this verb involves the meaning of ‘talk about something recalled’ as part of its characteristics (*Oxford Dictionary*). Lastly, the meaning of *memorize* is ‘to intentionally save some information to memory,’ which is different from *remember* in that the latter is ‘to retrieve information from memory’ in a non-volitional way. Moreover, stylistically speaking, the objects of *memorize* are likely to be something academic rather than simple things like a name or telephone number.

## V. Conclusion

The analyses above make clear the reasons why the verb *remember* is easily misused by L2 learners. Again, this is because it is not easy for them to clearly differentiate memory-evoking verbs such as *remember*, *remind*, *recall*, *recollect*, and *memorize*. These verbs differ in usage from a semantic (aspectual) and syntactic point of view. The major difference between *remember* and the rest is that only the former has intransitive and transitive forms, and functions dually as a stative or achievement (punctual) verb depending on context when used as a transitive verb. Nevertheless, this verb always functions as a non-volitional verb. This is characteristic of this verb, as opposed to the other memory-related ones. Therefore, this is a grammatical point that English teachers must convey while teaching.

Another finding of the present study is that *remember* is not to be used alternatively with *memorize*, and the non-volitional aspect of the former verb is not clearly stated in most English-Japanese dictionaries published in Japan. That is why

*remember* in such a saying as “Remember Pearl Harbor” is sometimes translated into Japanese by using a verbal compound *omoidasu* ‘recall’ functioning dually as a volitional and non-volitional verb in Japanese. Again, the aspect of non-volition characteristic of *remember* should be emphasized in English classes in Japan.

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