

Collocations with the Synonymous Verbs

Remember, Recollect and Recall

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1. Introduction

The average Japanese person studies English for a minimum of six years in junior high school and high school and many thousands study English even before junior high school and/or after finishing high school. Some of the younger Japanese children learn English at home from their parents or by attending special English language schools or play centers where they are sometimes able to mix with children who are native speakers of English. Some of the older Japanese study English at the university level or go to so-called "English Conversation Schools". In some schools of this type education may be secondary to earning money for the owners of the school.

In spite of studying English for such a long time, when asked if they can speak English, a very large percentage of Japanese will answer either "No, I can't" or "Just a little." Even many of the Japanese who do answer that they can speak English often do not have very much self-confidence in their ability to produce good English sentences, in their choice of vocabulary, or in their pronunciation. Many Japanese say they can understand written English and that they have a good knowledge of English grammar. This author has found the former to be true in

most cases, but the latter is often not the case. In fact, it has been observed (Elliott, 1998, 1999, 2000) in various conversation, composition, and workshop classes that just the opposite is generally true. Japanese students are often very weak at grammar and many learners do not even know how to use the basic grammar rules. It is difficult to know, however, if the reason the mistakes they make in producing English is because of an inadequate knowledge of grammar or just carelessness in using it.

2. Purpose

In this paper the author will attempt to explain some of the reasons Japanese learners of English often have a very difficult time in either mastering or improving their English abilities. A brief glimpse of some of the problems they have in understanding certain grammar points will be undertaken. Another point that will be looked at is the difficulty encountered with both direct and indirect translations. Yet another point that will be discussed in this paper is language differences between Japan and English speaking countries that confuse Japanese learners of English and cause mistakes or inappropriate responses in speaking or writing English. A last point that will be looked at is some of the research that has been done concerning disagreements of native speakers in what is acceptable or unacceptable usage of English⁽¹⁾.

3. Grammar

In spite of the fact that many people believe that Japanese students are well versed in the area of grammar, that is not always true. Japanese students are often

(1) This paper is partly based on our two interim reports at the 37th JACET Convention (Sept. 13, 1998) and 12th AILA World Congress (Aug. 6, 1999), in which I took part as a member of JACET Special Interest Group: English Usage.

very weak at producing grammatical sentences. Let's look at one of the most common errors made by Japanese learners. A common excuse that students give for being absent from class is "I catch(ed) a cold." Sometimes they will use the correct tense and say "caught", but even this is not correct. The correct verb should be "I have (had) a cold." *Caught* refers to the onset of the cold, whereas *have/had* refers to the actual period of the cold.

Another area in which students seem to be weak in grammar is in the use of articles. Often they put an article where they should not put one, or they omit one when they should use one. Such an example is the following sentence written by a junior at a university in Japan after returning from a year of study in Australia: "But very difficult thing is to memorize words for long time." This is the opening sentence in a new paragraph and the writer has failed to supply the article *a* in front of the nouns *thing* and *time*, even after a year of speaking almost only English.

A third area is confusion about the use of present and past participles. Many learners still do not understand the difference between sentences such as: "I was exciting at the game" and "I was excited at the game." Other words such as these that are often misused include tired/tiring, surprised/surprising and bored/boring.

4. Translation

In addition to the problems mentioned above, translation from Japanese into English is often confusing and leads to errors by Japanese learners. One Japanese university student, who had studied in New York for about one year and at the time was in her third year of study back in Japan, wrote the following: "For example, 'L' and 'R' pronunciation is big different." It can be assumed that she was thinking of the Japanese words *okii* and *chigau* which literally mean *big different*. A much more natural translation would be either "For example, 'L' and 'R' pronunciation is really different" or "For example, there is a big difference in the pronunciation of 'L' and

'R.'

Another type of translation problem is when there is no direct translation, or at least no appropriate translation for the Japanese word. An example is the word *ganbaru* which has various English meanings such as *persevere*, *hold out*, and *stand firm*. But in daily conversation, a native speaker would not use any of these words when, for example, cheering a marathon runner to keep on going or keep on trying. There are many such words in the Japanese language that are very difficult to translate into English.

5. Language differences

Language differences also make learning English difficult for Japanese students. One big difference is the lack of plural nouns in Japanese. Admittedly there are suffixes such as *tachi* that do change a noun into a countable noun, but these suffixes are not normally used and it is usually taken for granted that the noun is plural even though it is referred to in the singular form. An example is "The trees in the forest are beautiful." In Japanese, the noun *tree* would be singular and the verb would usually be in the singular form, but it can be assumed that all the trees are beautiful, not just one. This causes many problems for learners in the use of both nouns and verbs. This leads to another problem. Students will say, "The three car is very fast." It can be assumed that the student knows that after the number three, both the noun and the verb have to be in the plural forms. Yet this type of mistake is repeated over and over.

Yet another problem is that although the Japanese language does have pronouns, they are seldom used. This makes it difficult for students to be able to distinguish when to use a noun or when to use the appropriate pronoun in English. An extremely large number of Japanese speakers, even very fluent speakers of English, have trouble using and distinguishing between *he* and *she*. This writer has heard many Japanese explain this to the fact that the pronunciation of these two words

sounds the same to Japanese ears, much like the sounds of 'L' and 'R' sound the same.

6. Synonymous Verbs

In this paper I want to concentrate on synonymous verbs and the kinds of problems that they can cause Japanese university students⁽²⁾. What are some of the reasons for the difficulties in choosing which synonymous verb to use when given a choice of two or more? The most obvious reason is not knowing and understanding the nuances of each individual word in the group. Another reason is not knowing situations in which the words can be used. A third reason is not knowing either the frequency of usage or degree of intensity of the words in each group. But the reason that might be the most difficult to master is what collocations can be used with each verb. Something that most people do not even consider is the fact that even native speakers of English can not agree on which collocations are acceptable and which are not. But research glaringly points out the fact that this is true.

Two research projects were undertaken by JACET Special Interest Group (SIG): English Usage. The first was on the usage of synonymous adjectives and the second was concerned with synonymous verbs. In both the book of synonymous adjectives (JACET, 1995) and the book of synonymous verbs (JACET, 2000), the research shows clearly the big differences of opinions among us native speakers. In both projects concerning synonymous adjectives and synonymous verbs, research was undertaken by means of a survey among ten native speakers of English, representing four countries, who were asked to give their opinions as to the

(2) This writer did research on Set 18 (Remember, Recollect, Recall), Set 6 (Change, Alter, Modify), and Set 19 (Fix, Mend, Repair, Remodel, Renew) found in JACET Special Interest Group: English Usage (2000). *A Study of Synonymous Verbs in English —With Special Reference to Corresponding Japanese Synonyms*, The Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET).

acceptability of several collocations of adjective-noun and noun—verb combinations⁽³⁾. In the second project, the ten informants were asked to look at lists of synonymous verbs plus noun and/or phrasal collocations and to mark each with an “0” if they thought it was acceptable, mark it with an “X” if they thought it was not acceptable, mark it with an “#” if they thought the collocation needed more clarification, and mark it with a “?” if they were doubtful of the acceptability.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of how each of the informants individually answered regarding the acceptability of the verb and noun collocation. Table 2 illustrates in chart form how many speakers would accept each collocation. From these two tables, it is shown that there are many more words that the informants disagree on than that they agree on. Some of the collocations that were approved by some native speakers were eye-opening to this author, who had considered some of them as completely unacceptable. But on the other hand, this writer thought some of the collocations were acceptable, but surprisingly, some of the other native speakers did not.

The present writer has often been in conversations with other native speakers discussing vocabulary and word usage. One person will say that he or she would never use a certain word in a particular context. But then someone else will say that the word is okay because he or she uses it in that context. Still another person will say that the word might be in American English, but never, or seldom, in British English. Then someone else will say that it can be used in formal writing, but it would sound strange in informal spoken English. Therefore it is understandable why it is very difficult for not only learners of English, but also nonnative English speaking teachers of English to know which verb is the correct one to use.

Recent research also confirms this disagreement among native speakers on usage

(3) The survey was conducted with the following native speakers of English: Warren Elliott, Elliot Taback, Barbara Wells, Richard Curé (Americans), Michael James Farquharson (Canadian), Andrew Porter, Roger McCormick, Lesley Ann Taylor (British), and Kieran Mundy, Anne Murray Conduit (Australians).

of synonymous words. Yamazaki (1997,1998), in two studies, has conducted research showing not only native speaker intuition disagreement in the usage of *contagious* and *infectious*, but also that several major dictionaries disagree on the correct usage and the correct definitions of each. It was especially shown that native speakers could not agree on which word to use in certain situations given in the survey. Takagi (1997, 1999) has shown through research conducted with 100 native speaker informants, including such honorary members of JACET as Drs. Sir R. Quirk, J.B. Carroll, D. Crystal, W. Rivers, that there is some difference in opinion even among the answerers in a questionnaire on the usage of the prepositions *for* and *at* in several different examples of “for a certain price” and “at a certain price”.

Elliott (1998) conducted a survey using questionnaires to both Japanese university students and seventeen native speakers of English, all of whom were teaching at Japanese colleges or universities. The survey asked both groups to give appropriate responses to several compliments paid them by native English speakers. The responses by both groups were given in English and were given in two different forms; i.e. giving what they themselves thought were appropriate responses and choosing what they thought was the best response from five choices given by the researcher. The choices of answer and also choices of vocabulary were widespread and varied in both groups.

Bergman and Kasper (1993) found the same general results of disagreement in checking performance of native and nonnative apologies and Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) found similar data in an earlier paper on expressions of gratitude by native and nonnative speakers of American English. Yamazaki (1999) showed the differences in usage of the word *esteem* by both native speakers of English and dictionary definitions. He was able to show that native speakers do not agree on how or in what contexts the word *esteem* should be used. In another work, Yamazaki (2000) researched the different usages of *bear*, *endure*, and *stand*, and got a wide difference of opinion among dictionary makers and also native speakers, who could not only not agree on definitions but also could not agree on either

usage or nuances of the three synonymous verbs. This was also observed in research done by Elliott (2001, 2002) covering two other groups of synonymous verbs.

Bishop (1975) has the following to say: “The principles of descriptive linguistics have thus been simply put: (1) Language changes constantly; (2) Change is normal; (3) Spoken language is the language; (4) Correctness rests upon usage; (5) All usage is relative.” One way of interpreting this is that even Native Speakers of English will disagree on word usage because it is always changing and some people are ahead of the times and readily use new usages and some people lag behind in adopting new usages.

6.1 A comparison of dictionary definitions of *remember*, *recollect* and *recall* will be made to show any general agreement and/or disagreement among dictionary publishers.

6.1.1 *American Heritage Dictionary* lists the following definitions:

remember: 1. to recall to the mind through an act of memory; think of again 2. to recall to the mind with effort or determination 3. to retain in the mind; keep carefully in memory

recollect: to recall to mind; remember

recall: to remember or recollect

According to Bishop (1975) the approximately 100 members of the usage panel of *American Heritage Dictionary* disagreed more than they agreed. In only one case of all entries in the dictionary did they agree 100 per cent—in opposition to the use of simultaneous as an adverb.

6.1.2 *Cambridge International Dictionary* lists the following definitions:

remember: to be able to bring back (a piece of information) into your mind, or to

keep (a piece of information) in your memory)

recollect: to remember (something)

recall: to bring back (the memory of a past event) into your mind and often to give a description of what you remember

6.1.3 *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* says:

remember: to have a picture in your mind of people, events, places etc from the past

recollect means “to be able to remember something, especially by deliberately trying to remember

recall: to deliberately remember a particular fact, event, or situation from the past, especially in order to tell someone about it

6.1.4 *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* says:

remember: to have or keep in the memory sth that was said, done or agreed previously; to recall (1) sth to one's memory

recollect: to be able to remember sth from the past

recall: to bring sth/sb back into the mind; to remember sth

6.1.5 *Sanseido Concise English Dictionary* says:

remember: call to mind, keep in mind

recollect: remember, call back to the mind

recall: recollect, remember; remind

6.1.6 Various groups of synonymous verbs will be looked at that cause problems for Japanese students of English. The first group is that which includes remember, recollect, and recall. Looking at the dictionary definitions listed above, basically all of these words have the same underlying meaning, although they are used differently and used in different contexts with the nuances being different. Japanese

university students often do not know how these words are different. As shown by the research carried out by JACET SIG—English Usage (2000), even native speakers of English disagree about the usage and collocations that are permissible and not permissible with these three synonymous verbs.

It is very difficult to distinguish the meanings of these words from the dictionary definitions. How do the three words differ? What are the different nuances of each word? In what collocations can they be used? Since neither dictionaries or native speakers can agree, how can Japanese learners be expected to know how and when to use these words? How can non-native English speaking teachers be expected to teach their students which collocations are correct and which are not? The word recall in this same group of verbs is also often either misunderstood or is too vague in meaning to be used correctly by Japanese students.

In Japan in the late 1990's and at the beginning of the turn of the new century, recall seems to have been associated with product safety and quality control and political accountability. Probably most Japanese think of the recall of Snow Brand milk products, Mitsubishi automobiles, Firestone/ Bridgestone tires, and most recently the recall of out-dated eggs, and the recall of mayors, Diet members, and other politicians.

Neither *recollect* nor *recall* are commonly used by Japanese students, if ever. By knowing only the keyword *remember*, they are limiting their scope of vivid and colorful communication by not availing themselves of the usage of these two other synonymous verbs.

6.2 An examination and explanation, including some data on the intuition of native speakers of English about the acceptability of each of the three synonymous verbs included under the keyword *remember* and their collocations with twenty-seven nouns from the survey (JACET, 2000), will be attempted.

6.2.1 Remember: There was almost complete agreement among all ten of the

informants concerning *remember* and its collocations. There were only two exceptions and one was when one of the British informants wanted more clarification about *remember the sight*. The other exception was that one of the Australians listed all collocations with *remember* as being incorrect, except for *remember the sight*. It is impossible for this author to judge the reason for him doing thus.

6.2.2 Recollect: Of the twenty-seven collocations with *recollect*, there were no instances of complete agreement among the ten informants. One reason for this disagreement was that the Canadian informant listed all twenty-seven collocations as doubtful. A second reason is that the same Australian referred to in 6.2.1 above again listed all collocations as incorrect. Also in these cases it is impossible for this author to judge the reason for them doing thus.

Disregarding the opinions of these two informants and looking at the answers of the other eight shows that they completely agreed on only three of the collocations: all said *recollect having it done* and *recollect he went to the war* were correct and *recollect to buy milk* was incorrect. Seven of the eight informants agreed that collocations with *lines of a play, the dialogue, the visit, that it was nice, and the event* were all correct and *to set the alarm* was incorrect. So it appears that in only nine of the twenty-seven collocations do at least seven informants agree with each other.

On the other hand, in four of the collocations the eight informants are split four to four as to whether they were correct or incorrect and in a fifth, one person was doubtful. In addition, there were five collocations about which five people agreed and three disagreed and four other collocations about which five people agreed, two disagreed and the eighth person was doubtful or wanted more clarification. Thus there were fourteen collocations in which there was considerable disagreement among the native speakers of English.

If one is looking for a pattern in these results, we might look at the informants' answers by nationality. The four Americans completely agreed in nine of the

collocations and in seven others the fourth American was doubtful and disagreed with his countrymen about nine other collocations. So except for this one person, there was widespread agreement among the Americans.

The three British informants agreed with each other in sixteen collocations and one person wanted clarification in another. They were split three to two in the remaining ten collocations. Concerning seventeen of the collocations, the British and the Americans were in agreement about the correctness or incorrectness of the collocations and had the opposite opinions on eight others. Two of the collocations were not considered because the Americans were split evenly. The second Australian generally thought that all collocations with *recollect* were incorrect, saying only two of the twenty-seven were correct. More research could be done to ascertain whether Australians do not use the verb *recollect* as often as native speakers of other countries do.

6.2.3 Recall: Of the twenty-seven collocations with *recall*, there were five instances of complete agreement among the ten informants and eight others where one person disagreed or was doubtful and seven other cases where two people disagreed or were doubtful. There were no cases where the ten informants split evenly on their opinions of the collocations, but there were two collocations where they were split five to four with the tenth person either doubtful or wanting more clarification. From these two tables it can be assumed that there is general agreement among native speakers of English as to the usage of *recall* and what collocations are correct or incorrect.

Looking for a pattern of views regarding nationalities shows: 1) There were only three cases when at least two of the four Americans disagreed or were doubtful. 2) The Canadian thought *recall* was correct in every case, even when all nine of the others said it was incorrect. 3) There were eight cases when one of the three British speakers disagreed with the other two. 4) There were 11 cases when one of the Australians disagreed with his/her countrymen.

7. Assumptions based on the survey of JACET SIG: English Usage group.

7.1 The word *remember* plus its collocations seems to be the safest verb of the three words in this group of synonymous verbs for any learner of English and/or any nonnative speaking teacher of English to use. Of the possible 270 responses by the ten native speaker informants concerning *remember* and the twenty-seven collocations, 269 were correct with the exception of the answers by one of the Australians, who said only one needed more clarification, and none were incorrect. Thus using *remember* with any collocation will be accepted by an overwhelmingly percentage of native speakers of English.

7.2 There is a wide divergence of acceptability of the other two words in the synonymous verb group under the keyword *remember*; namely *recollect*, and *recall*. British and Australians seem to reject these two words and their collocations almost four times as often as North American speakers. A look at the responses given in our survey show: 1) three Americans and one Canadian said 83 collocations with *recollect* were correct, 19 were incorrect, and 33 were doubtful, with the Canadian accounting for 27 of those which were doubtful, and 119 collocations with *recall* were correct, 12 were incorrect, 3 were doubtful and 1 needed more clarification. 2) three Brits and two Australians said 51 collocations with *recollect* were correct, 83 were incorrect, and 1 needed more clarification, and 85 collocations with *recall* were correct, 48 were incorrect, 1 was doubtful and 1 needed more clarification. Thus the Japanese learner should either avoid these two words, or be very careful about them, when using British English.

8. Conclusions

8.1 Although many Japanese (senior) high school students spend a lot of time

and effort in learning vocabulary in order to pass entrance exams, they generally do not know how or when to use the words in various sentences and situations. Students do not know how to choose the correct word to use when faced with a choice of synonymous words or words with related meanings. Because of this university students may have much difficulty in expressing themselves in English in STEP examinations.

8.2 Problems with grammar usage, choosing the correct word when translating from Japanese to English, and trying to always use direct translations lead to errors of vocabulary usage, including mistakes using synonymous verbs.

8.3 Almost every dictionary gives a different definition of the different synonymous verbs in each word group and often uses other words in the same group as the definition. This may be confusing to learners of English. Most students use, or have access to, only one dictionary and that is usually a Japanese to English and/or English to Japanese dictionary. Thus they are able to get and understand only one definition of the verb and that limits them in fully understanding the implications and boundaries of the definition. The teacher should spend more time on the importance of using more than one dictionary and the language benefits of using “English-English” or monolingual dictionaries to discover the several different meanings given by different lexicologists.

Some people, including both teachers and students, believe that the use of “English-English” dictionaries may make the learning task even more difficult than it already is because of the barrier of understanding not only the word in question, but also the definition given, which is sometimes more complex than the original word. Others, though, say that reading the definition in English will help reinforce the learning of the word and help later in retention and recall of it.

8.4 Widespread disagreement even among native speakers of English leads to

uncertainty as to what is the correct synonymous verb to use. Tables 1 and 2 show the wide divergence and disagreement of native speaker intuition concerning which verb-noun collocations are acceptable and which are not.

8.5 Usage of the keyword⁽⁴⁾ in a group of synonymous verbs appears to be the safest way for learners of English to avoid unacceptable verb-noun collocations. However, dependence on the usage of only the keyword in a group of synonymous verbs leads to under usage of the other words in that group, thus leading to errors concerning the exact meaning that the learner of English may want to convey.

8.6 More work should be put in by both teachers and the students themselves in learning not only definitions, but also acceptable and unacceptable collocations of synonymous verbs⁽⁵⁾.

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(4) “The general term” according to *Webster’s New Dictionary of Synonyms*, “the simple and general word” in *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, and “the key word or concept” in *Longman Language Activator*, which says in its introduction that “All our work is corpus-based.”

(5) After more research, a forthcoming paper will present another group of synonymous verbs that are troublesome for Japanese university students. This paper will focus on the opinions of ten Native Speakers of English compared to the opinions of five Japanese university students and five Chinese university students studying English at a Japanese university. This is an interesting area that needs more research.

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Table 1

Selected Collocations of Synonymous Verbs Set 6 with the Keyword of *Remember*—Cf. JACET Special Interest Group: English Usage (2000 *A Study of Synonymous Verbs in English—With Special Reference to Corresponding Japanese Synonyms*, The Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET). pp.68-69.

	REMEMBER	RECOLLECT	RECALL
a name	00000 000X0	000?? 00XX0	00000 00000
a phone number	00000 000X0	000?? XXOX0	00000 00000
lines of a play	00000 000X0	0000? 000X0	00000 000X0
a recipe	00000 000X0	000X? XXXX0	000?0 000X0
some data	00000 000X0	000?? 00XX0	00000 000X0
the instructions	00000 000X0	000X? OXXX0	00000 000X0
the homework	00000 000X0	000X? XOXX0	00000 00XX0
your face	00000 000X0	000X? OXOX0	00000 OXOX0
the dialogue	00000 000X0	0000? 000X0	00000 00000
the shopping list	00000 000X0	000X? XXXX0	00XX0 XXXX0
the vocabulary	00000 000X0	000?? XXXX0	00000 OXXX0
An appointment	00000 000X0	00XX? OXOX0	OX#00 XXOX0
the route	00000 000X0	000?? 000X0	00000 000X0
the math functions	00000 000X0	0000? OXXX0	00000 OXX00
My high school days	00000 000X0	00X0? 000X0	00X00 000X0
the kid's birthdays	00000 000X0	00XX? XOXX0	00X?0 00XX0
how to play chess	00000 000X0	000X? XXOX0	000?0 000X0
to set the alarm	00000 000X0	XOXX? XXXXX	XOXX0 XXXXX
to buy milk	00000 000X0	XXXX? XXXXX	XXXX0 XXXXX
the visit	00000 000X0	0000? 000X0	00000 00000
that it was nice	00000 000X0	0000? 000X0	00000 000X0
having done it	00000 000X0	0000? 000X0	00000 00000
He went to the war	00000 000X0	0000? 000X0	00000 00000
one's childhood	00000 000X0	000? 000XX	00000 00000
the sight	00000 00#00	000X? 00#X0	00000 OX#00
the incident	00000 000X0	000?? 000X0	00000 000X0
the event	00000 000X0	0000? 000X0	00000 ?0000

Table 2

Comparison of the number of Native Speakers of English who agreed and disagreed on correct collocations of the synonymous verbs *remember*, *recollect* and *recall*. Entries under the heading 10 mean all ten native speakers agreed that the collocation was correct usage and entries under the heading 0 mean that all ten said that the collocation was incorrect usage. Cf. JACET Special Interest Group: English Usage (2000 *A Study of Synonymous Verbs in English—With Special Reference to Corresponding Japanese Synonyms*, The Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET). Pp 70.

REMEMBER	RECOLLECT	RECALL
10	10	10
9	9	a name
a name	8	a phone number
a phone number	having done it	the dialogue
lines of a play	he went to the war	the visit
a recipe	7	having done it
some data	lines of a play	9
the instructions	the dialogue	lines of a play
the homework	the visit	some data
your face	that it was nice	the instructions
the dialogue	one's childhood	he went to the war
the shopping list	the event	one's childhood
the vocabulary	6	the incident
an appointment	the route	the event
the route	my high school days	8
the math functions	the incident	a recipe
my high school days	5	your face
the kid's birthdays	a name	the route
how to play chess	some data	the math functions
to set the alarm	your face	how to play chess
to buy milk	the math functions	that it was nice
the visit	the sight	7
that it was nice	4	the homework
having done it	a phone number	my high school days
he went to the war	the instructions	the sight
one's childhood	the homework	6
the incident	an appointment	the vocabulary
the event	how to play chess	5
8	3	the kid's birthdays
the sight	a recipe	4
7	the shopping list	the shopping list
6	the vocabulary	an appointment
5	the kid's birthdays	3
4	2	2
3	1	to set the alarm
2	to set the alarm	1
1	0	to buy milk
0	to buy milk	0