Acceptability of an Utterance: On a Notion of Sufficient Informativeness*

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An apparently popular book on English vocabulary written in Japanese for general audience claims that one reason why Japanese people have difficulty mastering verbs in English is that there is no intransitive-transitive distinction in Japanese (Itoh 2000). This is patently false but it is perhaps understandable that non-linguists may make such a claim. This is because, as is well-known, it is acceptable to omit subject and/or object as long as the resultant utterances are comprehensible. Also it has been noted that Japanese university students have problems with verb valence when learning English (cf. Masuko 1996).

Although Japanese does have the intransitive/transitive distinction, it appears murkier compared to other languages such as English. What makes issues rather confusing is the existence of a group of intransitive verbs that behave like transitive verbs. They co-occur with a うる-marked noun phrase (NP). Here is such an example:

(1) Yamada-shi-ga shinsatsu-wo
    Yamada-Mr-NOM medical examination-ACC
owat-ta.
finish (INTRANSITIVE)-PAST

(2) Yamada-shi-ga shinsatsu-wo
Yamada-Mr-NOM medical examination-ACC
oe-ta.
finish (TRANSITIVE)-PAST
"Mr Yamada finished a medical examination."
(Suga 1981: 132; his 41; my gloss and translation)

Since this issue was discussed in Masuko (2000), I shall not discuss it fully. (1) is just like (2) except the verb form. The reason why the verb *owaru* should be considered as intransitive is because it has been traditionally considered intransitive when it occurs without the *wo*-marked NP. This is basically an argument made by Suga (1981). It follows then that the *wo*-marked NPs will have to be regarded as adjuncts, and not arguments.

Suga (1981) argues that this is reasonable also because there is some difference in meaning between the two. His basic claim is that the *wo*-marked object co-occurring with a transitive verb involves change of state, whereas the same object with an intransitive verb is not affected by any such change. The following pair supports his argument:

(3) *Keiko-wa megane-wo hazure-ta.*
Keiko-TOP spectacles-ACC remove (INTRANSITIVE)-PAST
"Keiko was not wearing her spectacles." [intended]

(4) Keiko-wa megane-wo hazusi-ta.
Keiko-TOP spectacles-ACC remove (TRANSITIVE)-PAST
"Keiko took off her spectacles."
(Suga 1981: his 31 my gloss and translation)

Taking off spectacles naturally entails change of state: i.e. the position of spectacles was changed. That is why (3) is unacceptable as there was no way in which the spectacles in question could avoid changing its position when the wearer took it off. I translated (3) and (4) differently because their meanings are different. That is, the intransitive version without the topic is acceptable, as can been seen in (5), and it will refer to a state of the spectacles having been removed:

(5) Megane-ga hazure-ta.
    spectacles-NOM remove (INTRANSITIVE)-PAST
    “The spectacles were removed.” [intended]

This simply means the spectacles were no longer at the location they had been. This I shall argue is due to the requirement from the verb semantics: hazureru means ‘be/get out of place’ and so it is a change of state verb. This is because the verb semantics of hazureru (literally ‘be/get out of place’) requires that the referent of the subject expression has been at a different location from the one it ends up with. That is, (5) does not refer to change of state itself like (4) does, but rather to the state that obtained as a result of the change.

Assuming the arguments so far have been convincing enough, the following point can be made. Intransitive verbs in Japanese are stative and when they alternate with transitive verbs, the referent of the subject expression of the transitive version is presupposed. In the case of hazureru, as we have seen, this presupposed entity is the original location as that is required by the semantics of the verb.

Imaizumi and Gunji (2000) discuss cases of the transitive/
intransitive alternation involving *deru* 'appear, get out, turn out, etc.' and *dasu* 'bring out, put out, send it, etc.', and offer an argument which is similar to the one just presented. The main difference from mine is that they contend that the alternation occurs when there exists some entity affected by the sententially denoted event. This entity will be linguistically realised as the subject in the transitive version but only presupposed in the intransitive one: they assume that this corresponds to Pustejovsky’s (1995) default argument. *Deru* and *dasu* involve some location where something is to appear or to be put out, and so the default argument would refer to that.

The following pair illustrate their point:

(6) Kaze-wo hii-te netsu-ga dete-iru.
cold-ACC have-and fever-NOM appear-PRES
“[Someone] has (caught) a cold and has a temperature.”

(7) Kodomo-ga kaze-wo hii-te netsu-wo
cold-ACC have-and fever-NOM
dashite-iru.
bring out-PRES
“[My] child has (caught) a cold and has a temperature.”

(Imaizumi and Gunji 2000: 49; their (22.b) and (17.b), respectively)

In (6), the person who has caught a cold and hence has a temperature is not mentioned. The location where the fever is manifested, as it were, is assumed to be the person who caught a cold, who in the absence of any specific information is assumed to be the speaker or someone salient in the current discourse.
Imaizumi and Gunji moreover maintain that there are cases where the alternation is not possible and that in such cases it is difficult to presuppose the affected entity, which in the case of the *deru/dasu* alternation, a topic that indicates some location. They list several examples, some of which are given here:

(8) a. Tsuki-ga  deru.
     moon-NOM  appear
     "[The] moon will come out." [intended]

     moon-ACC  put out
     "(Someone?) will put out [the] moon (somewhere)." [intended]

(9) a. Kujoo-ga  deru.
     complaint-NOM  appear
     "Complaints will be/are sent in."

     complaint-ACC  put out
     "(Someone) will send in complaints." [intended]

(10) a. Hanketsu-ga  deru.
      judgement-NOM  appear
      "(The) sentence is passed."

b. ?Hanketsu-wo  dasu.
    judgement-NOM  appear
    "(Someone) will pass (the) sentence." [intended]

(Imaizumi and Gunji 2000: 50; their (26.a) and (26.f); their
judgements: my gloss and translation)

My judgements do not completely coincide with Imaizumi and Gunji's. I also find (8.b) ungrammatical because it is rather odd to imagine someone moving the moon or a place where the moon will be laid. (9.b), however, I don't find as bad as (8.b). The acceptability I argue will be improved if it is passivised. If it cooccurs with a verb of feeling (or so-called psych-verb), it seems much better.

(9) c. Kujoo-wo das-are-ru.
   complaint-ACC put out-PASS-PRES
   "Complaints are sent in."
   \Rightarrow "Complaints are made against (something related to)
     me/us."

d. Kujoo-wo das-are-temo komaru.
   complaint-ACC put out-PASS-though be at a loss
   "Even if complaints are sent in, nothing could be done about
     them" [intended]

This is because when dasu is passivised, the existence of the affected entity is highlighted. In the case of (9.d), the location where complaints are sent becomes clearer as it must be the same as someone who is at a loss and does not know what to do with them. (10.b), which I find acceptable, can be similarly explained. Sentences are passed in the court of law and by the judge, and this is associated with the meaning of hanketsu 'sentence/judgement'.

Apart from the differences in judgements, my only qualm with Imaizumi and Gunji is their use of the concept affected. The concept of the same name has been invoked in the discussion of passives and also
verb alternations (cf. Levin 1993). What exactly the entity being
affected, it seems to me, has not been explicated; hence I shall not adopt
it.

What all this suggests is that entities to which arguments of a
predicate refer may not have to be linguistically realised when their
existence can be inferred from either linguistic or extralinguistic
context. In some cases, the semantics of co-occurring noun or verb
phrases will entail the existence of a missing entity. In other cases, the
entity has already been mentioned and become salient, or is salient
because it is the primary participant in the discourse, i.e. the speaker.
In all cases, the entity in question is considered superfluous: the
utterance without it is sufficiently informative. This notion of sufficient
informativeness appears to play a crucial role in determining utterances'
relative acceptability.

(10) Omission of Arguments
Arguments of a predicate can be omitted as long as the resultant
utterance is sufficiently informative and newsworthy.

(11) Sufficient Informativeness\(^3\) of an Utterance
Utterances must be sufficiently informative to be acceptable. That
is, an utterance must either linguistically realise all the arguments
required by the verb semantics unless it must be able to convey
enough information to 'recover' the missing argument(s).

The notion of newsworthiness invoked in Masuko (2000) can be
provisionally defined as follows:

(12) Newsworthiness
An utterance is considered newsworthy when it refers to a situation
markedly different from others

To sum up, verbs in Japanese can be used as intransitive when they are sufficiently informative and refer to states, rather than events in their narrower sense. There are some indications that this may not be limited to Japanese; English at least seems to obey the same restrictions (see Masuko 2000). More data and analyses are required to decide whether they are universal or not.

Notes
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1 It should be noted, however, that even in English, the intransitive/transitive distinction is not clear-cut and that the distinction might be pragmatic, rather than syntactic: see, for instance, Masuko (1999).
2 Noun phrases (NPs) in Japanese are usually followed by case-marking particles (kaku-joshi). Some call them postpositional phrases (cf. Gunji 1987). I shall use the term 'noun phrase', which will be abbreviated as NP henceforth, simply because more linguists use this term.
3 I would have used the term specificity had it not been used widely in linguistic literature in a completely different sense.

References
Proceedings of the ESSLLI-99 Workshop on Lexical Semantics and Linking in
(Differences between intransitives and transitives: intransitive verbs, object and
Suga, K. and E. Hayatsu (1995) (eds.) Doushi no Jita (Transitivity and Intransitivity of