TENSES IN “RELATIVE CLAUSES”
Japanese versus English

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Japanese and English languages are different in the way their tenses, or time expressions, are constructed. This paper compares the tenses of Japanese and English in the context of relative clauses, which are clauses that express a relationship between two other clauses.

More than eighty years have elapsed since the study of tense and aspect of the Japanese language started. This long history and its transition are discussed in detail in the thesis, Japanese Linguistics, Vol. 1 (1982), by Tetsuo Koyano.

The tenses of modern English are relatively well-regulated. There are three basic tenses: past time, present time and future time: each of which possesses both the progressive aspect and the perfect aspect. On the other hand, the tenses of the Japanese language are not so systematic. There are some grammarians who take the viewpoint that the tenses do not exist in modern Japanese. Osamu Mizutani is one. Tetsuya Kunihiro is another. Kunihiro says in his book, Systematic Semantics (1967), that the Japanese language does not possess the tenses which are the same in quality as those in the English language.

According to Kunihiro, Japanese is, as far as tense is concerned, endowed with only two forms: ‘ru’ form and ‘ta’ form which are its present tense and past tense. (i.e. ‘masu’ and ‘mashita’ in the polite form.) Therefore the forms look simple on the surface but the ideas that these forms carry are more complicated.

Let’s look at some Japanese sentences with ‘ru’ form and ‘ta’ form. Their expressive forms are only ‘ru’ or ‘ta’. But they are not simple present and past sentences. They are the main ways of referring to some meanings in the parentheses.

Present form:

1. a. Watashi-wa yoru 10-ji-ni nemasu (Habitual present) (I go to bed at ten in the evening.)
   b. Watashi-wa korekara nemasu. (Future) (I am going to bed now.)
   c. Taiyoh-wa nishi-ni shizumimasu. (General truth) (The sun sets in the west.)

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Past form:
2. a. Watashi-wa sakuya 10-ji-ni nema
    shita. (Past event) (I went to bed
    at ten last night.)
    b. Kimi-wa moh shukudai-wo shima-
    shitaka. (Recent indefinite event.)
    (Have you finished your homework yet?)

As a concept, tense has three dimensions—
past, present and future. 1.b. shows clearly
that the present form in Japanese refers de-
finitely to future tense as well as present
tense. Likewise in Japanese the past tense
form refers not only to the past tense but
also to the present perfect tense. In other
words, tense in Japanese has not only the
function of tense indication but also aspectual
significance. While in English, tense in-
dicates tense only.

Minoru Nakau, another Japanese gram-
marian with the same viewpoint sums up his
ideas, thus,

Time in the Japanese language covers a
wide range and has lurking ambiguities. One
can say that it functions either as tense or
as aspectual realization. The past tense can
refer to a definite time in the past or it can
take on the meaning of the present perfect
tense which is “past-time-related-to-present-
time.” In addition the present tense can
refer to a non-past tense (that is, present or
future time) or something uncompleted at the
present time.

The statement that present tense refers to
the uncompleted present perfect aspect needs
a little more explanation.
3. a. Kare moh itta?
    (Has he gone?)
    b. Ahhh moh itta-yo.
    (Yes, he's gone.)
    c. Iya, mada ika-nai.
    (No, he has not gone yet.)

In the example above, the affirmative an-
swer to question 3. a. is 3. b. and the nega-
tive reply is 3. c. In 3. c. the present tense
in ika-nai refers to an uncompleted present
perfect aspect accompanied by the adverb
mada (yet).

What Minoru Nakau summed up is one of
the most distinguishing characteristics of the
Japanese language and this will become the
key—or the base—to my discussion of the
comparison between English and Japanese
relative clauses.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the
tense and aspect in Japanese subordinate
clauses and how they differ from those in
English. What we call subordinate clauses
include in both languages noun clauses, ad-
jective clauses and adverbial clauses. I
will concentrate on adjective clauses—only
relative clauses this time. The tense in
adverbial clauses in Japanese is contained in
the book, Syntax of the Japanese Language
and its Meaning (1984), by Hideo Teramura.

Japanese is one of the languages in which
the dominative factors of the sentence comes
last. In most sentences the predicate which
carries the tense decisive factor comes at the
end. Therefore tense of the sentence can be
declared only when the end of the sentence
appears. Contrarywise, an English verb
usually is in the first part of the sentence
and exerts a strong influence on the rest of
the sentence. The rule of the sequence of
tenses in English is derived from this.

There is no such thing as the sequence of
tenses in Japanese and very often the same
verb form which appeared in a sentence in
direct speech can be used as it is in indirect
speech. But in English there is a rigid rule
of the sequence of tenses. If the reporting
verb is in the past tense, certain changes
have to be normally made in converting from
direct speech to indirect speech: the most
important one is to change present tense
verb into the past tense (to match the re-
porting verb). The change to the past tense
applies not only to ordinary present tense
verbs, but to the present perfect and to
modal auxiliaries. Another change is that
of first and second person pronouns into
the third person. Also sometimes pointer
words have to be changed too, as you can see in
the following examples.
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4. a. She said to him, "I live here."
   b. She told him that she lived there.
   On the contrary the same tense verb
   given in direct speech can be used in indirect
   speech in Japanese.
5. a. John said, "I am lazy."
   b. John said that he was lazy.
   c. Jyohn-wa, "Boku-wa namakemono-
      da" to itta.
   d. Jyohn-wa jibun-wa namakemono-
      da to itta.
   e. Jyohn-wa jibun-wa namakemono-
      datta to itta.

The Japanese translation of 5. b. is not 5.
   e. but 5. d. where was is expressed as da
   which is the present tense of the Japanese
   linking verb. Datta in 5. e. is the past tense
   of the linking verb. To convey the real
   meaning of the sentence 5. e., the English
   translation has to be either 5. a. in direct
   speech or 5. b. in indirect speech, because
   the shifting of a verb to an earlier time
   reference generally applies also to past tense.
   How do the sequence of tenses work in
   adjective clauses: that is, relative clauses of
   the English language? These function the
   same way as they do in noun clauses. But
   before examining the tense and aspect pro-
   blems in Japanese clauses that modify nouns
   or the like, let me compare the contents of
   these clauses in both languages.

   In English a clause that modifies a noun
   is always a relative clause, but in Japanese
   this is not always true. A Japanese clause
   modifying a noun does not necessarily take
   the form of an English relative clause when
   translated into English. Herein lies the big-
   gest difficulty when students whose mother
   tongue is Japanese take up the study of
   English relative pronouns and adverbs.
   Here are some Japanese sentence examples
   where a noun is modified by a clause. (Un-
   derlined are modifying clauses, double un-
   derlined are the nouns modified):
6. a. Chikyuh-ga taiyoh-no mawai-wo
    mawaru to-iu jijitsu-wa dare-mo
    hiteishinai.
   (No one can deny the fact that the
   earth moves around the sun)
   b. Haha-ga dare ka-to hanashiteiru koe.
   (The voice of Mother talking with
   somebody)
   c. Watashi-ga bosuton-e kuru mae-no
      toshi.
   (The year before I came to Boston)
   d. Epuron-wo shiteiru hito.
   (The lady with the apron on)
   (The lady who is wearing the apron)
   e. Hikkosu keikaku.
   (The plan to move)
   f. Taiyohnetsu-wo riyohshita kekka.
   (The result of the use of the solar system)

   The English translation of sentence 6. a.
   contains an appositive noun clause that is
   introduced by the conjunction "that," not a
   relative clause. None of the modifying
   clauses in example 6 require relative clauses
   in English translation. They take other
   sentence structures, such as appositive clauses,
   gerunds, to-infinitives, prepositional phrases,
   etc. They look the same because they are
   modifying clauses, but they are different in
   grammatical structure when transferred into
   English structure. And this is where Japa-
   nese students become befuddled.

   I would like to move on to my main con-
   cern, that is, the tense or aspect comparison
   of relative clauses in English and Japanese—
   especially the relations between the tenses
   in Japanese relative clauses and those of
   their principal clauses.

   The rule of sequence of tenses exists only
   in English and only when the tense of the
   principal clause is past tense. Therefore in
   order to make the comparison easier and
   more clear, I will deal from now on with
   Japanese sentences whose principal clauses
   are in the past tense.

   It is very well-known that Haruhiko
   Kindaishi, a famous linguist of the Japanese
   language, has classified Japanese verbs ac-
   cording to an aspectual view and distributed
   them into four groups. By the aspectual
view, he meant whether a verb can be agglutinated with “...te-iru,” which gives the verb its progressive, effective or statal aspects.

Group 1. Verbs that show state (statal verbs) “...te-iru” cannot be added. Ex. “iru” and “aru” (be).

Group 2. Verbs that show action (progressive verbs) “...te-iru” can be added and that means the action is progressive and the rest of the action is still undone. Ex. “yomu” (read) and “kaku” (write).

Group 3. Verbs that show action which ends momentarily (point action verbs) “...te-iru” can be added and then it means the action is over and its effect remains. Ex. “shinu” (die).

Group 4. Statal verbs which are always followed by “...te-iru” Ex. “sobieru” (sore) and “niru” (resemble).

This grouping is really elaborate and appropriate but for the purpose of this paper, I think I can combine Group 1 and Group 4 and name the new group “Verbs of State” and put the other two into another group and name this one “Verbs of Motion.” Also the verbs in Groups 2 and 3 can express some aspects of stasis (either progressive or effective) if “...te-iru” is added. For example, the verb “kaku” (write) plus the “...te-iru” form makes “kaite-iru,” which shows progressive stasis. The verb “shinu” (die) combined with “...te-iru” forms effective stasis. But I must eliminate the verbs in Group 4 because they are special in the sense that they become more or less like adjectives rather than verbs when used before nouns. They are usually followed by “...te-iru” or “...ta” when modifying nouns and this way they lose their character of tense and aspect.

For example, the way “magaru” (“wind” is used in “magat-teiru michi” or “magat-ta michi.” (Both mean “a winding road”) Here they function like English past participles or present participles which are being used adjectively.

Another premise in this discussion is that A in Column 2 comprises the verbs in Group 1, a Japanese liking verb or a copula.

The reason why I introduced Kindaichi’s grouping of Japanese verbs is that this becomes important in discussing the tense and aspect of a principal clause and its subordinate clause (relative clause). If I put the verbs in relative clauses in Column 1 and those in principal clauses in Column 2 and, call “Verbs of State” A and “Verbs of Motion” B, I shall get the following:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative Clause Column 1</th>
<th>Principal Clause Column 2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
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<td>III</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>B</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A-B

7. I got a light from the man who was near by.
   a. Soba-ni iru hito-ni tabako-no hi-wo karita.
   b. Soba-ni ita hito-ni tabako-no ni-wo karita.
   c. Sono-toki soba-ni ita hito-ni tabako-no hi-wo karita.

Even if the verbs in the relative clauses in 7. a. and 7. b. are different in tense, these two sentences are equivalent in meaning. However, only when such a word as “sono-toki” (then), which indicates past tense, is used, will 7. a. fail to function as a Japanese sentence like 7. b.

A-A

8. The book that Kenji was reading was a comic book.
   a. Kenji-ga yondeiru hon-wa manga datta.
   b. Kenji-ga yondeita hon-wa manga datta.

The base verb “yomu” (read) here belongs to Kindaichi’s Verb Group 2, but with
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"....te-iru" added, it can be considered to be a "Verb of Stasis."

In the example above it is possible to substitute the past tense verb "datta" in the principal clause in 8. b. with the present tense verb "da" without changing the meaning of the sentence. But doing this in 8. a. will change the entire sentence into the present tense. The past tense sentence is lost because the verb "yondeiru" in the relative clause becomes "is reading," while it means "was reading" with "datta."

That is to say, in this A-A combination the tense decisive factor of the sentence is the verb in the relative clause. If the verb is past tense, the sentence is in the past and if the verb is present tense, the action is in the present.

B-A

9. The lady whom I met at the station every morning was Professor Yokoyama.
a. Watashi-ga mai-asa eki-de _au hito-wa Yokoyama sensei datta.
b. Watashi-ga mai-asa eki-de _atta hito-wa Yokoyama sensei datda.

In 9. b. past tense "datta" is exchanged with present tense verb "da" without changing the meaning of the sentence. But in 9. a. the same change forces the whole sentence to change into the present tense. Here again the same rule adopted in II is working. In III the tense of the relative clause determines the tense of the whole sentence.

B-B

If the verb in a relative clause is that of motion, the meaning of the sentence varies greatly depending upon whether it is in the present or in the past.

10. a. At Narita I met my friend who was going to London.
b. At Narita I met my friend who has been to London.
c. Anybody that will come first tomorrow can have this.

a'. Rondon-ni iku tomodachi-ni Narita-de aimashita.
b'. Rondon-ni itta tomodachi-ni Narita-de aimashita.
c'. Ashita saisho-ni kita hito-wa kore-wo moratte yoi.

In 10. a. the person, "I" met a friend some time in the past and that friend "was going to London" But at that moment the action of going to London had not been completed. The present form "iku" (go) in 10. a. expresses future time in relation to the past tense "aimashita." It is the future tense measured from the particular time in the past when the person "I" met his friend. The "iku" cannot be substituted by "itta" (the past tense of "iku") as we did in the case of I. If we do this, we get the sentence 10. b. which means "At Narita I met my friend who had been to London." In other words, "itta" in 10. b. expresses time prior to the past tense "aimashita." In English this can be expressed precisely by using the pluperfect.

Again "kita" in 10. c. is actually the past tense form but it expresses the future perfect. The whole idea of the sentence is to convey the possibility of the future. But in Japanese the verb has to take the past because "to come" had to happen before "to be able to have." It is interesting to learn that the same relationship does exist between the verb in an adverbal clause and the verb in a principal clause.

11. a. When I went to bed, I said, "Good night."
b. When I got up, I said, "Good morning."
a'. Yoru neru-toki "Oyasumi-nasai" to ii-imagita.
b'. Asa okita-toki "Ohayoh-gozaimasu" to ii-imagita.
c'. Yoru neta-toki "Oyasumi-nasai" to ii-imagita.*

*Not grammatically correct.

Judged from the tense of the verb in the
principal clause, the present tense in the subordinate clause means, "incompletion: and the past tense means, "completion." "Neta" in 11. c. supposedly means that this deed of going to bed had been done by the time "I" said, "Good night." But in reality this is not possible: anybody that has gone to sleep can utter no greetings except in his dreams.

This phenomenon of a Japanese verb in a subordinate clause taking an aspectual feature might be closely related to the characteristics of the Japanese language that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper: tense in Japanese has got not only tense indication but also aspectual indication.

I have been discussing how the Japanese verbs in relative clauses are related to those of the principal clauses. From this one can deduce an interesting power relationship between a "Verb of State" (A) and a "Verb of Motion" (B). If the tense decisive power in A is stronger than B., it will be symbolized as A>B. Then the discussion above can be recapitulated thus:

In relationship

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<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A&gt;B</td>
<td>A&gt;B</td>
<td>B&gt;A</td>
<td>B=B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In IV the arrow means that the tense or aspect of the relative clause verb is usually under the law of relativity to the tense of the principal clause verb.

To sum up, it is clear that "Verb of Motion" both in a relative clause and a principal clause is endowed with the most power in deciding the tense of the sentence.

Bibliography