

Japanese Relative Clauses That Stand Alone

The functions of subordinate clauses in contrast to, or in relation to, main clauses are often discussed in terms that relate to foreground and background (e.g. Hopper 1979, Croft 2001). The proposition expressed in a restrictive relative clause, in particular, has been characterized as “presupposed,” “unchallenged,” and “taken for granted” (e.g. Thompson 1791, Givón 1982, Lambrecht 1994) in contrast to the proposition asserted in the main clause. These descriptions, however, are of less use in understanding the functions of complex noun phrases (such as a noun modified by a relative clause) that either stand alone without any main clause, or are followed by a semantically bleached predicate such as an existential verb.

Stand-alone relative clause constructions are observed frequently in Japanese informal writing, such as in blogs, essays and product websites. This paper considers the functions in discourse and the meaning of subordination in the context of a null or bleached main clause, and considers the implications with respect to the interlocutors’ knowledge of genres and grammar. Citing examples, it suggests that stand-alone relative clause constructions are used to introduce to the domain of the discourse referents with the highlighted attributes (described in the clause) in a manner analogous to setting a stage for events and actions to occur. Since the main clause (if any) provides no substantive action involving the referent of the complex NP, the “subordinate” clause takes a more assertive burden than usual. The stand-alone relative clause can be understood as a sub-type of clausal noun modifying construction whose function is not only descriptive but also presentational.

The following excerpt from a blog on sushi restaurants by a food critic gives a typical example of stand-alone relative clause constructions. It contains a sequence of complex NPs without main predicates, each followed by a period. The line breaks are the original.

- (1) [大切に 使い込まれた] 調理用の鍋。
 carefully well-used cooking pot
 [傷 が ついて ベコベコの いびつな 形に 成り果てて、
 scratch NOM added bumpy warped shape became
 でも それこそ が、 おいしい 料理を 作り 続けてきた
 but the very thing NOM delicious dish ACC make has continued
 証拠の ような そんな 厳しい] 調理器具。
 evidence seems very demanding cookware
 [それ と同じような 寿司職人 の
 that similar to sushi-artisan GEN
 やわらかくて、うつくしい]手。
 soft and beautiful hand

‘Cooking pots [that are carefully and well used].

[Such demanding] **cookware** [which became bumpy and warped with dents, but which is the evidence of making delicious food so long].

[Soft and beautiful] **hands** [of a sushi chef which are just like it].’

In the cited blog, the critic describes the joy of eating sushi at a restaurant counter while watching how sushi is created by the chef. The blog contains several other stand-alone complex NPs that also describe important elements that contribute to the author’s enjoyment. How these elements – props and actors – interact to create the joy in a sushi restaurant is not made explicit, but is suggested by the descriptions given in the clauses. The referents of these NPs set up a discourse domain that the readers are invited to join.

Such stand-alone relative clauses are reminiscent of stage directions used in scripts, in which the relevant aspect of the actors and props are spotlighted through the use of a non-restrictive relative clause, as in (2) and (3).

- (2) [一瞬 ぼんやり立ちつくす] 知子。
a moment blankly keep-standing Tomoko
'Tomoko, [who blankly stands for a moment].'
- (3) [待っていたように 開く] ドア。
was.waiting as.if open door
'The door, [which opens as it was waiting].'
[Both from *Tonari no Shibafu* (The Neighbor's Grass) by S. Hashida]

The head nouns in such stand-alone complex NPs can be personal referential terms such as in バカな彼女とアホな俺 (Lit. 'stupid she and foolish I', a blog title), which evokes a space in which events happen involving the woman and man. While the putative distinction between restrictive or non-restrictive clauses in Japanese has been contested (e.g. Masuoka 1997, Sanuki-Colier 1999), it is clear, regardless, that the content of the "subordinate" clause in (1) – (3) carries the primary information about the referent of the head noun that is relevant in the discourse. The complex description in the second NP in (1) well illustrates this point through the main-clause-like coordinate structure within the modifying clause.

Perhaps not surprisingly, speech act elements that are normally seen only in main clause are sometimes observed in stand-alone relative clauses such as in the attested example: やってみよう研究所 (Lit. '[let's try] research institute', the name of a center where children are encouraged to try various ideas and experiments).

The examples considered above and others illustrate that certain noun phrases used without a main clause have a presentational function. That function may be explained from the fact that, without the main clause to follow, the modifying or subordinate clause takes some of the force of a main phrase. The stand-alone relative clause construction – a form and meaning pair – (e.g. Goldberg 1995, Croft 2001) functions within the discourse by spotlighting certain characters and objects. The close relation between form and discourse function in such examples is consistent with the idea (e.g. Fillmore 1982, Östman 2005) that discourse functions are properly regarded as part of grammar.

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