

Deontic *koto* constructions in Japanese discourse

Category: discourse/pragmatics/sociolinguistics

Past studies (e.g., Akatsuka and Clancy 1993, Clancy, Akatsuka and Strauss 1997) have noted that Japanese possesses a grammaticalized set of conditional constructions conventionally employed for the expression of such deontic modalities as obligation, prohibition, and concession. One such patterning consists of a clausal proposition (in either the affirmative or negative) marked by the connective *-te* form as its antecedent, and an evaluative predicate as its consequent clause, as exemplified in (1)-(4). The grammatical encoding of the speaker's positive or negative assessment (in the consequent clause) of the action, event or state named (in the antecedent) has been claimed to be an important factor for the frequent use of such deontic conditional constructions in caregiver-child speech. (Akatsuka, Clancy and Strauss 1997: 50).

The present study focuses on an alternative set of grammaticalized constructions available in Japanese for expressing the same deontic notions in (1)-(3), which likewise involve a shared structural component—namely, a clausal proposition (again in either the affirmative or negative) in the non-past *rentaikei* 'attributive' form, nominalized by the *keisiki meisi* 'formal noun' *koto*. This *koto*-nominalized proposition is followed (optionally) by the copula *da*, or the negative form of the verb of existence *aru*. Examples of such deontic *koto* constructions as found occurring naturally in discourse are provided in (5)-(7) below.

The existence in the language of formally variant constructions for delivering the "same" deontic messages necessarily gives rise to the question of what their functional differences might be, and more crucially, what would motivate the speaker's use of such *koto* constructions in the context of discourse? A notable feature of these *koto* constructions is their capacity to reference both an epistemic and deontic reading in certain contexts. The absence of a *koto* construction for conveying the speech act of permission (as in Ex. 4), with only a close equivalent to be found in the periphrastic expression of ability *koto ga dekiru* 'able to ~' (e.g. *Taberu koto ga dekiru* 'able to eat'), is also noteworthy.

This paper seeks to address these issues by suggesting that a key structural factor contributing to the modal capabilities of deontic *koto* constructions is its presentation of a proposition--made nonchallengeable (Givon 1984) through its nominalization—as a "*koto*". Reference grammars typically categorize *koto* as a nominalizer, ascribing the meaning 'abstract thing' to this dependent noun. This analysis, however, proposes an underlying semantics of 'cognitively-conceived existence' for *koto*, alternative to those of previous accounts (e.g., Teramura 1981). It further claims that when this element occurs in deontic *koto* constructions, where it takes on a secondary meaning, the semantics signaled by it "shifts" by way of metaphorical inferencing (SPACE>TIME) from denoting an existence lacking a fixed spatial orientation to connoting a truth/obligation without temporal persistence; namely, one whose validity/necessity applies only to a specific time or situation. Moreover, a conception possessing no existence outside the mind is reinterpreted to indicate a truth/obligation whose validity/necessity is known only to the speaker (and not the hearer). Finally it is hypothesized that, in the context of discourse, deontic *koto* constructions provide a means of presenting an obligation or necessity to perform (or refrain from performing) a designated act, without the added assessment of its desirability (or undesirability), and thus tend to occur in situations where the overt expression of the speaker's individual will or evaluation may be deemed "inappropriate", such as in formal writings or speech occurring in a professional/public setting, typically made on behalf of a collective or institutional agent.

A context-based analysis of 150+ tokens of deontic *koto* constructions collected from authentic Japanese discourse data (e.g. the broadcast interviews and news reports, scripted dialogs from television, Internet blogs, newspaper and magazine articles, etc.) is presented as evidence in support of the hypothesis posited above.

Examples:

- (1.) *Tabenaku-te wa ikenai/dame.* --> '(You) must eat (it).' = OBLIGATION
eat:NEG:TE TOP won't do/no good
- (2.) *Tabete wa ikenai/dame.* --> '(You) may not eat (it).' = PROHIBITION
eat:TE TOP won't do/no good
- (3.) *Tabenaku-te mo ii.* --> '(You) don't have to eat (it).' = CONCESSION
eat:NEG:TE also good
- (4.) *Tabete mo ii.* --> '(You) may eat (it).' = PERMISSION
eat:TE also good

- (5.) Source: Website blog of a former Japanese ambassador, posted 6/24/08
(<http://www.amakiblog.com/archives/2008/06/>):

Okinawa o honki-de irei-suru tumori nara,
[place name] ACC seriously memorialize:NPST intend COND
Beigunkiti no teppai o zitugen-suru kotoda
U.S.bases GEN abolition ACC actualize:NPST **KOTO:COP**

'If (we) seriously intend to memorialize (the war victims) of Okinawa,
(we) **must** abolish (its) U.S. military bases!'

- (6.) Source: Japanese TV program series on health and beauty, "*Karada genki ka*", televised on 10/8/04:
Osyare no tame ni amakawa o izimenai koto
fashionability GEN sake DAT cuticle ACC abuse:NEG:NPST **KOTO**

'You **must not** abuse your cuticle for the sake of being fashionable!'

- (7.) Source: A chiropractor's website blog, posted 5/1/08 (<http://www.asahigaoka.info/diary/diary.cgi>):
Taiyoo ni ooki-na henka ga nai no naraba,
health DAT big-COP:ATT change NOM exist:NEG SE COND
medicine ACC take:NPST **KOTO TOP exist:NEG:NPST**
kusuri o nomu koto wa nai

'If there are no major changes to your physical health, (you) **don't need to** take medicine.'

Abbreviations: ACC=Accusative; COND=Conditional; COP=Copula; DAT=Dative; GEN=Genitive;
NEG=Negative; NPST=Nonpast; SE=Sentence Extender; TE=-*te* Connective;
TOP=Topic