

The abstract noun plus ‘see’ construction in Japanese and Korean: Language contact, semantic extension, and register

Category: cognitive/functional syntax/semantics, discourse/pragmatics/sociolinguistics

In formal written Japanese (e.g. newspaper articles), a perception verb *miru* (‘see’) can take, as its object, a set of abstract nouns, mostly Sino-Japanese verbal nouns such as *itti* (‘agreement’) and *zooka* (‘increase’). The combination of ‘see’ with an abstract noun (henceforth ‘the *miru* construction’), which at times occurs with an inanimate subject noun, encodes the emergence of an event, or its realization by an organization (or organizations) as in (1). This paper probes into the usage of the *miru* construction in Japanese from the viewpoint of language contact (Matras 2009), and compares it with its Korean counterpart *pota* (‘see’) construction in terms of the semantic variability of object nouns as well the register in which these constructions are used.

- (1) **KEDO rizikai-ga** raigetū igo, zyuuyū-no kyōkyū-o teisi-suru koto-de,
board-NOM next month after heavy oilcrude petroleum-GEN supply-ACC stop-do NMLZ-INST
itti-o mi-ta...
agreement-ACC see-PST

‘The KEDO board has *reached an agreement* in their decision to stop the supply of petroleum after next month...’
(*Tokyo Shinbun*, Nov 16, 2002)

The typical structural template of this construction is shown in (2):

- (2) ([**Inanimate subject N**] -{Nominative/Topic}) [**abstract object N**]-Accusative *miru*.

Our preliminary investigation of a selection of the *Taiyō* (a popular magazine, 1895-1928) corpus (compiled by the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics; the years selected were: 1895, 1901, 1909, 1917, 1925; approximately 14.5 million letters) suggests that the *miru* construction is presumed to have been introduced into “Modern Japanese (*Kindaigo*)” in the late 19th century (the Meiji era) (3a) with the usage of English *see* such as (3b) as its model.

- (3) (a) Sikoosite dokkoku-no ikoo hanahada taenara-zu, noti tuini **sangoku**
however Germany-GEN intent quite innocent-NEG later finally triple
doomei-o miru-ni itare-ri.

alliance-ACC see-to reach-Perfective (*Taiyō* 1895, Vol. 12)

‘And then, Germany wasn’t quite satisfied, which resulted in *witnessing* (the formation of) the *triple alliance*.’

- (b) Europe was astonished to **see the re-union** of Moreau and Pichegru. (*The Times*, Jun 14, 1804)

Since that time however, the semantic classes of object nouns allowed in the *miru*-construction in “Present-day Japanese (*Gendaigo*)” have become diversified, ranging from the emergence of an event (4) to the change-in-progress (5) to the endpoint of an event (1).

- (4) **Kokusai syakai-wa ...** aratana kadai-no **hassei-o mite-i masu.**
international society-TOP new problem-GEN emergence-ACC see-PROG:POL

‘The international society is *witnessing the emergence* of new problems...’ (*Chunchi Shinbun*, Jan 22, 1993)

- (5) **Taiwan kaikyō ryoogan-no kooryū-ga** saikin tokuni **sinten-o mite-iru...**
strait both sides-GEN exchange-NOM recently especially progress-ACC see-PROG

‘(We) *are witnessing the* recent accelerated *progress* of the exchange between both sides of the Taiwan strait...’
(*Chunichi*, August 26, 1988)

Korean has a similar usage of a ‘see’ verb *pota*, as in (6). Our questionnaire survey with 18 Korean native speakers (male 5, female 13; aged 20s to 30s) has revealed that, compared to its Japanese counterpart, the Korean

pota-construction is generally more restricted in terms of the semantic types of co-occurring object nouns. Specifically, the *pota*-construction is most felicitous when it co-occurs with object nouns that encode an endpoint of an event (6a) but is less so when it co-occurs with nouns that refer to the change-in-progress (6b), or the emergence of an event (6c).

- (6) (a) Twu salam-i uykeyn-uy **ilchi-lul** **po-ass-ta.**
 Two person-NOM opinion-GEN agreement-ACC see-PST-DECL
 ‘Two people *reached an agreement.*’
- (b) *Kiswul-i kupkeykhan **paltal-ul** **po-ass-ta.**
 technology-NOM rapid development-ACC see-PST-DECL
 ‘Technology *saw a rapid development.*’
- (c) *Kwukcye saho-y-nun hwankeyng mwuncye-uy **palsyang-ul** **po-ass-ta.**
 international society-TOP environment problem-GEN emergence-ACC see-PST-DECL
 ‘The international society *saw an emergence* of an environmental problem.’

The differential degrees of acceptability toward different semantic classes of object nouns can be accounted for by the stability of a target of visual perception (‘percept’). One can ‘see’ an event at its inception, under way, or at its endpoint (and the resultant state), but the event that came to an end and its resultant state can be better perceived in entirety than that which is not yet completed (Miyazaki and Ueno 2008).

It is interesting to note that the Korean *pota*-construction differs from its Japanese counterpart in terms of the register in which it is typically used. That is, the *pota* construction is commonly employed in spoken language, and can be used in propositive form (7a) or can have its accusative marker omitted (7b):

- (7) (a) Ppalli **hapuy-lul** **po-psita.**
 quickly agreement-ACC see-PROPOS ‘Let’s *see an agreement* quickly (Let’s solve this issue quickly).’
- (b) Ku muncye-nun **hyakeyl** **pw-asse?**
 that problem-TOP solution see-PST
 ‘Did you *see a solution* to that problem (Did you solve that problem) ?’

The *miru*-construction, which is restricted to written language, is not felicitous in such uses as (a’, b’):

- (a’) *Hayaku **gooi-o** **mi-yoo.**
 quickly agreement-ACC see-PROPOS
- (b’) *Sono mondai-wa **kaiketū mi-ta?**
 that problem-TOP solution see-PST

The register-related tendency for the *miru*-construction to be used in written language is arguably attributable to the fact that it was introduced into formal written Japanese in the Meiji era. Though restricted to written language, the diversification of semantic classes of co-occurring object nouns in the *miru*-construction in Present-day Japanese accords with the historically observed tendency in Japanese for periphrastic/analytic forms (e.g. the Sino-Japanese nominal stem + *suru*) to expand its scope of usage (Abe 2009). It is not entirely clear at this point how the *pota*-construction in Korean developed historically, but the construction has been apparently undergoing a different pathway than its Japanese counterpart.

References

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