

Achievement in Japanese — Theoretical Implications

Achievements in English and Japanese exhibit some interesting differences in behavior, especially in conjunction with the “progressive construction”.

Japanese equivalents of English achievements such as *reach the summit*, *die*, interact with the Japanese “progressive construction” to yield **resultative** interpretations. (1a) entails that Bill has already reached the top of the mountain. By contrast, English achievements in the progressive such as (1b) produce on-going process interpretations. In other words, (1b) entails that Bill has not reached the mountain top. Similarly, (1c) means that Robin is dead, whereas (1d) entails that Robin is not (yet) dead.

- (1) a. Bill-wa ima yama-no tyoozyoo-ni tui-teiru.
Bill-TOP now mountain-GEN top-at reach-PROG.PRES
'(Implicit subject) is at the top of the mountain now (after having reached there).'
- b. Bill is reaching the top of the mountain now.

The Japanese construction *V-teiru* behaves like the English progressive marker *be V-ing* when the verb is an activity or accomplishment. This is shown in (2).

- (2) a. Bill-wa ima hasit-teiru.
Bill-top now run-prog.pres
'Bill is running now.'
- b. Bill-wa ima ie-o tate-teiru.
Bill-top now house-acc build-prog.pres
'Bill is building a house now.'

Intuitively, the meaning of *-teiru* seems invariable in (1a) and (2a, b). Note also the use of *ima* 'now' in (1a) and (2a, b); they both appear to indicate the existence of some "salient situation associated with the verb" at the utterance time. However, a uniform compositional analysis of achievement cases like (1a) and non-achievement cases like (2a, b) is difficult to obtain. Despite many recent research findings about Japanese aspect (e.g., Okuda (1978), Kudo (1995), Ogihara (1998), Shirai (2000)), many questions remain.

Ogihara (2004) argues for an analysis in which achievements in Japanese and English have different lexical meanings. For example, *otiru* 'fall' in Japanese indicates that the entity denoted by the subject obtains a resultant state and continue to have this state at least for a while. On the other hand, its English equivalent *fall* indicates the process of falling that culminates in the object's being in a lower location. Although this accomplishes the semantic effects we need for Japanese and English "progressive" constructions, it is odd to have to posit different meanings for words in two different languages that appear to be equivalents.

In this presentation, I attempt to formalize the difference in the two languages as differences in thematic structures, rather than the lexical semantics of verbs, borrowing some insights from Okuda (1978), Kudo (1995) and Shirai (2000). For example, regarding (3a) and (3b), I argue that different thematic roles are associated with the sole nominal argument in the two examples. In

(3a), 'a/the tree' bears the role of state-getter/bearer, whereas in (3b), *a tree* bears the role of change-undergoer. In plain terms, the subject of (3a) says that a/tree has some relevant state produced by falling, whereas (3b) says that a tree is a participant of a relevant change-of-state event. The semantic difference between the two nominal arguments is characterized formally as in (3c, d).

- (3) a. Ki-ga taore-teiru. 'A tree is on the ground (after having fallen over).'
 tree-NOM fall-PROG.PRES
 b. A tree is falling over.
 c. $\llbracket \text{ki-ga} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle \text{ev}, t \rangle} . \lambda e' . \exists e \exists x [\text{tree}(x) \ \& \ \text{state-getter/bearer}(x, e') \ \& \ e' \text{ results from } e \ \& \ P(e)]$
 d. $\llbracket \text{a-tree} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle \text{ev}, t \rangle} . \lambda e . \exists e \exists x [\text{tree}(x) \ \& \ \text{undergoer}(x, e) \ \& \ P(e)]$

Extending Kratzer's (1996) idea of “severing the external argument from its verb”, I argue for an account in which the meaning of the verb contains no information about nominals. We can then accurately represent our intuition that the relevant cross-linguistic difference stems from differences in argument structure and thematic roles, rather than differences in verb meaning, *per se*.

References

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