

The Semantics of *-ta* in Japanese Counterfactual Conditionals

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This paper contends that Japanese counterfactual conditionals with a past tense in the consequent always involve a counterfactual presupposition in that the proposition conveyed by the antecedent is required to be false. This observation reveals an important difference between English and Japanese and provides strong support to Iatridou's (2000) contention that a "fake past tense" (i.e. a past tense that does not indicate temporal anteriority) is used to exclude the actual world. The current literature on Japanese conditionals (including the papers collected in Masuoka 1993) does not espouse this generalization.

English uses past tense to indicate counterfactuality, but not to the extent that the falsity of the antecedent is presupposed. Lewis's (1973) analysis of counterfactuals is compatible with this fact. Examples like (1) (Anderson 1951) indicate that the falsity of the antecedent is not guaranteed in English counterfactual conditionals; it is merely implicated.

- (1) If a patient had the measles, he would have exactly the symptoms he has now. We concluded, therefore, that the patient has the measles.

The same is true of future less vivid (FLV) conditionals, in which past tense is used in a sentence that describes a future situation. In this case (e.g. (2)), the speaker "excludes" the actual world only in that she believes that the antecedent proposition is likely to be false. Again the falsity is merely implicated.

- (2) If it rained tomorrow, we would not play baseball.

The temporal meaning of past tense is qualitatively different. It does not implicate that the time under discussion is a past time. It is presupposed to be one. Thus, as far as English goes, the two uses of past tense posited by Iatridou (2000) are not completely analogous.

On the other hand, Japanese uses past tense in such a way that when it has a non-temporal interpretation, it indicates counterfactual presupposition. We can define a counterfactual conditional with a past tense as a conditional in which past tense in the consequent has a non-temporal interpretation. Japanese examples like (3a-b) must describe contrary-to-fact situations. (3a) clearly presupposes that he is not here now. Similarly, (3b) requires that Taro not be there at the past time in question. The "progressive form" *-te iru* behaves like the English perfect here and indicates anteriority causing the topic time to be shifted to a past time.

- (3) a. Mosi Taroo-ga ima soko-ni i-ta ra, soodan si-ta daroo.
if Taro-NOM now there at be PAST discuss PAST probably
'If Taro were there now, (I would) talk to him.'
b. Mosi Taroo-ga sono-toki soko-ni i-ta ra, nagut-te i-ta daroo.
if Taro-NOM then there-at be-PAST, hit-PROG-PAST probably
'If Taro had been there then, I would have hit [him].'

That the non-temporal use of past tense carries a definitive meaning of counterfactuality is also clear from example (4). (4) is a literal translation of (1) into Japanese, and there is an important semantic difference between them. Since the past tense in the consequent indicates

true counterfactuality (the symptom in question is not observed now), this is not compatible with the assumption that the symptom in question is observed. Thus (4) is anomalous if the consequent is understood to describe a current situation.

- (4) # Mosi kono kanzya-ga hasika dat-ta ra,
if this patient-NOM measles be-PAST
ima araware-te ir-u syoozyoo-ga (ima) araware-te i-ta daroo.
now surface PROG PRES symptom-NOM (now) surface PROG PAST probably

This further substantiates the claim that non-temporal past in Japanese indicates counterfactuality.

The above findings lead us to expect that when past tense morpheme *-ta* is used to talk about a future situation, it would also involve a true counterfactual meaning. This prediction is borne out by examples like (5a).

- (5) a. Mosi Taroo-ga asita-ki-te i-ta ra,
if Taro-NOM tomorrow come-PROG-PAST
Hanako-wa yorokon-da daroo.
Hanako-TOP be-pleased-PAST probably
b. If Taro came here tomorrow, Hanako would be pleased.
c. If Taro had come here *tomorrow*, Hanako would have been pleased.

(5a) has a genuine counterfactual meaning in that the proposition conveyed by the antecedent is false (in the actual world). There are two different ways in which the proposition is false. One possibility is that the speaker somehow knows that Taro will not come here tomorrow. Another possibility is that Taro came here at some past time, and the speaker wishes counterfactually that the “same thing” would have happened tomorrow. The first situation can be described by (5b), though (5b) is compatible with Taro’s coming here tomorrow. The second situation can be described by (5c), which Ogihara (2000) discusses. However the semantics of (5c) is described, one thing is clear. When the morpheme *-ta* is used in the consequent of a Japanese counterfactual conditional, the proposition conveyed by the antecedent must be false. According to Ogihara (2000), the proposition that is false is one that is associated with a sentence that contains an implicit expression of the form “instead of NP”. For example, the antecedent of (5a) is understood to mean that Taro comes here tomorrow instead of yesterday (say). This lends support to Iatridou’s idea that past tense either excludes the current time or the current world. When *-ta* is used for a non-temporal meaning, it always excludes the current world.

There is one complication that needs to be stated here. In Japanese conditionals, the tense form of the consequent is very important and determines the nature of the entire sentence. But the tense form of the antecedent is less so. This can be shown by examples like (6a) and (6b).

- (6) a. Mosi ima soko-ni Taroo-ga i-ta ra,
 if now there-at Taro-NOM be-PAST
 Hanako-wa yorokon-de ir-u daroo.
 Hanako-TOP be-pleased-PROG-PRES probably
 ‘If Taro was there now, Hanako would be happy.’
- b. Mosi asita ame-ga fut-ta ra, sanpo-ni-wa ika-na-i.
 If tomorrow rain-NOM fall-PAST walk-to-TOP go-NEG-PRES
 ‘If it rained tomorrow, (we would) not go for a walk.’

Both (6a) and (6b) have a past tense morpheme in the antecedent clause. But the entire clause does not have a true counterfactual meaning. It is more like a FLV sentence. What this shows is that the tense form of the consequent must have “scope” over the entire sentence. This assumption is agreement with recent works in tense such as von Stechow (2002).

Given this extra assumption about scope of tense, we can say quite simply that the morpheme *-ta* is used as an exclusion feature (ExclF) in the sense of Iatridou (2000). When it is used for a temporal meaning, it excluded the utterance time. (I.e. the time in question (topic time) is presupposed to be a past time.) When it is used for a non-temporal meaning, it excludes the actual world. (I.e. the proposition conveyed by the antecedent is presupposed to be false.)

References

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