

On the Subject of the Japanese Middle and *Tough* Constructions

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Abstract

One of the defining properties of the Japanese middles and *tough* constructions is that the internal argument must be marked as nominative or topicalized, and the external argument remains non-overt. Given this property, it appears plausible that the internal argument is the subject of the sentence. In this paper, however, we discuss what the nature of the subject in these constructions is, and claim that the syntactic subject is the non-overt external argument, which bears an inherent dative Case, and that the internal argument remains as an object throughout the derivation. We demonstrate that our claim is supported by the data showing that the non-overt external argument passes three subjecthood tests and that the internal argument passes an objecthood test.

Keywords: middle constructions, *tough* constructions, internal/external argument, subjecthood/objecthood tests

1. Introduction

One of the defining properties of middles and *tough* constructions is that the internal argument must be marked as nominative, and the external argument remains non-overt, as shown in (1)a and (1)b:

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- (1) a. This floor washes nicely.
 b. This floor is nice to wash.

In Japanese middles and *tough* constructions, on the other hand, the internal argument must be either marked as nominative or topicalized, and the external argument remains non-overt as shown in (2)a and (2)b, respectively (cf. Nakau 1991):

- (2) a. *Kono hon-ga/wa kantanni yom-e-ru.*
 this book-nom/top easily read-MS-pres
 ‘This book can be read easily.’
 b. *Kono hon-ga/wa yomi-yasu-i.*
 this book-nom/top read-easy.to-pres
 ‘This book is easy to read.’

Given this property, it appears plausible that the internal argument is the subject of the sentence, as in the English middle and *tough* constructions (1). In this paper, however, we discuss what the nature of the subject in (2) is, and put forth two proposals. One is that the syntactic subject is the non-overt external argument, which bears an inherent dative Case, and the other is that the internal argument remains as an object throughout the derivation. We demonstrate that our claim is supported by the data showing that the non-overt external argument passes three subjecthood tests and that the internal argument passes an objecthood test.

2. Preliminaries: Syntactic vs. Lexical Middle Languages

To begin with, let us assume that languages are classified into syntactic and lexical middle languages, following Marelj (2004). In particular, we show that Japanese is a syntactic middle language, and propose a syntactic analysis of Japanese middles, which has rarely been attempted so far.

Marelj points out differences between syntactic and lexical middle languages. We are concerned here with only two of them. Specifically, Marelj argues that English is a lexical middle language on the grounds that the English middle formation does not involve morphological marking on verbs and imposes selectional restrictions on verbs. This observation is exemplified by (3) and (4). (3) shows that English middles are not marked by a construction-specific morpheme, and (4) shows that perception and psych

verbs cannot participate in the English middle formation:

(3) These books read poorly.

(4) a. Perception Verbs

*The mountains see best after rain.

b. Psych Verbs

*Anniversaries forget easily.

Turning to Japanese middles such as (5) and (6), however, we find that they involve construction-specific morphological marking on verbs.¹ Also, it should be noted that the selectional restrictions on verbs such as those observed in English middles are absent in Japanese middles.

(5) *Korerano kinoko-ga/wa taber-are-ru.*

these mushroom-nom/top eat-MS-pres

‘This mushroom can be eaten (by anyone).’

(6) a. Perception Verbs

Yugamine-ga/wa santyoo-kara yoku mi-e-ru.

Mt. Yugamine-nom/top top.of.mountain-from well see-MS-pres

‘Mt. Yugamine can be seen from the top of the mountain.’

b. Psych Verbs

Iyana koto-ga/wa kantanni wasurer-are-ru.

bad thing-nom/top easily forget-MS-pres

‘Bad things can be forgotten easily.’

Assuming that Marelj’s diagnostic tests are reliable for classifying languages into lexical or syntactic middle languages, we conclude that Japanese is a syntactic middle language (cf. Taguchi to appear).

3. Proposal

¹ The middle suffix *(ar)e*, glossed as MS in the examples, is homophonous with the potential suffix (and the passive suffix in some cases), which is glossed as PS in the examples below.

In this section, we put forward two proposals regarding the syntactic properties of Japanese middles and *tough* constructions. One is that the syntactic subject of these constructions is the external argument which is not realized overtly, reinforced by the claim that the nominative or topicalized argument stays as the object throughout the derivation (cf. Taguchi to appear), and the other is that the non-overt external argument bears an inherent dative Case.

Before elaborating upon this proposal, we claim that analyzing *tough* constructions in parallel with middles is well motivated. In fact, the analyses along the same line have been proposed for the English data like (1) (e.g. Oosten 1977, Fellbaum 1986, Massam 1988, and Hoekstra and Roberts 1993), based on the observation that both are generic sentences describing the facility of the action denoted by the verb. We would like to claim that the Japanese middle and *tough* constructions like (2) should be analyzed in parallel as well, in the sense that they are also generic sentences describing facility. Although the semantic properties of middles mentioned above are intriguing issues to pursue further, we do not discuss them any further in this paper and leave them to further research.

Given the parallelism between middles and *tough* constructions in Japanese, we propose that the subject in these constructions is an external argument syntactically realized as a non-overt pronominal *pro*. In order to show that our proposal is on the right track, let us consider three diagnostic tests for subjecthood that have been proposed in the previous literature on Japanese syntax. First, as is widely discussed (e.g. Kuno 1973, Katada 1991, etc.), a reflexive anaphor *zibun* ‘self’ in Japanese must be licensed by a [+human] subject antecedent. The grammaticality of (7), where *zibun* is properly licensed, shows that middles and *tough* constructions have such a subject, even though it is not overtly realized:²

- (7) a. *Zibun-no hon-ga/wa kantanni yom-e-ru.*
 self-gen book-nom/top easily read-MS-pres
 (lit.) ‘Self’s book can be read easily.’
 b. *Zibun-no hon-ga/wa yomi-yasu-i.*
 self-gen book-nom/top read-easy.to-pres
 (lit.) ‘Self’s book is easy to read.’

Second, Ura (1999, 2000) claims that the missing subject of an adjunct clause headed by

² See, however, Ackema and Schoonermer (1995) and Marelj (2004) for the claim that the syntactic presence of a subject (more precisely, an agent) in middles cannot be evidenced by anaphor binding, if Reinhart and Reuland’s (1993) approach to the Binding Condition A is adopted (cf. Zribi-Hertz 1993).

nagara ‘while’ must be controlled by the matrix subject. The grammaticality of (8), where the missing subject of the adjunct clause is properly licensed, shows that middles and *tough* constructions have a subject that controls the missing subject.

- (8) a. [*tanosimi-nagara (demo)*], *kono hon-ga/wa kantanni yom-e-ru.*
 enjoying-while (even) this book-nom/top easily read-MS-pres
 (lit.) ‘(Even) while enjoying, this book can be read easily.’
- b. [*tanosimi-nagara (demo)*], *kono hon-ga/wa yomi-yasu-i.*
 enjoying-while (even) this book-nom/top read-easy.to-pres
 (lit.) ‘(Even) while enjoying, this book is easy to read.’

Third, subject honorification (SH) requires a syntactic subject, which is an SSS, as defined by Harada (1976) as (9) (see also Shibatani 1977, 1978, and others). The grammaticality of (10), where readers in general are taken to be honorified, shows that middles and *tough* constructions have a subject that triggers SH.

(9) Subject Honorific Marking:

Mark the predicate as [Subject Honorific] if its subject is an SSS (a person who is socially superior to the speaker).

- (10) a. *Kono hon-ga/wa kantanni o-yomi-ninar-e-ru.*
 this book-nom/top easily SH-read-SH-MS-pres
 ‘This book can be read easily.’
- b. *Kono hon-ga/wa o-yomi-ninari-yasu-i.*
 this book-nom/top SH-read-SH-easy.to-pres
 ‘This book is easy to read.’

We thus conclude that middles and *tough* constructions in Japanese involve a syntactic subject that is not overtly realized.

Now, let us turn to our second claim that the non-overt subject of the Japanese middle and *tough* constructions bears an inherent dative Case. We would like to consider two pieces of evidence for this claim. For one thing, Ura (1999, 2000) shows that the above diagnostic tests for subjecthood apply not only to nominative subjects, but also to dative subjects. In this respect, we are arguing that Japanese middles and *tough* constructions are variations of the dative subject construction, as will be discussed below. For another, let us consider the unacceptability of (11) under the middle reading. (11) is

acceptable only under the interpretation that the non-overt subject is recovered from the context (i.e., the subject does not have the arbitrary interpretation, but is interpreted as the non-overt counterpart of a nominative pronoun like *he*, *she*, and *they*).

(11) #*Kono hon-o kantanni yom-e-ru.*
this book-acc easily read-MS-pres
'This book can be read easily.'

We account for the unacceptability of (11) as a middle sentence, with recourse to Shibatani's (1977: 802) filter, which is defined as (12).

(12) A non-embedded clause of Japanese may have more than one nominative NP, but it requires at least one such NP.

Specifically, if the non-overt subject is indeed marked as nominative in (11), it is predicted that the sentence should be acceptable as a middle sentence, because (12) is satisfied by that subject. However, the prediction is incorrect. On the basis of the unacceptability of (11) under the middle interpretation, we conclude that the non-overt subject in Japanese middles is unable to satisfy Shibatani's filter (12), because it is assigned a Case other than nominative. We thus claim that the subject receives an inherent dative Case. It therefore follows that (2)a, repeated here as (13), is fully acceptable as a middle sentence because (12) is satisfied by the internal argument marked as nominative.

(13) *Kono hon-ga/wa kantanni yom-e-ru.*
this book-nom/top easily read-MS-pres
'This book can be read easily.'

So far, we have been mainly concerned with subjecthood of the non-overt external argument. Now, we would like to turn to the question of what the nature of the internal argument is. Given a well-known fact that Japanese is a multiple subject language, one may wonder if the Japanese middle and *tough* constructions are also instances of multiple subject constructions. However, we follow Taguchi (to appear) in assuming that the internal argument in these constructions does not become the subject, but stays as the object throughout the derivation; for, it does not pass the three diagnostic tests for subjecthood. First, let us compare (14) and (15). Notice that *kono hito-ga/wa* 'this

person-nom/top’ in these examples has the [+human] feature, but it cannot be interpreted to be coreferential with the reflexive pronoun *zibun* in (15). This shows that *kono hito-ga/wa* cannot be taken as the antecedent of *zibun*, because it is not a subject but an object.

(14) a. *Kono hito_i-ga/wa kantanni damas-e-ru.*
 this person-nom/top easily deceive-MS-pres
 ‘This person can be deceived easily.’

b. *Kono hito_i-ga/wa damasi-yasu-i.*
 this person-nom/top deceive-easy.to-pres
 ‘This person is easy to deceive.’

(15) a. **Kono hito_i-ga/wa zibun_i-nitotte kantanni damas-e-ru.*
 this person-nom/top self-for easily deceive-MS-pres
 (lit.) ‘This person can be deceived easily for self.’

b. **Kono hito_i-ga/wa zibun_i-nitotte damasi-yasu-i.*
 this person-nom/top self-for deceive-easy.to-pres
 (lit.) ‘This person is easy to deceive for self.’

Next, the examples in (16) show that they do not allow the interpretation that *kono hito-ga/wa* controls the missing subject in the embedded *nagara*-clause. These examples are fine if the non-overt external argument in the matrix clause is interpreted as the controller. This means that the non-overt external argument is, but *kono hito-ga/wa* is not a subject.

(16) a. #[*Warai-nagara (demo)*], *kono hito-ga/wa kantanni damas-e-ru.*
 smile-while (even) this person-nom/top easily deceive-MS-pres
 (lit.) ‘(Even) while smiling, this person can be deceived easily.’

b. #[*Warai-nagara (demo)*], *kono hito-ga/wa damasi-yasu-i.*
 smile-while (even) this person-nom/top use-easy.to-pres
 (lit.) ‘(Even) while smiling, this person is easy to deceive.’

Finally, let us consider (17), in which *kono hito-ga/wa* triggers SH. Again, these sentences are unacceptable as such, and become fully acceptable middle and *tough* sentences only if the non-overt external argument is interpreted as the trigger of SH. This should be taken as another piece of evidence that the non-overt external argument is, but

kono hito-ga/wa is not a subject.

- (17) a. #*Kono hito-ga/wa kantanni o-damasi-ninar-e-ru.*
this person-nom/top easily SH-deceive-SH-MS-pres
'This person can be deceived easily.'
- b. #*Kono hito-ga/wa o-damasi-ninari-yasu-i.*
this person-nom/top SH-deceive-SH-easy.to-pres
'This person is easy to deceive.'

Before concluding this section, let us have a look at some important data showing that the nominative or topicalized argument in the Japanese middle and *tough* constructions is an object rather than a subject, and that these constructions should be treated on a par with the dative subject construction, as discussed above. First, the examples in (18) show that the nominative or topicalized argument *kono ryoori-ga/wa* in the dative subject construction cannot trigger SH, but it is capable of triggering object honorification (OH), which requires that an SSS must be included in the object, as defined by Harada (1976) as (19):

- (18) a. *Taroo-ni-wa kono ryoori-ga/wa oisiku taber-are-ru.*
Taroo-dat-top this cuisine-nom/top deliciously eat-can-present
'This cuisine can be eaten deliciously for Taro.'
- b. #*Taroo-ni-wa sensee-no ryoori-ga/wa oisiku mesiyag-are-ru.*
Taroo-dat-top teacher-gen cuisine-nom deliciously eat.SH-PS-present
'The teacher's cuisine can be eaten deliciously for Taro.' (SH)
- c. *Taroo-ni-wa sensee-no ryoori-ga oisiku itadak-e-ru.*
Taroo-dat-top teacher's cuisine-nom deliciously eat.OH-PS-present
'The teacher's cuisine can be eaten deliciously for Taro.' (OH)

(19) Object Honorific Marking:

Mark the predicate as [Object Honorification] when an SSS is included in

- (a) the indirect object, if the predicate is ditransitive, or
(b) the direct object, if the predicate is transitive.

The examples in (20) and (21) show the same pattern; namely, *kono ryoori-ga/wa* in these middle and *tough* sentences cannot trigger SH, but it can trigger OH:

- (20) a. *Kono ryoori-ga/wa oisiku taber-are-ru.*
 this cuisine-nom/top deliciously eat-middle-present
 ‘This cuisine can be eaten deliciously.’
- b. #*Sensee-no ryoori-ga/wa oisiku mesiag-are-ru.*
 teacher-gen cuisine-nom/top deliciously eat.SH-middle-present
 ‘The teacher’s cuisine can be eaten deliciously.’ (SH)
- c. *Sensee-no ryoori-ga/wa oisiku itadak-e-ru.*
 teacher-gen cuisine-nom/top deliciously eat.OH-middle-present
 ‘The teacher’s cuisine can be eaten deliciously.’ (OH)
- (21) a. *Kono ryoori-ga/wa (ano ryoori yorimo) tabe-yasu-i.*
 this cuisine-nom/top (that cuisine than) eat-easy.to-present
 ‘This cuisine is easier to eat than that cuisine.’
- b. #*Sensee-no ryoori-ga/wa (senpai-no ryoori yorimo) mesiagari-yasu-i.*
 teacher-gen cuisine-nom/top (senior’s cuisine than) eat.SH-easy.to-present
 ‘The teacher’s cuisine is easier to eat than the senior’s cuisine.’ (SH)
- c. *Sensee-no ryoori-ga/wa (senpai-no ryoori yorimo) itadaki-yasu-i.*
 teacher-gen cuisine-nom/top (senior’s cuisine than) eat.OH-easy.to-present
 ‘The teacher’s cuisine is easier to eat than the senior’s cuisine.’ (OH)

In this section, we claimed that the syntactic subject of the Japanese middle and *tough* constructions is the external argument which is not realized overtly and bears an inherent dative Case. The nominative or topicalized argument of these constructions, on the other hand, stays as the object throughout the derivation.

4. Conclusion, Consequences, and Further Discussion

In this paper, we have argued that in the Japanese middle and *tough* constructions, the non-overt external argument is the subject realized as a dative *pro*, whereas the internal argument is the object. This argument is evidenced by the observation that the non-overt external argument has the ability of triggering SH, and that OH can, but SH cannot be triggered by the internal argument. In addition, we have shown that the Japanese middle and *tough* constructions pattern with the dative subject construction in these respects.

One of the consequences of our proposal is that Marelj’s account of syntactic

middle languages needs to be reconsidered (cf. Taguchi to appear). Her claim on the [+human] feature is summarized in (22):

(22) In syntactic middle languages, the [+human] feature that is responsible for agentivity of middles, is introduced only in LF.

However, there are two observations that argue against Marelj's claim. First, given Belletti and Rizzi's (1988) observation that Condition A of the Binding Theory may apply in overt syntax, it is hard to account for the successful binding relation in (7), repeated as (23). More specifically, given the claim by Kuno (1973), Katada (1991), and others that a reflexive anaphor *zibun* in Japanese must be licensed by a [+human] subject antecedent, it should follow that the [+human] feature must have been introduced in overt syntax.

- (23) a. *Zibun-no hon-ga/wa kantanni yom-e-ru.*
self-gen book-nom/top easily read-MS-pres
(lit.) 'Self's book can be read easily.'
- b. *Zibun-no hon-ga/wa yomi-yasu-i.*
self-gen book-nom/top read-easy.to-pres
(lit.) 'Self's book is easy to read.'

Second, let us turn to another consequence by taking seriously Niinuma's (2003) claim that honorification is a syntactic Agree operation with respect to the [+human] feature. Crucially, Boeckx and Niinuma (2004) and Boeckx (2006) explicitly claim that honorification must apply prior to short scrambling of the object that triggers object honorification. This is shown by the examples in (24), where the Defective Intervention Condition on Agree is still at work after short scrambling of the object:

- (24) a. #*Taroo-ga Mary-ni Tanaka sensee-o go-syookai-si-ta.*
Taroo-nom Mary-dat Tanaka teacher-acc OH-introduce-OH-past
- b. #*Taroo-ga Tanaka sensee-o Mary-ni go-syookai-si-ta.*
Taroo-nom Tanaka teacher-acc Mary-dat OH-introduce-OH-past
'Taro introduced Prof. Tanaka to Mary.'

If honorification must take place prior to purely syntactic operations such as scrambling, the [+human] feature must be introduced in overt syntax, rather than in LF.

Finally, we would like to touch slightly on the difference between English and Japanese regarding the licensing of the internal argument in middles and *tough* constructions. We suspect that the difference may be due to either of the following two reasons. One is that in Japanese, the internal argument can have its nominative Case checked off by AgrO/V (cf. Saito and Hoshi 1999, Tada 1992, 1993, Yatsuhiko 1999, Wurmbrand 2001, etc.). In English, on the other hand, the internal argument must move to SpecTP. The other is that in Japanese, *pro* moves to SpecTP and thus the internal argument remains as the object (contra Takahashi 2001). In English, on the other hand, *pro* is unavailable and thus the internal argument moves to SpecTP.

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