TENSE-ASPECT CONTROVERSY REVISITED: THE -TA AND -RU FORMS IN JAPANESE

Yoko Hasegawa

Introduction

Both of the verbal suffixes -TA and -RU in Japanese are used to refer to a situation in past, present, or future time. Nevertheless, they are frequently glossed as past and nonpast, respectively, mainly because they refer only to past or nonpast time in monosentential sentences in isolation. The competing analysis claims that -TA and -RU are primarily aspect markers, and that tense interpretation emerges as a derivative from the actual meanings. Despite ample work involving in-depth probes into the nature of these markers, it is surprisingly rare to find research that compares and evaluates those competing analyses of -TA and -RU. The present study attempts such a critical inquiry.

After listing in section 2 typical uses of -TA and -RU, the present paper summarizes in section 3 six hitherto proposed analyses. Their strengths and weaknesses, based on analysis of 19 Japanese novels taken from various periods and styles, are then discussed in section 4. Conclusions follow in section 5.

Usage of -TA and -RU

Imahiro (1967:56-68) lists the uses of the -TA and -RU forms as follows (unless otherwise specified, examples are supplied by the present author; the verbs in English responding to those marked by -TA and -RU are in small capitals):

- TA form is used to express:

1. A situation completed in the past or that lasted for a certain length of time in the past: *haha ni tegami o kai-TA* ‘I wrote a letter to my mother.’
2. Habitual repetition in the past: *ano koro wa yoku undoo si-TA* ‘I used to exercise frequently in those days.’
3. A situation that occurred under a certain circumstance in the past: *kaeru to sugu ni te o arat-TA* ‘I would wash my hands immediately after I got home.’
4. A situation that materialized in the past and still exists: *ookiku nat-TA ne* ‘You’ve grown, haven’t you?’
5. Sudden discovery that a certain state has continuously existed (the so-called TA form of discovery; a special case of (4)): a, soko ni i-TA no ‘Oh, these are!’

6. Sudden recalling of a future event or plan that the speaker has definite: a, asita siken ga at-TA ‘Oh, I have an exam tomorrow’!

7. A request for hearer’s confirmation of a fact (normally only in question): anata wa donato desu-TA ka ‘Who are you?’ (Mikami 1953).

8. Proclamation or assertion of the realization of a situation which has not been realized: yosi kat-TA ‘All right, (I’m sold) I’ll buy it!’ (Suzuki 1965).


The -Ru (-u) form is used to express (-u = allomorph of //Ru//)

10. A present state: kono isu wa sakki kara koko ni ar-u ‘This chair has been here for a while’ (Mikami 1953).


12. A speech act (hatsugen-genzai ‘the utterance present’): yakusoku su-TA ‘Promise it.’

13. An event occurring in front of one’s eyes: a, teppan ga oti-RU ‘Oh, a plate has fallen down!’ (Suzuki 1965).

14. A situation that is certain to occur in the future: asita wa yasumi da ‘Tomorrow is a holiday.’

15. The speaker’s present intention or plan: asita amerika ni tat-u ‘I’ll leave for America tomorrow.’

16. A past event: kikizute naranai koto o i-u ne ‘You’ve said something I ignore.’

17. Habitual repetition: itumo 12-zi ni ne-RU ‘I always go to bed at 12.’

18. A step by step procedure (e.g. in recipes): tugis ni slo o tre-RU ‘Next, add some salt.’

19. A situation regularly occurring under a certain condition: tabi o suru to manab-u ‘We learn a lot by travelling.’

20. A characteristic or general truth: ano hito wa yoku syaber-u ‘He talks a lot.’

21. A command: sugu ni tabe-RU ‘Eat it now!’

Although it is questionable whether those items are all distinctive, they show that the -TA form can be used to refer to a situation in the past (1-3), in the present (4-7), or in the future (8-9), and the -RU form to a situation in the past (16), in the present (10-13), in the future (14-15), or to an atemporal one (17-21).

3. Previous Analyses

3.1. Tense Analysis

Those who advocate that -TA and -RU are primarily tense markers contend that, whereas complications occur in multi-clausal sentences and/or in discourse, they refer only to past or nonpast time in mono-clausal sentences in isolation.
The fact that -TA and -RU frequently alternate in written as well as spoken discourse poses another problem to the tense analysis. Advocates commonly argue that their alternation should be regarded as a rhetorical phenomenon, as in the case of English, which, it is widely agreed, has a tense system, although its nonpast/present tense can be used for a past situation — the so-called historical/narrative present. Historical/Narrative present is considered by many to be a stylistic device with limited distribution (cf. Wolfson 1979, Schiffrin 1981, Fleischman 1990). Soga (1983:219) states:

"With the exception of the uses of -ru required by grammatical restrictions, it is quite possible for an author to use only the -ta form regardless of whether an event is 'foreground' or 'background.' Likewise, although it may not be very common, it should be possible to use nothing but the non-past tense form regardless of the types of the events described. In the former case, the story will be perceived only in a matter-of-fact way, while in the latter it will be perceived as if the reader is experiencing the events himself. In this sense, therefore, it seems that proper uses of tense forms constitute an element of the effective specific style of an author or of a story."

Following Hopper (1979), Soga contends that background statements in Japanese narrative are frequently expressed with -RU, but it is possible to change it to -TA without making the discourse elusive.

Analyzing Soseki Natsume's Sanshiro, Takakura (1990) acknowledges that in general, the foreground/background distinction accurately predicts the choice of -TA or -RU (she call them tense markers). She points out, however, that not all sentences in narrative can be ended with -TA, as shown in (24-25). (The translation and the appropriateness judgment are Terakura's.)

(24) ① hirota-san wa hige no sita ka o dasite warat-TA. ② warai kiretama ha o matte-i-TA.
    'Mr. Hirota smiled showing his teeth below his moustache. ② He got good-looking teeth.'

(25) ① "odeni narimasen ka" to kiku to, sensei wa suki so warai nagara, mugon no mama kubi o yoki ni hiru-TA. ② kodomo no yoona syosha o su-RU? su-TA.
    '① Wouldn't you like to go out?' asked Sanshiro, and then Sensei smiled faintly and shook his head without saying a word. ② That was a childlike gesture.'
Takakura confirms that sentences representing perception, exemplified by (24), normally occur with -RU, but they permit the TA-RU alternation. When -TA is selected, she explains, the percipient disappears from the narrative, and the described situation conceived as an objective fact in the voice of the narrator. Significantly, she informs that in sentences in the free indirect style—representing a character’s consciousness—exemplified by (25), -RU resists replacement with -TA. This fact poses another problem for the tense analysis because, as demonstrated in (25), the represented idea entered the character’s consciousness in the narrative past, and thus the use of the “past tense” must be allowed, at least as a possible variation. This is not the case, however, as Terakura points out.

Still another problem with the tense analysis is that, as Soga acknowledges, there are grammatical restrictions on the usage of -TA and -RU. For example, in certain subordinate clauses, they do not contrast, i.e., either -TA or -RU can appear, but not both, regardless of the matrix time or mood of the sentence, as shown in (26-27).

(26) mado o ake-TA/ake-RU ra, kanarazu simete kudasai ne.
   ‘Please make sure to close it if you OPEN the window.’

(27) mado o ake-TA/ake-RU to, tori ga hatte ki-TA.
   ‘When I OPENED the window, a bird FLEW in.’

Unless an explanation of why some connectives require a specific “tense” is provided, the claim of -TA and -RU as primarily tense markers cannot be upheld in a straightforward manner, and, consequently, a more elaborate analysis is needed.

3.2. Time-Relationship Analysis

Ota (1972) argues for two tense types—(a) a deictic notion and (b) ‘time-relationship’ indicating an alignment of event and reference times (à la Reichenbach). He contends that, while English has both types, Japanese encodes only time-relationships: -TA indicates event time being prior to reference time, and -RU otherwise. If no reference time is specified, speech time serves as reference time, making -TA and -RU resemble deictic tenses. In a dependent construction, e.g., subordinate clause, reference time is supplied by the construction on which it depends.

Miura (1974) points out that, in dependent constructions, not only the matrix-clause time, but also speech time, can serve as reference time. For example:

(28) kanai no ike-TA hana ga asita no tenrankai ni de-RU.
    ‘Flowers that my wife HAS ARRANGED/WILL ARRANGE will be displayed in tomorrow’s exhibition.’

In one reading, the flowers were arranged before speech time, and in the other, they will be arranged before the exhibition, but not before speech time. In either case, -TA indicates anteriority.

It is frequently commented that the usage of -TA and -RU in Japanese discourse appears to be bewildering or even illogical to non-native speakers. Isshiki (1965), for example, claims that in a long discourse it becomes cumbersome once the passage is established and have very little sense of time. Arguing -TA or -RU is not arbitrary in the time

(29) ① osida, to singo wa tubi 'This one’s mute,' Shing had sung so loudly.'

Miura explains that in (29) ①, the reference in the past established by ①. He writes past (or ... in Shingo’s place). This is Japanese and frequently occurs in narrative is whether it is necessary to assume that because ② is in the free indirect style, Terakura. Had ② appeared with -TA, the narrator, not of Shingo (which is the case)

The problem with the time-relationships marked events must be understood to have time, e.g., (27) and (30).

(30) naita ranom-U kara one o ka
    ‘Because you IMPLOR ED me, I

In both (27) and (30), the -RU event has occurred before the -TA event. The time-relationship event is not the case.

3.3. Aspect Analysis

Miyoshi (1974:24) claims, “Japanese has forms for past and present [nonpast] confusion for the reader.” However, if the time to what do the “forms for past and present do, that -TA and -RU are primarily tense discourse, it may not be appropriate to suggested by Soga.

Responding to Miyoshi, Miller (1975) markers of perfective and imperfective, res.

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in (26-27).

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imete kudasai ne.

'Look in the window.'

'Otete ki-TA.

'Open the door.'

require a specific “tense” is provided, the use of -TA cannot be upheld in a straightforward way, and another analysis is needed.

3.3. Aspect Analysis

Miyoshi (1974:24) claims, “Japanese has no clearly established grammatical tense, and forms for past and present [nonpast] are often interchanged without creating any confusion for the reader.” However, if there is no clearly established grammatical tense, to what do the “forms for past and present” refer? If one considers, as Miyoshi appears to do, that -TA and -RU are primarily tense markers but used interchangeably in Japanese discourse, it may not be appropriate to investigate them in the realm of grammar, as suggested by Soga.

Responding to Miyoshi, Miller (1975) claims that -TA and -RU are aspect, not tense, markers of perfective and imperfective, respectively. 4 He defines these notions as:

'Tense' is a grammatical term that is generally reserved for the verb systems of languages in which the different forms of the verbs are essentially, or mainly, concerned with identifying, marking, or ... 'expressing' differences in time,
indicating when the action or event to which the verb has reference took place. 

'Seapect' is a grammatical term that is generally reserved for the verb systems of languages in which the different forms of the verb are concerned with whether something was done, but how, particularly and typically (e.g., the Slavic languages) with whether or not a given action was or is completed (over and done with) or was or is still continuing (not over and done with, uncompleted or incomplete). (3-4)

Using *Kusamakura* by Soseki Natsume, Miller provides numerous convincing examples. (The free translation is from Turney (1965.).)

(31) ① rakuzyoo hodo no tiisana zasiki ni irare-TA. ② mukasi kita toki te wa maru de kentoo ga tiga-U.

'① I was eventually shown into a small room about twelve feet by nine. ② This was not at all as I had remembered the place from the last time I was there.'

(32) ① mooretu naru undo o kaisi si-TA. ② kono tame ga, sippuu no sokudo de tooru gotoku no oorai su-RU.

'① (The barber) began a violent exercise. ② His fingernails went back and forth at whirlwind speed.'

In (31), the verb ① irare-TA 'be shown into + TA' is perfective, whereas ② tiga-U 'be different + RU' is imperfective. In (32), the verb ① kaisi si-TA 'bebegin + TA' (perfective) contrasts with ② oorai su-RU 'go back and forth + RU' (imperfective).

The aspect analysis is in accordance with the idea that more salient concepts than tense per se are (i) whether or not a certain change has occurred, and (ii) whether or not the speaker is certain about its occurrence. If the speaker is confident about a given situation having been completed (the notion of perfective), the addressee naturally interprets it as having occurred in the past. Tense thereby emerges as something more tangible one, for it can be analyzed independently of the speaker's mental state. Therefore, researchers tend to consider the notion of tense as most basic. Diachronically, however, tense is secondary to aspect in Indo-European languages (Kurylowicz 1964, Izui 1967, Bybee 1985), and Pidgin and Creole systems are inherently aspectual (Givón 1982, Kotsinas 1989).

One technical difficulty that should be addressed here is that, as Bybee et al. (1994) point out, if a given language has both perfective and imperfective aspects, they must contrast and should be mutually exclusive. Japanese has the -TE 1-form, a well-agreed-upon imperfective construction, and it freely co-occurs with either -TA or -RU, as shown in (33) ②.

(33) ① akiko ga ki-TA. ② aikawarazuru kuroi huku o ki-TE1-TA/ki-TE1-RU.

'① Akiko came. ② As usual, she was wearing a black dress.'

This implies either -TA or -RU are not genuine (or typical) aspect markers, or that they mark a different kind of aspect from the -TE 1-form.

What Miller has in mind in fact depends on his analysis. He claims that the perfective aspect is defined by the meaning of the predicate. (The translation is from Miller (1975:13).)

(34) ① "Sensei, sensei" to hutaka-e kao o das-U. ② boosi wa ki-teisai-ru kake-TA.

'① "Sensei, sensei," she called. ② I raised my head above the questioner above.'

In (34), ① kake-TA 'call + TA' and ③ of das-U 'put out one's head ('raise' in the perfective as well, for it is a punctual verb). Miller explains that das-U is marked as in (33) ②: His head out over the quince bush and following passage (Miller 1975:13).

The significance of this claim is that, because they are worth mentioning, but because they are worth mentioning, but not genuine (or typical) aspect markers, or that they predict that such a use should be absent from the narrative, because *Kusamakura* is in first-person narrative, it is impossible to narrate. This use resembles the use of -TA introduces a precondition for the matrix sentence, but -TA and ②, as shown above, the connective to would be too omniscient. Of the 19 novels from various narratives. There were several problematic.

(35) ① siawase to wa sono to-ni tetubin no yu o yutanpo-maru made no aida , kenn o site miru no dat-ta.

'① She couldn't recall anything. ② She poured herself a cold bed. ③ Scrunching forth, she fell asleep.' (Tatsuzo Ishikawa)

Miller's analysis can account for the meaning of the occurrence of ②. However, as shown by ③, it is natural to consider that ② and ③ sentences. (In fact, deviding ② and ③).

Another problem with the aspectal sentences like (36) cannot be regarded as...
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As shown in

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What Miller has in mind in fact departs from the traditional perfective-imperfective analysis. He claims that the perfective and imperfective aspects are not determined solely by the meaning of the predicate. (The translation in (34) is mine.)

(34) ① “sensei, sensei” to hatake kake- TA ... ② “nan desu” to yo wa boke no u e kai o das-ta. ③ boosi wa kusahara e oti- TA.

‘(1) Sensei, sensei,” she CALLED twice. ... ② “Yes, what do you want?” I RAISED my head above the quince bush. ③ My hat FELL on the grass.’

In (34), ① kake- TA ‘call + TA” and ③ oti- TA ‘fall + TA’ are perfective and so marked, but ② das- ‘put out one’s head (raise) in this particular context’ is naturally interpreted as imperfective as well, for it is a punctual verb and the event occurred between ① and ③.

Miller explains that das- is marked as imperfective here because the protagonist ‘sticks his head out over the quince bush and leaves it visible there continuously during the following passage” (Miller 1975:13).

The significance of this claim is that the Japanese aspect system is considered to reflect not the completion or incompleteness of a given situation, but, rather, the encoder’s rhetorical intention of the statement. That is, in (34), three events are presented not solely because they are worth mentioning, but also because the protagonist’s raising his head above the bush enabled the observation of event ③. This explanation is plausible because Kusamakura is in first-person narrative, i.e. the narrator is not omniscient. Thus, without event ②, it is impossible to narrate event ③.

This usage resembles the use of -RU in subordinate clause, which frequently introduces a precondition for the matrix event. In fact, if (34) ② and ③ were to be conjoined, the connective TO would be the only natural choice. In addition, this analysis predicts that such a use should be absent in third person narrative where the narrator is omniscient. Of the 19 novels from various periods I investigated, 11 are third-person narratives. There were several problematic cases.

(35) ① siawase to wa sono teido no mono da to sika, kangaerarenakata TA. ② tetubin no yu o yutanpo ni ire- RU. ③ sostie tumetai nedoko ni hai- RU. ④ netuki made no aida, kanoyo wa karada o tizime te, mata atama no naka de keisan o site miru no dat- TA.

‘(1) She COULDN’T RECALL happiness as anything more than such a trivial thing. ② She POURED hotwater into a foot warmer. ③ And she SLIPPED into a cold bed. ④ Scrunching herself up, she THOUGHT about it again until she fell asleep.’ (Tatsuzo Ishikawa, Seishun no saetetsu)

Miller’s analysis can account for the relationship between (35) ③ and ④, but not the occurrence of ②. However, as shown by the conjunctive sosie ‘and’ at the beginning of ③, it is natural to consider that ② and ③ form a unit, so that the author used -RU in both sentences. (In fact, deviding ② and ③ and marking both with -RU sounds deviant to me.)

Another problem with the aspect analysis is that, as Suzuki (1976) points out, sentences like (36) cannot be regarded as perfective.
(36)  *kino tomatat ryokan ni wa niwa ni ookina matu no ki ga at-TA.
   ‘The inn I stayed at yesterday HAD a big pine tree in the garden.’

The aspect analysis predicts that the garden no longer exists, which is improbable. And the narrator is likely to continue talking about events in which the garden plays some significant role. Thus the narrator’s rhetorical intention should select -RU, but (36) sounds perfectly natural.

3.4. Dual-Function Analysis

This may be the most widely-accepted analysis. Teramura (1971) points out that -TA is ambiguous in such sentences as (37), and that this ambiguity becomes overt when the sentence is negated. Here, Teramura contrasts imperfective with perfect, rather than perfective. To answer question (37), (38) with -TA is selected to negate the past-tense reading, or (39) with -TE-1-RU to negate the perfect reading.

(37)  hirumesi o tabe-TA ka.
   ‘Did you eat lunch?’ or ‘HAVE you eaten lunch?’

(38)  iya, tabenakat-TA.
   ‘No, I DIDN’T EAT lunch.’

(39)  iya, tabete-1-NA-1. (NA-1 = NEGATIVE-RU)
   ‘No, I HAVE N’T EATEN lunch.’

It is, however, worth questioning whether or not the existence of two possible answers proves that (37) is indeed ambiguous. It may be the case that it is unambiguous, but one may respond to the inferred intention of the questioner: it is possible to respond to the question “Did you have lunch?” with “No, I haven’t eaten anything today.”

Like Teramura, Nakau (1980) considers that -TA and -RU primarily indicate tense but they also signify aspects. His argument is that, in an adverbial clause, they designate either tense or aspect, depending on the nature of the clause connective. For example, with noni ‘although’, they mark tense, whereas with toki ‘when’, they mark aspect. In (40) with noni, the connected clauses can carry different time adverbials, but in (41) with toki, they cannot.

(40)  kinoo ame ga hut-TA noni, kyoo wa atu-1. (∼1 = allomorph of //RU//)
   ‘Although it RAINED yesterday, it’s hot today.’

(41)  *kinoo ame ga hut-TA toki (wa), kyoo wa atu-1.
   ‘When it RAINED yesterday, it’s hot today.’
   (Intended; this is impossible in both Japanese and English.)

Nakau explains that in (40), both -TA and -RU function as tense markers, i.e. the two clauses have different tenses, and, consequently, two time adverbials are permitted. In (41), by contrast, because -TA is an aspect marker, the entire sentence has only one tense encoded by the matrix clause -RU, and thus the sentence can take only one adverbial.

Kunihiro (1980) disagrees with Nakau, however, by suggesting that recognition of the aspect-marking function alone is sufficient to account for the difference between (40) and (41). The reason that -TA is in nothing to do with the tense-aspect of the concessive noni, which requires the

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3.5. Perspective Analysis

Like Miller, Kunihiro (1967) considers that -TA indicates the aspect-marking function alone is sufficient to account for the difference between (40) and (41). The reason that -TA is in nothing to do with the tense-aspect of the concessive noni, which requires the

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Tense-aspect...
The reason that -TA is interpreted as referring to a past situation in (40) has nothing to do with the tense-aspect distinction; rather, it is due to the nature of the concessive noni, which requires the presupposition of the referent of the noni clause.

The dual-function analysis is the last resort. If a uni-functional analysis can account for the usage of -TA and -RU, it is not necessary to posit two equally-weighted functions.

3.5. Perspective Analysis

Like Miller, Kunihiro (1967) considers that neither -TA nor -RU encodes tense proper. Instead, he argues that -TA indicates an objective judgment made by an unspecified person of the situation having been materialized at a certain point in time, and that -RU indicates an unspecified person’s subjective judgment regarding the realization of the situation — viz. the person is certain about the realization of the situation, but does not assert that it has already materialized. I will call this the perspective analysis.

The perspective analysis is not subject to the problem of (36) raised for the aspect analysis. Kunihiro cites Mikami (1953), who observes that while (42) below with -TA and (10) in section 2 with -RU, restated here as (43), can be used to depict the same situation, the former is understood as an indirect report of the speaker’s experience, and the latter as a direct expression of his/her perception.

(42) kono isu wa sakki kara koko ni at-TA.

‘This chair HAS BEEN here for a while.’

(43) kono isu wa sakki kara koko ni ar-U.

Kunihiro explains that if a person is confident about the realization of a situation and asserts it as such, the situation is naturally understood to have taken place in the past, and consequently, -TA appears to be a past-tense marker. However, because -TA itself does not encode tense, it can occur in a sentence used as an imperative, e.g. (9), as well as in a conditional clause, e.g. (44).

(44) ame ga hut-TA ra siai wa tyuusi desu.

‘If it RAINS, the game will be cancelled.’

Although he can explain why -TA is not incompatible with conditional, he does not provide an explanation as to why -TA should be selected.

Regarding the usage of -RU, Kunihiro explains that temporally neutral formatives are naturally associated with the speech time, and that this principle accounts for the uses of (10-13) above. When the verb is punctual, speaker’s certainty about, but not assertion of, the realization of the situation logically implies its occurrence to be in the future. Kunihiro contends that this fact explains (14), i.e. a situation that is certain to occur in the future, and (15), i.e. the speaker’s present intention or plan. Furthermore, he states that the usage in (16), i.e. a past event, depends heavily on a context that clearly guarantees the statement to be about a past situation, and that the meaning of -RU — certainty without assertion — is compatible with this function. Finally, Kunihiro states that for (17-21) — atemporal situations — -RU is the most natural selection.
One problem with this perspective analysis of objective -TA and subjective -RU is that, when both -TA and the -TE I- plus -RU refer to a past situation, a salient difference between them is that -TA implies subjectivity, and -TE I-RU objectivity — contrary to Kunihiro. Inoue (1978) argues that the -TE I-RU construction marks evidentiality; viz. the described situation is not part of the speaker’s direct experience. She refers to this function as reportative, since it is frequently found in journalistic writing conveying objectivity and availability of evidence. Comparing the sentences in (45-46), she concludes that -TA lacks this reportive sense. (Grammaticality judgments are Inoue’s.)

(45) zyon wa 10-nen mae ni zyeneraru moothaazu o yamesaserare-TE I-RU/ yamesaserare-TE

‘John was laid off by General Motors ten years ago.’

(46) watasi wa onazi tosi ni kuraisuraa o *yamesaserare-TE I-RU/yamesaserare-TE.

‘I was laid off by Chrysler in the same year.’

She explains that the use of -TE I-RU in (46) is anomalous because it implies that the speaker has forgotten about the lay-off s/he personally suffered, and hence must check some document regarding his/her own past employment — an unlikely situation. While some native speakers may disagree with Inoue’s grammaticality/appropriateness judgments, it is true that -TE I-RU frequently conveys the idea that the asserted situation is not part of the speaker’s direct experience.

3.6. Grounding Analysis

Onoe (1995) claims that Japanese has neither tense nor aspect as a morphosyntactic category, and that the contrast between -TA and -RU cannot be expressed in terms of tense or aspect. Rather, he advocates that provision of the characteristics of -TA, -RU, -TE I-RU, and -TE I-TA as predicative forms and clarification of their mutual relationships are essential.

He argues that the contrast between -TA and -RU does not involve a tense opposition. Because, as we have already seen, -TA need not refer to past time, and -RU need not refer to nonpast time. Between -RU and -TE I-RU, the opposition cannot be perfective vs. imperfective, respectively, because the latter can also be perfective, as shown in (47).

(47) sono koro made ni wa kono koza o owat-TE I-RU.

‘The construction will be finished by that time.’

He characterizes -TA as the form to describe a situation in relation to the point in time at which the speaker recognizes it to have already happened. When -TA appears in the matrix clause, this time point is normally speech time. -TE I-RU marks either the perfect or the progressive. Because, in terms of aspect, the notion of perfect corresponds to the perfective, and the progressive to the imperfective, and because -TE I-RU covers both, Onoe concludes that Japanese does not have an aspectual system. He characterizes -TE I-TA as an indicator of the pluperfect, past progressive, present perfect, or the discovery present, as exemplified in (5). Because -TE I-TA as a whole can indicate a situation connected with speech time, i.e. it cannot be derived compositional uses and comments that its typical encodes present or future time. It a situation as a type. He conc temporality, but -RU is not.

Onoe’s analysis is insightful decomposed into -TE I- and -TA/- a past specific situation, -TA en what the perspective claims. If objection becomes irrelevant.

The problem with Onoe’s analysis investigation of narratives. In narratives are narrated: (1) the spectacular (-TA), (2) she poured a cold bed (-RU), and (3) she thought a situation as a type. He concludes that this objection becomes irrelevant.

4. Discussion

Section 3 summarized six analyses: (i) tense and aspect, (iv) perspective, (v) dual futurality, and (vi) temporal sequentiality (i-ii). (B) A discussion of (i-iv), (C) a combination of both events because it assumes that -TA is the temporal marker and (ii) -RU is free from such temporal problems by positing dual future applicability; (ii) some past event time. The time-relation
The present -TA and subjective -RU is connected with speech time, i.e. the present perfect, he argues that the meaning of -TE I-TA cannot be derived compositionally from -TE I- and -TA. Regarding -RU, Onoe posits 18 uses and comments that its typical uses do not involve any temporal concept, i.e. it rarely encodes present or future time. Consequently, he characterizes -RU as the form to present a situation as a type. He concludes that -TA, -TE I-RU, and -TE I-TA are grounded in temporality, but -RU is not.

Onoe's analysis is insightful, and his proposal that -TE I-TA and -TE I-RU should not be decomposed into -TE I- and -TA-RU saves the perspective analysis. Recall that to refer to a past specific situation, -TA encodes subjectivity, and -TE I-RU objectivity, contrary to what the perspective claims. If we do not posit the existence of -RU in -TE I-RU, then my objection becomes irrelevant.

The problem with Onoe's analysis is that it is difficult to apply it straightforwardly to investigation of narratives. In the passage in (35), restated as (48), for example, four situations are narrated: (1) the character could not recall happiness as something spectacular (-TA), (2) she poured hot water into a foot warmer (-RU), (3) she slipped into a bed (-RU), and (4) she thought about happiness again until she fell asleep (-TA). It is not clear in what sense (48) (1) and (4) are grounded, but (2) and (3) are not.

(48) 1 siwase to wa sono teido no mono da to sika, kangaerarenakat-TA. ② tetubin no yu o yutanpo ni ire-RU. ③ sosite tumetai nedoko ni hai-RU. ④ netuku made no aida, kanozyo wa karada o tizime, mata atama no naka de keisan o site miru no dat-TA.

'The character could not recall happiness as anything more than such a trivial thing. She poured hot water into a foot warmer. And she thought about it again until she fell asleep.' (Tatsuzo Ishikawa, Seishun no satetsu)

4. Discussion

Section 3 summarized six analyses of -TA and -RU: (i) tense, (ii) time-relationship, (iii) aspect, (iv) perspective, (v) dual function, and (vi) grounding. These six analyses can be organized into three groups according to the concept presumed to be essential: (A) temporal sequentiality (i-ii), (B) the speaker's attitude toward the encoded situations (iii-iv), (C) a combination of both (v-vi). The grounding analysis is categorized as (C) because it assumes that -TA is temporally grounded with respect to some other time, but -RU is free from such temporal sequentiality like aspect. This section provides further assessment of such analyses and their relative validity.

I do not have much to say about the type C analyses, for they attempt to solve problems by positing dual functions. If a type A or type B analysis can provide satisfactory characterization of -TA and -RU, positing both will become superfluous.

In type A, the tense analysis presents three problems: (i) it has very limited applicability; (ii) some past events cannot be marked the alleged past-tense marker -TA; (iii) it cannot explain why certain connectives require a particular 'tense' regardless of event time. The time-relationship analysis has wider validity, and it gives an explanation
for (ii), by shifting reference time. However, (iii) remains problematic for the time-
relationship analysis because it cannot explain why such clauses as to require the -RU
form to express anteriority.

In type B, the aspect analysis needs to posit two types of aspect because the alleged
perfective -TA can co-occur with the typical imperfective marker -TE 1. In Miller’s
proposal, what -TA and -RU encode is not the traditional notions of perfective and
imperfective, but, rather, more general judgments of how a given situation occurs and
how the speaker presents it, a step closer to the notion of modus. As mentioned earlier,
the most serious challenge to the aspect analysis is how to account for the use of -TA in
sentences like (36), restated here as (49).

(49) 亲ootomatta ryokan ni wa niwa ni ookina matu no ki ga at-TA.

'The inn I stayed at yesterday HAD a big pine tree in the garden.'

This use of -TA can be explained by the perspective analysis. As discussed in section 3.5,
the function of -TA in this case is to express an indirect report of the speaker’s experience. If -RU were used instead, the sentence would be a direct expression of the speaker’s perception.

Although integration of the aspect and perspective analyses is beyond the scope of
the present paper, analyses based on the speaker’s involvement, vis-à-vis the sequentiality of situations, can more accurately account for the data. Nevertheless, many (myself included) are inclined to consider that the prototypical uses of -TA and -RU are to mark tense. Soga (1990:104), who nonetheless insists that -TA and -RU are primarily tense markers, states:

If the past tense form is used, it indicates that the speaker perceives the situation to be remote, but if the non-past tense is used, it means that the past situation is perceived as if it were directly before the speaker. Put another way, the use of the past tense suggests a detached and objective attitude on the part of the speaker toward the situation, but the use of the non-past tense suggests the speaker’s subjective and psychological involvement with the situation. ... the difference in use between past and non-past tense markers reflects a difference in the speaker’s or writer’s perception of and psychological attitude toward the situation being described, and that is a modality difference.

This statement resembles the perspective analysis. The crucial difference, however, is its direction of semantic extension. Soga attempts to derive other usage from deictic tense, whereas the perspective analysis claims that tense interpretation is derived from the subjectivity and objectivity opposition.

The time-relationship analysis (A type) also resembles the aspect analysis (B type). In both analyses, the -TA situation is understood to be completed before some other situation. The crucial difference between the two is, again, that whereas the former maintains that -TA and -RU primarily indicate some notions of temporal alignment, the latter affirms that such notions are secondary, for the term aspect is generally defined as the assessment or characterization of the denoted situation ‘as it progresses or as it is distributed in time, but irrespective of action, mentioned or implied’ (Maeda 1989).

This discrepancy in the directi
priori mental permanence of abstract
mentioned earlier, in many languages
than tense (and modus is more personal
and objective; aspect is definite, in
Soga (1989) also comments:

Time ... does not present a fact
happen, but rather time is sequentiality of events rather
time is primary only to the expe
in scientific events ... This p
consequences for the linguist’s
that ‘tense’ has been singled out as
modality.

The usage of -TA and -RU can be defined as taking tense as necessity.

5. Conclusion

The present paper discussed the tense in Japanese. Having examined six
speaker’s judgments about given
Admittedly, it is extremely difficult
notion of time and to interpret a
subjective dimensions. This is useful
for most people in modern times.
and they inevitably reflect conditions. However, such essential components
the case of Japanese, the aspect
although new usage has emerged, are
firmly encoded in the future.

NOTES

1 //RU// stands for the morpheme
2 Hopper (1979:213) divides statistical
signaling the major thread of the
He calls the former, foreground
of the past situation is
put another way, the use of the tense suggests the speaker's intention of presentation, rather than the sequentiality of those situations.

The crucial difference, however, is its other usage from deictic tense, interpretation is derived from the present paper discussed the tense-aspect controversy associated with -ta and -ru in Japanese. Having examined six analyses, it is concluded that -ta and -ru encode the speaker's judgments about given situations and his/her intention of their presentation, rather than the sequentiality of those situations.

Admittedly, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for me to abandon the linear notion of time and to interpret sentences solely in terms of aspect and subjective dimensions. This is understandable because the concept of linear time is real for most people in modern times. Languages have developed over a long course of time, and they inevitably reflect conceptualizations different from those of modern users. However, such essential components as verbal morphology resist abrupt alternations. In the case of Japanese, the aspectual meaning in its broadest sense is still predominant, although new usage has emerged, and the notion of tense will certainly become more firmly encoded in the future.

NOTES

1 //Ru// stands for the morpheme of which -ru is an allomorph.

Hopper (1979:213) divides statements in narrative discourse into two categories: those signaling the major thread of the narrative, and those providing supportive information. He calls the former, foreground, and the latter, background. Foreground statements...
express the events in chronological order, making the completion of one event a necessary condition for the next; verbs that appear in foreground tend to be punctual or perfective. Background statements need not be sequential with respect to foreground events, tend to amplify or comment on the main narrative events, and are concurrent with the main events; they tend to be durative, stative, iterative, or imperfective.

3 Ota calls these two tense types the primary and secondary tenses. Because his primary tense is identical with the conventional notion of tense, I call the former, (deictic) tense. Following Miura (1974), I use the term time-relationship to refer to the latter.

4 Because the objective of Miller’s article is to scrutinize Miyoshi (1974), who makes the claim based on his analysis of modern Japanese fiction, Miller also restricts his claim to only the written language of modern Japanese fiction.

5 Smith (1986:101) defines perfective as indicating “a situation as a whole (that is, complete with initial and final endpoints).”

6 A totally opposite view has been expressed by Hopper (1982:4): “Aspectual structures are highly abstract. Whereas even tense morphemes have a concrete relationship to the observer — the observer’s own time-line — aspect depends on an absolute, observer-independent shaping of a state or action.” It is, however, difficult to envisage aspect as more objective than tense, because, as Michaelis (1993:17) argues, aspectual meaning involves such notions as evidentiality, resultativity, modality, individuation, perspective, transitivity, and distribution of focus over sentential constituents.

7 The present perfect differs from perfective and imperfective (the aspects proper), because it tells us “nothing directly about the situation in itself, but rather relates some state to a preceding situation” (Comrie 1976:52). If a language has both present perfect and past-tense forms, the semantics of the two invariably overlap. The difference is traditionally stated in such a way that, while both terms refer to past situations, the present perfect also signals their ‘present (current) relevance,’ although this characterization is manifestly inadequate. In normal discourse, the very act of mentioning a situation guarantees its present relevance, and the use of the present perfect does not transform an irrelevant piece of information into a relevant one.

8 This line of analysis has recently become popular among literary critics (Karatani 1993, Noguchi 1994). It is said that the modern usage of -TA was developed by Japanese intellectuals who had become acquainted with European languages, which are equipped with a tense system. They contend that the newly invented use of -TA enabled authors to efface the narrator, and that it gave the text a single third-person point of view.

9 Shinzato (1993:51-52) proposes that -TE I-RU conveys the notion of temporal distance, which can be viewed as reflecting the degree of immediacy of information processing. In keeping with traditional cognitive psychology, she posits two kinds of cognitive processes — perception and cognition. Perception is a cognitive process in which ‘perceived stimuli are translated and encoded in a mandatory and instantaneous manner. Cognition ... involves further processing of the information using all resources available to the speaker.’ The evaluative and objective views reflect the speaker’s deliberation on the acquired information, and this implies non-instantaneous information processing.

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The completion of one event a round tend to be punctual or with respect to foreground events, and are concurrent with imperfective.

by tenses. Because his primary refer to the latter.

iyoshi (1974), who makes the also restricts his claim to the situation as a whole (that is,

“Aspectual structures and a concrete relationship to the grounds on an absolute, observer­
necessary to envisage aspect as (1982:4): “Aspectual structures relate to events, but rather relates some language has both present perfect tense and the present perfect tense does not overlap. The difference is whether we refer to past situations, the relevance,” although this course, the very act of mentioning past situations is not the same as the present perfect.


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